

Academic Freedom and the Role of the Academy: An Open Letter to the McMaster Community

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<http://dailynews.mcmaster.ca/article/academic-freedom-and-the-role-of-the-academy-an-open-letter-to-the-mcmaster-community/>

Dear Members of the McMaster University Community,

I said in a recent interview with students that the most serious thing I have to do in my role as President is to defend the principle of academic freedom. The freedom to research, consider, discuss and present even the most controversial or potentially divisive issues is a fundamental tenet of academic freedom, and the foundation of the work and mission of the academy. In the same interview, I also made the comment that defending academic freedom is not always easy to do. The events of last Friday surrounding the "Drawing the Line" student-organized event provide a perfect demonstration of this difficulty. The University received multiple communications both before and after the event from individuals and groups writing either in support of or in opposition to the speaker. The University was variously invited to shut down the event, to silence anticipated protests, to make public statements denouncing the speaker, and to make similar statements denouncing those expressing their opposition to the speaker.

As President I chose to do none of those things. The event was framed and organized as a discussion of political correctness and freedom of speech on campus, which I regard as an important and entirely appropriate topic for discussion at an institution of higher learning. The fundamental mission of the University is to provide opportunities for education, both within and beyond the classroom. Taking the opportunity to listen to a speaker, even one with whom one may vehemently disagree, is an important aspect of education and a cornerstone of academic debate. It has not, therefore, been my approach, nor that of this University, to intervene to shut down events, exclude speakers, or prevent discussion of issues, even where controversial topics are under discussion.

In clearly affirming the commitment of this University to protecting the expression of diverse opinions on our campus, I also want to be absolutely unequivocal in expressing our support for the diversity of our campus community, and our commitment to the rights of minority groups, including trans- and gender-non-conforming members of our community, in particular. I am in no doubt that our University, like our society, is only enriched and strengthened by the diversity of people and opinions on our campus. As such, the presence on campus of a speaker who may challenge the rights of any particular group should not be seen as undermining the University's commitment to inclusivity but merely as an opportunity to explore and debate the topics under discussion.

Indeed, an important aspect of academic freedom is the willingness and ability to engage with and discuss ideas that might be fundamentally opposed to one's own. It is extremely regrettable that the events of last Friday do not reflect the standard of academic debate that we would aspire to model on our campus but this does not mean that as an institution we should ever seek to limit the right of members of our community and visitors to our campus to engage in peaceful protest. In the event that the tactics employed by such protestors violate the laws of our land, or the codes of conduct of our community, appropriate sanctions can and will be applied, but our commitment to academic freedom requires that, except in the most extreme cases, the cancellation of events, or the exclusion or removal of particular individuals will not be our response.

I would hope that all members of our community are united in our pursuit of knowledge, our belief in the power and importance of education, and our mission to protect the free flow of ideas within an inclusive and respectful environment. As members of the academy, we bear a shared responsibility to reaffirm and uphold the core principles of academic freedom, collegiality, and respect that are fundamental to McMaster and to ensure that our University continues to be a place where respectful debate and discussion can flourish.

Sincerely,

Patrick Deane

President and Vice-Chancellor

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