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STUDENTS HOLD PUBLIC FORUM ON GARDENS

University privately sends threatening letters

April 8 2010 - Coast Salish Territories - Victoria, BC. On Wednesday, April 7th students organized a public forum to discuss issues raised by the garden constructed outside McPherson Library the previous week.

“The intention was to create a space for dialogue among peers about some of the issues that have been brought up with the construction of the gardens - namely food security, property, university governance, and legitimacy,” said Daniel Geselbrach, one of the forum organizers. Over 40 students and community members attended, some of whom opposed the construction of the garden.

“I really appreciated the opportunity to engage with people who have problems with the garden,” said Katy Dewinetz, a student who attended the forum. “The forum was a great place to dialogue in a non-confrontational way.”

Although UVic’s administration has pledged to hold a public meeting on sustainability to address these issues, it has yet to take initiative. Instead, it issued threatening letters to students identified as “guerilla gardeners.”

The letter is signed by the Director of Campus Security, Peter Zacour, and the Assistant Vice-President of Student Affairs, Jim Dunsdon, with instructions to “stay away from the makeshift garden, and away from the area in front of the McPherson Library except for legitimate purposes associated with your course of studies.” It further hints that recipients of the letter are under criminal investigation, and warns that once police proceedings are concluded, UVic “will examine the question of whether additional sanctions are necessary.”

Many students see the letters as intimidation tactics by UVic administration. “I feel singled out from a crowd of hundreds,” said Miranda Cross, one of the students who received a letter. “On the day of the action, I was talking with participants about the Vision of UVic as a Garden Campus, with educational farms and ethnobotanical gardens. We collected over 500 signatures in just a few hours for this vision.”

Nick Montgomery, another student who received a letter, said that UVic could learn from students. “UVic has said it’s going to hold a forum to discuss these issues, but that hasn’t materialized. While students were busy participating in public discussions, the administration was drafting coercive letters, rather than engaging in dialogue.” He suggests that UVic is trying to marginalize the gardeners. “UVic spokespeople have emphasized the fact that the garden was created by people who don’t represent the whole UVic community,” said Montgomery. “What they don’t mention is that UVic’s decisions are made by a small group of administrators at the top of the bureaucratic hierarchy. That doesn’t represent everyone either.” Recipients of the letters say that they have already received support from faculty, community members, and other students and support continues to grow.

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