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OPEN LETTER

December 15, 2017

Sandy Welsh
Professor and Vice-Provost, Students
Simcoe Hall, Room 221
27 King's College Circle
Toronto, ON M5S 1A1

Dear Professor Welsh,

Re: University-Mandated Leave of Absence Policy

I am writing to you to express UTFA's concern about the proposed University-Mandated Leave of Absence Policy for students. UTFA is pleased that the Administration has taken the opportunity to respond to one of the recommendations made in the 2014-2015 Ombudsperson's Report. We share the Administration's objective to avoid handling student mental health crises in a disciplinary manner and further contribute to their stigmatization. We remain troubled, however, as do several student groups, that there are insufficient procedural safeguards in place to protect the rights of vulnerable students experiencing mental health struggles. In light of the Academic Board's recent decision to postpone action until further consultation has occurred, UTFA welcomes this opportunity to provide comments on the existing draft.

In general, UTFA finds that the Policy, as drafted, does not ensure that a fair and consistent approach will be followed in all instances where the Policy is invoked. For example, there are inadequate guidelines for University employees to follow, no requirements for consultation with medical, psychiatric, psychological or other registered mental health practitioners when making decisions, no guarantee that employees handling these matters have sufficient training and/or baseline knowledge about handling students with mental health concerns, and a lack of transparency in the decision-making process. It should also be emphasized within the University-Mandated Leave of Absence Policy that the Policy should be used only when all reasonable accommodations for the student have already been attempted. Furthermore, it should be emphasized that this University-Mandated Leave of Absence Policy may be considered only when the student creates a

substantial disruption to the learning of other students or substantially disrupts the management of the classroom or learning environment. We believe that other behaviors of concern, possibly related to mental health, are already covered under other policies.

Furthermore, UTFA worries that the Policy, as drafted, will have a chilling effect on students wishing to seek help for mental health concerns at the University. For example, faculty members and librarians that are assisting students may be reluctant to offer referrals to needed University support services. Students may be more reluctant to follow-through on those referrals because they fear it may trigger an action under the Policy.

While UTFA recognizes the complexity of issues involved in drafting such a document, we urge the Administration to address the concerns identified above. Our members hope to see a compassionate and reasonable approach to supporting students experiencing emotional crises while studying at the University. If you would like to discuss this further, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,

Cynthia Messenger
President

cc. Sioban Nelson, Vice-Provost, Faculty & Academic Life
Terezia Zoric, VP Grievances, UTFA
Helen Nowak, General Counsel, UTFA