4 December 2020

Students’ Society of McGill University Executive Team
Anthropology Students Association
The Anthropology Graduate Students Association
World Islamic & Middle Eastern Studies Association
Black Students’ Network
Muslim Students Association
Students in Solidarity for Palestinian Human Rights
Thaqalayn Muslim Association

To the McGill student associations named above:

I am writing as president of the Society for Academic Freedom and Scholarship (SAFS), an organization of university faculty members, students and others dedicated to the defense of academic freedom and the merit principle in higher education. (For further information, see our website at www.safs.ca.)

SAFS has read with concern your “Open Letter Demanding the Overhaul of McGill’s Statement of Academic Freedom,” of 30 November 2020. (https://ssmu.ca/blog/2020/11/open-letter-demanding-the-overhaul-of-mcgills-statement-of-academic-freedom/) In that statement, you call for McGill University to limit academic freedom for the sake of inclusivity and safety. SAFS holds that limiting academic freedom would prevent the university from pursuing its mission to advance research and to educate students while serving neither of the values you prize.

Academic freedom and freedom of expression on campus make it possible for professors and students to consider all ideas and points of view on any topic and to determine for themselves what is true or likely true. Without robust academic freedom, some topics or ideas can be declared out of bounds. Once that happens, critical inquiry and discussion are impossible.

Unless students and professors are free to discuss multiculturalism, immigration, gender parity, and the other topics you mention, they will not be able to come to sound conclusions about them. What they believe or say will not reflect their considered opinions but might simply parrot a party line imposed on them.

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If universities are to help students and others to become independent thinkers and people whose values and emotions are informed by their understandings of the world, then universities need to remove from professors and students the fear that expressing themselves sincerely and candidly will get them into trouble. Only if people are able to think independently can they resist propaganda and pressures to conform to the thoughts and values of the day.

As well, if universities are to produce research that people will find trustworthy, they must protect robust academic freedom, for when people think that research has been channeled toward certain conclusions, they will not trust it. Lacking solid research, people will be unable to address the social problems they confront.

You propose that academic freedom be restricted in service to inclusivity and safety. But that implies that you favour treating people disrespectfully. To treat a person with respect is to engage him or her as one’s moral and intellectual equal, as a person able to participate in critical discussion. Those who care to treat others respectfully are concerned not to be false with others or to manipulate them, even for their own good. To shield others from discussion is disrespectful for it is patronizing.

It is not likely that the sort of oversight and control you envision for McGill will promote either inclusivity or safety. It will, instead, create villains and victims and an apparatus of surveillance and punishment.

A university campus on which professors and students may without fear pursue the questions about which they are passionate is a wonderful place. The inquiries and discussions that academic freedom and freedom of expression on campus make possible are rare and precious.

Students unsure about academic freedom might want to consult a short guide posted on the SAFS website: https://www.safs.ca/newsletters/article.php?article=1054

We respectfully request that you respond to our letter. With your permission, we will post your response along with this letter on our website.

Sincerely,

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