

## **SAMRU Representation Executive Council condemns comments mocking the unmarked graves of Indigenous children**

Calgary, AB July 13, 2021 — Last week, SAMRU's Representation Executive Council unanimously voted to condemn MRU Professor Frances Widdowson's public social media comments deriding the unmarked graves of Indigenous children of the residential school system.

Spirit River Striped Wolf, President of the Students' Association of Mount Royal University's (SAMRU) Representation Executive Council, notes that "the nature of an instructor's role gives them authority over students in their classroom. Black, Indigenous, and people of colour (BIPOC) and LGBTQ students who are required to take classes from this instructor may be left wondering if they are being treated and graded fairly, while also feeling like their personal and cultural identities are being attacked. I know I would."

Worse yet, the learning environment is made more difficult for BIPOC and LGBTQ students by comments that go beyond simple disagreement. Public attacks on culture and identity coming from people in positions of authority — even when they are purportedly satirical — have real consequences. Intensified through social media, this kind of rhetoric not only diminishes the genuine lived experiences of specific populations but can also foster and amplify outrage directed at identifiable groups of people both online and in real life.

According to 'The Legal Analysis of Genocide' in the 'Final Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls', colonial structures are one of the root causes of 'the current increased rates of violence, death, and suicide in Indigenous populations.' Describing his own experience, Striped Wolf revealed that he came from the reserve system and is a second-generation survivor of the residential school system, the day schools, and of the 60s scoop. "I've personally witnessed some of the intergenerational fallout resulting from racist government policies," said Striped Wolf. "Deriding Indigenous genocide that resulted from colonial policies and structures like residential schools conveys a tolerance for violent and lethal behaviour — and that's very concerning."

The SAMRU Representation Executive Council (REC) has a long history of endorsing the privilege of students and faculty to engage in rigorous debate on controversial topics, and it continues to hold that stance. However, Striped Wolf believes the nature of the recent comments goes beyond fair debate. Mocking the unmarked graves of Indigenous children is a clear example of misused academic power.

"The voices of Indigenous peoples shared in multiple Canadian commissions are valid testimonies to the lethal violence on Indigenous peoples in Canada," said Striped Wolf. "I am open to having a rational conversation on theories and maybe even on what the term 'genocide' means — but certainly not in the context of messages that demonstrate tolerance for lethal behaviour. SAMRU's Representation Executives cannot condone behaviour like this; it creates a culture of fear among students on campus and, because of that, we'll be advocating for student-focused alternatives for certain required courses."