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YORK'S DAILY BULLETIN

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[Archive](#)

[Search](#)

[About YFile](#)

[Contact Us](#)

[Front Page](#)

[Today at York](#)

[York in the Media](#)

[York Research](#)

[Faculty Job Postings](#)

[Staff Job Postings](#)

## Headline News

### President issues statement on academic freedom

*President & Vice-Chancellor Mamdouh Shoukri issued this statement yesterday:*

Freedom of inquiry by faculty and students is central to the mission of the academy. Academic freedom implies the freedom to teach, conduct research, disseminate knowledge and help shape public opinion and policy.

However, with academic freedom come certain obligations. Scholars' academic activities must be based on evidence, rigorous thought and extensive research, and universities must be dedicated to rigour, reasoned discourse and a willingness to accept dissent and deal with complex issues.

As such, academic freedom cannot be a shield for racism or bigotry.

Recently, two particular issues here at York have raised basic questions about academic freedom.

### Conferences

The first arose in relation to an upcoming conference organized by York faculty members, as well as academics from other institutions, titled Israel/Palestine: Mapping Models of Statehood and Paths to Peace.

The freedom of independent scholars to organize events such as conferences on matters of legitimate academic inquiry goes to the very heart of academic freedom. It would be entirely inappropriate for the University administration to intervene in or to take responsibility for the academic content of such events, provided that they do not offend Canadian law, are consistent with the obligations cited above and deal with issues that are appropriate for academic debate.

Within those general parameters, the choice of topic, of who is to speak and of what is said at the event lies squarely with the individual academics who organize and/or participate in it and no one else. The University provides a forum for the robust exchange, but does not align itself with a particular set of views or positions.

Some have complained that the conference should not form part of the University's 50th anniversary calendar of almost 100 events. However, this would have involved excluding a conference *because* of its subject matter, which would in itself have been a fundamental violation of academic freedom.

### Boycotts

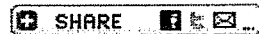
The second issue is the concept of academic boycotts, an issue that has been debated at a number of universities, including at a recent academic forum here at York.

Universities at their core are free institutions that must be open to the widest range of ideas, arguments and debates. Thus the concept of an academic boycott, which would prescribe a form of blacklist, is antithetical to the very purpose of a university. It would undermine the freedom of individual scholars to make their own academic choices, and would suggest that the university "owns" its academics or their opinions. In fact, it would be contrary to the very purpose of the university to dictate those with whom its scholars may or may not associate.

On this basis, York University has consistently opposed the call to boycott Israeli universities; our position is clearly outlined in the [President's Statement on the Autonomy of Universities](#).

Universities exist for the discussion of often difficult and uncomfortable ideas in a civil and respectful academic environment, because this is a critically important way to protect genuine freedom of thought and opinion. As these recent issues illustrate, it is important that, as a community, we clearly and unequivocally reaffirm our commitment to the core values of academic freedom and the right of free inquiry.

Like democracy, academic freedom is untidy, ungainly and often inconvenient, but it remains our best defence against the intellectual paralysis that is the hallmark of totalitarian societies.





6/16/2009 in headline news

## University statement on building academic communities

*York President & Vice-Chancellor Mamdouh Shoukri, Board of Governors Chair Marshall Cohen and Board of Governors Chair-designate Paul Cantor issued this statement yesterday:*

York University has recently been singled out for public criticism from some external community groups. The catalyst for this criticism is an upcoming conference the University is hosting, with the support of Queen's University and the Social Sciences & Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC), titled Israel/Palestine: Mapping Models of Statehood and Paths to Peace. The central criticism is that holding this conference is essentially anti-Israel and/or anti-Semitic.

York has considered these complaints very seriously and on May 21, President & Vice-Chancellor Mamdouh Shoukri issued a statement on academic freedom and the role of the university that clearly declared the University's position on the critical role academic freedom must play in fulfilling the mission of a university in a free society. The statement was equally clear about the obligations of evidence, research, rigorous thought and willingness to accept different perspectives that are entailed by academic freedom. It recognized that academic freedom can never be a shield for racism and bigotry in any form, including anti-Semitism.

Having considered the criticism the conference continues to generate, we believe that it is important to reiterate the University's view that the principles of academic freedom must prevail with regard to all activities undertaken under the auspices of the university, including this conference, so long as they are consistent with the obligations cited above and are consistent with Canadian law. To do otherwise would undermine the mission of the academy to provide a free and unmediated forum for serious academic discussion.

We understand that the subject at the heart of the conference, an examination of the potential models for statehood that could lead to peace between Israelis and Palestinians, is one that many find difficult, sensitive and very personal. We believe that the University remains a most appropriate forum for academic debate of these issues and for a conference such as this to take place. These issues are discussed on a daily basis in all parts of the world, especially in the Middle East, including Israel. There is no reason why they should not be discussed at a university in Canada.

York has also been criticized this year for events on campus that have included academic disruption, intimidation, sit-ins, name-calling and banging on the doors and windows of the Hillel student lounge. These events have disturbed the University community and members of the Jewish community. York has followed up on these complaints under the Student Code of Conduct, as has been widely reported and welcomed. When any individual or group does not adhere to the code, the University takes action as we have done in these specific instances, reprimanding and fining individuals and suspending the activities of student clubs who violated the code. We will continue to enforce the code without exception whenever complaints are received.

York has a long tradition of social activism, but these events – intimidation and shouting each other down – have nothing to do with social activism.

In February, the University made a commitment to fix the way members of our community relate to each other on campus. We know that we must build trust, learn to deal with each other in good faith and communicate in an open and honest way. We must replace tension and negativity with reasoned dialogue. We will answer any charge that anti-Semitism and intolerance in any form are allowed to persist at York. Let us once again be absolutely clear: they are not.

To that end, in March, York's president announced the creation of a Task Force on Student Life, Learning & Community under the leadership of the Dean of Osgoode and Provost-designate Patrick Monahan. At the time, President Shoukri said: "We are committed to ensuring that our students can pursue their studies free of harassment or intimidation. This task force will take a hard look at the current environment on campus, and explore ways that we can promote open debate and the free exchange of ideas."

The task force is hard at work, receiving submissions from all interested parties, and will report to the President by the end of August. Its recommendations, along with the perspectives gained through ongoing round-table meetings the President is holding with students, faculty and staff to discuss ideas and thoughts on how the University should move forward, will contribute to actions the University will take to ensure civility

and security on campus.

As always, the University will continue to reach out to all partners of goodwill who want to help build our academic community in good faith. Similarly, external community groups must also do their part to create an atmosphere of tolerance, respect and mutual understanding so that difficult ideas can be explored in a peaceful and constructive environment.

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