

SPECIAL EDITION: EDITORIAL

## The Compact and the Future of MIT

Members of The Editorial Board of the MIT Faculty Newsletter, Nazli Choucri, Christopher Cummins, Sally Haslanger, Thomas Heldt, Ceasar McDowell, Tanalís Padilla, Nasser Rabbat, Balakrishnan Rajagopal, Robert Redwine, Warren Seering, Franz-Josef Ulm

**The *Faculty Newsletter* exists to give MIT faculty** a space for reflection and debate. All voices count – especially when the issue at hand touches the foundations of our scholarship and the future of the Institute and academia in general.

The proposed **“Compact for Academic Excellence in Higher Education”** marks such a moment – recognized by students, faculty, alumni/ae and MIT’s leadership alike. This Special Edition of the FNL gathers faculty perspectives from across the Institute to examine the Compact’s implications for research, teaching, and the principle most central to our mission: **academic freedom**. All of the submitted perspectives reflect the authors’ opinions prior to President Kornbluth’s response issued on Friday, October 10th.

We are grateful to President Kornbluth for her courageous leadership and thoughtful response to the Secretary of Education, which sets an important tone of engagement. Her letter opens a question that now belongs to us all: *what comes next?*

Whatever form it will ultimately take, this engagement will redefine the relationship between the federal government and American universities – a relationship that has developed steadily since the post-World War II era. It was during that period, under the leadership of figures such as Vannevar Bush, that universities became integral to the nation’s pursuit of knowledge, innovation, and the broader promise of happiness.

That system has weathered crises before – from the McCarthy-era attacks on academic freedom to the politicized oversight that followed September 11. Yet the Compact, in its initial form, stands apart in both scale and scope. What will now emerge from MIT’s response will affect us all. Its potential to reshape the core principle of academic freedom demands open and rigorous discussion among faculty.

As a platform *by faculty, for faculty*, the FNL invites every member of our community to join this essential conversation – on MIT’s response, on what should follow, and on how we can preserve the independence that makes discovery possible. For what is at stake is, quite simply, the future of MIT and of higher education in America.

# President Sally Kornbluth's Response to the "Compact for Academic Excellence in Higher Education"

Sally Kornbluth



Massachusetts Institute of Technology

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**Sally Kornbluth**, President

Dear members of the MIT community,

The U.S. Department of Education recently sent MIT and eight other institutions a proposed "Compact for Academic Excellence in Higher Education," along with a letter asking that MIT review the document.

From the messages I've received, I know this is on the minds of many of you and that you care deeply about the Institute's mission, its values and each other. I do too.

After considerable thought and consultation with leaders from across MIT, today I sent the following reply to U.S. Education Secretary Linda McMahon.

Sincerely,  
Sally Kornbluth

Dear Madam Secretary,

I write in response to your letter of October 1, inviting MIT to review a "Compact for Academic Excellence in Higher Education." I acknowledge the vital importance of these matters.

I appreciated the chance to meet with you earlier this year to discuss the priorities we share for American higher education.

As we discussed, the Institute's mission of service to the nation directs us to advance knowledge, educate students and bring knowledge to bear on the world's great challenges. We do that in line with a clear set of values, with excellence above all. Some practical examples:

- **MIT prides itself on rewarding merit.** Students, faculty and staff succeed here based on the strength of their talent, ideas and hard work. For instance, the Institute was the first to reinstate the SAT/ACT requirement after the pandemic. And MIT has never had legacy preferences in admissions.
- **MIT opens its doors to the most talented students regardless of their family's finances.** Admissions are need-blind. Incoming undergraduates whose families earn less than \$200,000 a year pay no tuition. Nearly 88% of our last graduating class left MIT with no debt for their education. We make a wealth of free courses and low-cost certificates available to any American with an internet connection. Of the undergraduate degrees we award, 94% are in STEM fields. And in service to the nation, we cap enrollment of international undergraduates at roughly 10%.
- **We value free expression**, as clearly described in the MIT Statement on Freedom of Expression and Academic Freedom. We must hear facts and opinions we don't like – and engage respectfully with those with whom we disagree.

These values and other MIT practices meet or exceed many standards outlined in the document you sent. We freely choose these values because they're right, and we live by them because they support our mission – work of immense value to the prosperity, competitiveness, health and security of the United States. And of course, MIT abides by the law.

The document also includes principles with which we disagree, including those that would restrict freedom of expression and our independence as an institution. And fundamentally, the premise of the document is inconsistent with our core belief that scientific funding should be based on scientific merit alone.

In our view, America's leadership in science and innovation depends on independent thinking and open competition for excellence. In that free marketplace of ideas, the people of MIT gladly compete with the very best, without preferences. Therefore, with respect, we cannot support the proposed approach to addressing the issues facing higher education.

As you know, MIT's record of service to the nation is long and enduring. Eight decades ago, MIT leaders helped invent a scientific partnership between America's research universities and the U.S. government that has delivered extraordinary benefits for the American people. We continue to believe in the power of this partnership to serve the nation.

