

Petition in Defense of Academic Freedom. “Effectiveness of Face Mask ” Banned From Classroom Discussion?

Letter to President Andrew Hamilton at NYU

By [Prof Mark Crispin Miller](#)

Global Research, December 01, 2020

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [Police State & Civil Rights](#)

Dear President Hamilton,

*Herewith I am submitting my petition in defense of academic freedom and free speech, prompted by my unfortunate experience at NYU since Sept. 20, when, as you are well aware, a student in my undergraduate propaganda course, “Mass Persuasion and Propaganda” (MCC-UE 1014), took to Twitter to demand that **NYU fire me, for suggesting that the class look into the scientific studies of the effectiveness of masks against transmission of respiratory viruses**. It was not the student’s tweets that decided me to publish the petition, but NYU’s response to them: a tweet of thanks from my department chair, with assurances that my department had made her grievance “a priority”; an email from Dean Jack Knott, and Dr. Carlo Ciotoli, to my other students (without myself on copy), hinting that I had dangerously misinformed them, and including links to studies that they should accept without question (studies that I also had encouraged them to read, albeit with an open mind); and pressure from my chair to cancel next semester’s propaganda course (which I’ve been teaching for over twenty years, usually twice a year at least) in favor of two sections of “Film: History and Form” (MCC-UE 1007).*

Before giving you some sense of the diversity and eminence of many of the petition’s signatories, I feel it is appropriate to note what’s happened since I published it (although FIRE made you aware of it, in their comprehensive letter of Nov. 13). Evidently angered by its affirmation of my academic freedom, and my request that NYU respect that freedom, a majority of my department colleagues sent Dean Knott a letter on Oct. 21, urging him to order a “review” of my “conduct,” which they deem reprehensible not just because I had suggested that my students read those scientific studies, but, as they assert at length, because I am a menace in the classroom and beyond, engaging in “explicit hate speech,” “intimidation of students, staff and colleagues,” advocating for “an unsafe learning environment,” and otherwise behaving in a manner that bears no relation whatsoever to the way I teach, treat others generally, and always have done. They made that case in hopes that it will obviate my academic freedom, enabling whatever “disciplinary measures” NYU may deem “appropriate.” Although I explained to Dean Knott that my colleagues’ accusations are sheer fantasy, at the urging of NYU’s lawyers he complied with their demand, and ordered that review, which is ongoing.

To say that I am disappointed by my colleagues’ letter, and by Dean Knott’s response to it, is an understatement, as it appears to demonstrate that academic freedom is on thin ice at this university, where I’ve served on the faculty since 1997, and never have encountered

anything like this, with my courses always heavily enrolled, with very positive responses from the students. My disappointment is compounded by my colleagues' readiness to make up, or imagine, that I ever have committed any such transgressions as those which they impute to me, as well as by their eagerness to nullify my academic freedom, even as they claim to hold such freedom dear. (They are now up in arms over Zoom's recent censorship of Palestinian activist Leila Khaled—censorship that I too have protested.) Their charges have been thoroughly refuted by many of my students, former and current, as well as many visitors to my classes through the years, in statements of support sent to Dean Knott. While that impressive chorus of defense is surely gratifying, I'd rather not have found myself in need of it.

Those many individual pleas that NYU respect my academic freedom are in accord with the view of the petition's over (as of today) 17,700 signatories, who include professors, scientists, doctors, journalists and whistleblowers from all over the US and the world. The academics include economist James K. Galbraith, at the University of Texas and Bard College; Rashid Khalidi, Edward Said Professor of Modern Arab Studies at Columbia; Mark Edmundson, University Professor at the University of Virginia; Roberto Strongman, Associate Professor of Black Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara; Ross Posnock, Anna S. Garbedian Professor of the Humanities at Columbia; Lynn Comerford, Professor of Human Development, and director of Women's Studies, at California State University, East Bay; Benjamin Ginsberg, David Ginsberg Professor of Political Science, and Chair of the Hopkins Center for Advanced Governmental Studies in Washington, D.C., at Johns Hopkins; and faculty at schools as various as Trinity, Brown, Pace, University of Zurich, Ohio State, University of Bath, Wheaton College, Morgan State, University of Massachusetts (Amherst), East Carolina University, Virginia Commonwealth University and Okinawa Christian University.

The journalists who have signed the petition include Seymour Hersh, Sharyl Attkisson, Lewis Lapham (editor of *Lapham's Quarterly*), Andrew Sullivan, Naomi Wolf, Stephen Jimenez, Kristina Borjesson, Celia Farber, Margaret Kimberly and Anne Garrison (editors at *Black Agenda Report*), Mnar Muhawesh (editor of *Mint Press News*), Max Parry, Max Blumenthal and Patrick Henningsen, among others. The scientists and physicians include Dr. David L. Katz, founding director of the Yale-Griffin Prevention Research Center at Griffin Hospital in Derby, CT (and formerly on the faculty at Yale); Dr. James C. Meehan, specialist in public health and ophthalmology, and former Associate Editor of the *Journal of Ocular Immunology and Inflammation*; Dr. Meryl Nass, biowarfare epidemiologist; and researchers and clinicians from Lynchburg, Santa Barbara, Green Bay and Lexington, Mass. to La Paz (Mexico), Madrid, Heilbronn, Trier, Changuinoa (Panama) and Rosebery in Australia.

Other noted signatories include Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., Oliver Stone, Gov. Don Siegelman of Alabama, Rep. Cynthia McKinney of Georgia, and prominent whistleblowers from the US government, including Ray McGovern, former CIA analyst; Coleen Rowley, former FBI Special Agent; Clement J. Laniewski, former Lieutenant Colonel in the US Army; Marshall Carter-Tripp, former senior State Department official; Elizabeth Murray, former CIA Deputy National Intelligence Officer for the Near East; US Marine and former UN weapons inspector Scott Ritter; and Robert Wing, former State Department Foreign Service Officer (and NYU alumnus, who calls what has happened here a "travesty").

Finally, Ralph Nader, although unable to sign the petition, has issued this statement of support, with his permission for me to use it publicly:

Academic freedom means the freedom to contest received opinion and official truths, on subjects of all kinds. Universities that seek to curb that freedom impede the education of their students and deprive society of invaluable research.

New York University and all universities must stand up to unfounded attacks on academic integrity and encourage professors to teach without interference or threats of punishment.

It is my hope that this petition will persuade you to act quickly to address its urgent plea that NYU respect my academic freedom, which you may do by halting the review demanded by my colleagues, with a public statement reaffirming NYU's commitment to academic freedom, not only in my case but overall, whether certain students and/or faculty believe in it or not.

The petition is [here](#). There are 17,700 signatories and counting.

Thank you for your time and attention. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Mark Crispin Miller

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