

Response

TO: Senate

FROM: Professor Suzanne Fortier, Principal and Vice-Chancellor

SUBJECT: Response to the Question Regarding Academic Freedom of Academic Administrators and the Question Regarding Academic Freedom

MEETING DATE: April 20, 2017

RESPONSE: Thank you, Senators Galaty, Hastings, Hébert, Gore, and Saroyan for your questions. As they address related issues I have provided here a single response.

Academic freedom is fundamental to any university. This is obviously true of McGill, whose mission statement affirms that “the principles of academic freedom, integrity, responsibility, equity, and inclusiveness” are critical to “the advancement of learning and the creation and dissemination of knowledge, by offering the best possible education, by carrying out research and scholarly activities judged to be excellent by the highest international standards, and by providing service to society.”

Let me state unequivocally that academic administrators enjoy the full protection of academic freedom in the pursuit of their scholarly activities. At the same time, they assume institutional administrative responsibilities with respect to both the University and the unit they lead. Although University officers may not interfere with the academic freedom of academic administrators and, moreover, have a duty to respect and protect it, they also have an obligation to ensure that administrative responsibilities are discharged effectively to the highest institutional standards, in a manner that pursues the academic mission and responsibilities of the unit that they are charged with overseeing.

Tensions or conflicts between the exercise of academic freedom by academic administrators and their obligation to execute their administrative responsibilities effectively are rare. So are tensions or conflicts between the University’s duty to protect the academic freedom of academic administrators and its obligation to ensure effective execution of administrative responsibilities. None of these tensions or conflicts can be resolved through bright-line rules. Moreover, their resolution also depends on the nature, level, and category of the administrative responsibilities in question. Ultimately, it is a matter of judgment on the part of both academic administrators and senior university officers, acting carefully and with due regard for institutional neutrality and free inquiry.

When academic administrators no longer believe that they are able to discharge their administrative responsibilities effectively, then it is reasonable for them to step down from those responsibilities. Similarly, the University may, through the relevant institutional procedures appropriate for each case, replace academic administrators who are no longer able to discharge their responsibilities effectively. In either case, with the exception of a finding of serious misconduct, there is no impact on the academic administrator's status as a scholarly member of the university community.

Members of the scholarly community are not normally understood to be speaking on behalf of the University. However, when scholarly members of the community make statements in their capacity as academic administrators, ambiguity may arise as to whether their views do, in the absence of information to the contrary, represent those of the University. In those rare instances where such ambiguity arises, it may be necessary for either the academic administrator or the University to provide clarification. This was the intent of the message released via Twitter, but I recognize that it raised its own ambiguities about the University's commitment to academic freedom and the general norm that extramural statements by faculty members do not represent the views of the University. I regret this ambiguity.
