

Response to Peter MacKinnon

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Mark Mercer
Department of Philosophy
Saint Mary’s University
Halifax, NS B3H 3C3
(902) 420-5825
mark.mercer@smu.ca

Peter MacKinnon is right that academic freedom helps us “to advance scholarly enquiry in the interests of seeking truth” (“What do we mean when we talk about academic freedom?”, *University Affairs*, November 2011, pp. 35 – 36). But he’s wrong to think that that is the only reason, or even the best reason, to value and protect it.

Much more important is that academic freedom, and freedom of expression on campus generally, is a value constitutive of both scholarly endeavour and scholarly community.

Scholars, scientists, and intellectuals prize not simply knowledge but understanding and learning; they want not just to hold true beliefs, but to hold them only on the basis of evidence and argument. They don’t want to hold them as a result of institutional, social, or political pressures to think or value one way rather than another.

Because they respect the desire of their colleagues and students to think and value as they do for the right reasons, scholars are concerned to minimize all the pressures to which belief and enquiry are subject save those of evidence and argument. To that end, they support wide academic freedom and wide freedom of expression on campus.

What about MacKinnon’s worry that unless administrators have weapons to use against the holocaust deniers, 9/11 truthers, and climate-change sceptics roaming the halls, research will be corrupted and students will graduate both ignorant and cynical?

Far from worrying about corruption, a scholar would treasure a holocaust denier at her school, for his presence provides her with an excellent opportunity to express the attitudes of a scholar: a willingness to engage respectfully those whose views she thinks false and abhorrent, a passion for dispassionate enquiry, and a concern to employ and respect evidence and argument alone.