If you have never personally felt what it is like to disappear into thin air, or questioned if your life matters, then to you, maybe the subject of freedom of expression can be an academic debate. However, for many students on this campus who have lived much of their lives in fear of the state and its institutions, the stakes are too high, and our humanity is on the line. This is not merely an academic debate, but part of an ongoing struggle for self-determination and the rights to exist in peace, safety, and dignity. Some believe that there is no issue that cannot be debated and unpacked in the classroom. Nevertheless, we find it challenging when someone explains that their house is on fire, and the response is to simply debate it.

By supporting freedom of expression and attempting to dictate how dissent should take place, the report fails to appreciate the limitations of public debate, academic freedom, and systemic inequalities that make protests a necessary and essential form of public discourse. Academics have used, and still use, freedoms to justify violent and pernicious systems. Civility in itself causes harm to those who are not afforded it. From intellectual justifications of eugenics, ethnic supremacy that leads to mass incarceration, and Indigenous genocide, academics have used civil discourse to participate in the sins done to our beloved home on Native land. This argument is true for various ideologies that are present across the political spectrum. Such ideologies were themselves created and upheld by "civil discourse.

Academia is in dire need of disruption. Disruption is necessary in the realm of academia to hold civil discourse accountable. We should ask ourselves: should some issues simply not be debated? How can we peacefully tell others that we deserve to be treated equally, that our lives have worth, and that the pain we feel is inherited and real? Debate presumes equality in the history and power of those who participate in it, and neutrality in the argument. In addition, debates should not be the end goal of public discourse. Winning a debate should not come at the cost of understanding, resolution, and harmony. Disruption becomes a necessary venue in the context of debates that are designed for one side to lose.

Disruption is necessary in the realm of academia to hold civil discourse accountable

In the current political climate, we have witnessed how the presence of individuals and the perpetuation of their respective views can cause a reaction. It may be easier to look externally for the causes of protest and disruptions. Yet, it is important to acknowledge the existence of frustration, disenfranchisement, and the lack of trust in institutions to treat us with dignity and respect. Protest is used as a last resort because the systems that have been designed to adjudicate, despite their well intentions, are not sufficient for justice. Forms of protest should not be restricted or controlled, especially considering how those who choose to protest on this campus have historically done so in a way that is respectful of the institution.

Disruption is the expected outcome for institutional inaction. The University’s response to academic freedom and protest has yet to account for the real hurt, pain, and frustration that certain communities at Mac feel. We want accountability and validation from the institution, but we are not expectant of it. The University should show their commitment to the wellbeing of the students and our learning environment. Not because people are offended or uncomfortable, but because history should not repeat itself.

Our communities are resilient and self-reliant. We are accustomed to experiencing threats to our lives and livelihoods. These threats are not caused by, nor do they cease, with controversial speakers on campus. Yet, we are hopeful that the University recognizes the responsibility that comes with its role as a public institution. The response should go beyond academic freedom to include prudence, temperance, fortitude, and justice. It is critical that those in power look beyond debate and into the hearts and histories of those for whom it matters.

The University has welcomed commentary on their suggested guidelines and report. Feedback can be provided to univsec@mcmaster.ca prior to March 30, 2018. As an alternate avenue to participate in the conversation, we encourage students to send us their commentary on the policy. We ask that students continue to engage with one another and actively cultivate our community. One that is not devoid of disruption, but recognizes how essential it is for societal progress.