



**Middle  
East  
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Association**  
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18 April 2022

Provost Christopher Manfredi  
Office of the Provost and Vice Principal (Academic)  
McGill University  
845 Sherbrooke Street West, Suite 504  
Montreal, Quebec H3A 0G4  
via fax: 514-398-4768

Dear Provost Manfredi:

We write on behalf of the Middle East Studies Association of North America (MESA) and its Committee on Academic Freedom to express our concern about a recent statement by McGill University's Deputy Vice Provost indicating that the university is considering terminating its Memorandum of Agreement with the Students' Society of McGill University (SSMU) as a result of the latter's adoption of a "Palestine Solidarity Policy." Such a step by the university would constitute a serious violation of the right of McGill University's students and student organizations to freedom of speech and association.

MESA was founded in 1966 to promote scholarship and teaching on the Middle East and North Africa. The preeminent organization in the field, the Association publishes the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* and has nearly 2800 members worldwide. MESA is committed to ensuring academic freedom and freedom of expression, both within the region and in connection with the study of the region in North America and elsewhere.

On 21 March 2022, the SSMU conducted a referendum of its members on the Palestine Solidarity Policy, which among other provisions called for the boycott of, and divestment from, corporations and institutions with investments in Israel; 71 percent of those voting favored adopting the policy. On 24 March 2022, McGill University's Deputy Vice Provost, Fabrice Lebeau, disseminated an email message demanding that the SSMU reverse its adoption of the Palestine Solidarity Policy on the ground that it "echoes key tenets of the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) movement" and thereby violates the SSMU's constitution, despite the fact that the Judicial Board of SSMU had issued three separate rulings ([here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)) in 2021, all of which affirmed the constitutionality of political campaigns directed at corporate or state entities, including BDS-related campaigns. Mr. Lebeau further threatened to terminate the University's Memorandum of Agreement with SSMU.

The right of McGill University students and faculty, as well as student organizations, to voice their opinions on policies toward any state, or to advocate political activities including boycott, sanctions, and divestment, is protected by the right of free speech and the principles of academic freedom. Mr. Lebeau's threat to revoke the university's Memorandum of Agreement with the SSMU because of a vote fairly and freely conducted in keeping with the student organization's established procedures therefore constitutes an attempt to silence protected political speech. The fact that the university has yet to implement this sanction against the SSMU does not alleviate our concern since the administration has served the student union with a notice of



Re: Students' Society of McGill University

18 April 2022

Page 2

default, requesting that the union repeal the motion or have its agreement with the university terminated.

We believe that institutions of higher learning must resolutely uphold and defend the principles of academic freedom, and they must also be sanctuaries for the free expression of ideas and opinions. We therefore ask you that you immediately withdraw the notice of default served to the SSMU and issue a clear and forceful public statement assuring students and faculty that McGill University will not countenance threats or attempts to limit their right to free speech and academic freedom, including the advocacy of ideas and policies that some may deem controversial.

We look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Eve M. Troutt Powell'. The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first letters of each name being capitalized and prominent.

Eve Troutt Powell  
MESA President  
Professor, University of Pennsylvania

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Laurie A. Brand'. The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first letters of each name being capitalized and prominent.

Laurie Brand  
Chair, Committee on Academic Freedom  
Professor Emerita, University of Southern California