Sincerely,  
Sally Kornbluth

cc  
Ms. May Mailman  
Mr. Vincent Haley

## MIT's Faustian Bargain

Franz-Josef Ulm

**There are many ways for a university to lose its soul.** Some do it slowly, by trimming values until only the trimmings remain. Others do it quickly, with a pen. MIT, standing before the *Compact for Academic Excellence in Higher Education*, now faces the latter.

This is a Faustian bargain. In Goethe's story, Faust trades his soul for diabolical favors – youth, knowledge, power – and the devil does not collect by force. He collects by staging satisfactions, moments that look like fulfillment. Faust believes he has cut canals, drained swamps, recovered land for the common good. Convinced at last that this is the pinnacle of his striving, he wants to hold the moment still. And that was the bargain: the instant Faust no longer seeks to advance, the devil claims his soul. At that very instant of literal blindness, Faust mistakes illusion for achievement – and damnation is sealed.

The parallel to MIT is uncomfortably close. Mephistopheles, now in a gray suit, offers rivers of funding, expedited visas, favorable tax treatment, and the imprimatur of national prestige. In return, the Institute would pledge political “neutrality,” adopt a tests-first, standardized admissions regime, and accept what the compact calls an “intellectually open environment” that, in practice, empowers administrative policing of thought while fitting diversity into a straitjacket – identity flattened at selection, revived for reporting, and sex narrowed to biology. On the brochure this reads as prudence; in substance it is a quiet transfer of independence.

Why does the compact fall on such fertile ground now? Because the ground has been tilled by the very hand that offers the bargain. Since January, universities have been squeezed by federal policy: the new tiered endowment excise tax puts schools like MIT in the top 8% bracket; moves to cap reimbursement of indirect research costs at 15% have slashed the funds that keep labs, libraries, and compliance running; and grant rules and agency actions have tightened across the board. The same administration that tightened the screws now extends a “compact” as relief – preferential pathways to federal funds if institutions accept its terms. Desperation is part of the design, as in *Faust*, where the devil arrives when the scholar is most depleted.

Read the compact closely and the target comes into focus: academic freedom – the soul of a university. The document name-checks academic freedom, then immediately limits it as “not absolute,” pairing the nod with disciplinary machinery and institutional neutrality rules that move political speech off departmental homepages and into segregated spaces. It bans the “heckler’s veto,” authorizes “lawful force,” and promises “swift, serious, and consistent sanctions,” all while requiring neutrality “at all levels.” However one feels about each provision in isolation, together they shift the locus of judgment from faculty culture to administrative enforcement, and from scholarly independence to governmental review. That is not a garden for freedom; it is a greenhouse for compliance.

On admissions, the compact bars consideration of sex, race, nationality, political views, sexual orientation, gender identity, and religion, requires universal standardized testing (or program-specific equivalents), and mandates public reporting of admitted and rejected cohorts’ academic data by race, national origin, and sex. The appearance is symmetry; the effect is flattening difference at the moment of selection and reanimating it for audit.

And the financial back end is recoded into bank-style oversight: Know-Your-Customer and anti-money-laundering programs, designated compliance officers, suspicious-activity reports, and training obligations for personnel. Enforcement culminates in annual certifications by the president, provost, and head of admissions; mandatory public climate surveys; Department of Justice review; clawbacks of federal money for violation years; and even donor refunds on request. In a dispute, legal enforceability sits with the government, while the university has already rendered its soul.

What results is not excellence but eligibility – the art of staying maximally fundable. The canals appear as glossy renderings in a development deck; the swamp is renamed “innovation”; the bloom is a bullet point in a federal report. Like Faust, the university is invited to confuse the devil’s staged satisfactions with real achievement, to declare itself “happy” precisely when it has ceased to strive.

The price will not arrive as spectacle but as sedation. Scholarship narrows as neutrality hardens into doctrine and risky projects are quietly deferred. Talent homogenizes as standardized inputs reward polish over difficulty. Trust thins as self-censorship becomes the safest habit. Community cools as equality is reduced to definition rather than practice. The Infinite Corridor will not be dragged to hell; it will be gently anesthetized into compliance.

MIT need not choose that end. Faust’s lesson is not that desire is wrong; it is that certainty is a trap. He is lost when he mistakes the staged moment for the work itself. The Institute still has time to decline the performance. Excellence has never been secured by compact. It is a freedom exercised: to pursue inquiry that unsettles power, to admit the candidate who does not scan cleanly, to host conflicts that cannot be scripted in advance, to hold a community capacious enough to be interesting and generous enough to be whole.

In the end, the devil never delivers what he promises; the “works” are a chimera. So, too, with this compact: **the promises are discretionary and revisable, while the obligations are binding and enforceable.** The right answer for a university is constant – choose the work over the rendering, freedom over the counterfeit. If MIT resists, it may keep the one thing no contract can bestow and no audit can certify. If it signs – well, the devil is very patient.

## For MIT and Country

Alan Jasanoff

**On October 1st, the administration in Washington invited MIT** and eight other institutions to sign a "compact" that would offer favorable governmental treatment in exchange for our commitment to "pursuing Federal priorities with vigor." MIT can under no circumstances agree to this. To do so would compromise our Institute's integrity and leave us stained and weakened for a generation or longer. Three factors align to argue for abstention: our dedication to excellence in research and teaching, our reputation as a paragon of academic virtue, and our duty to support the nation at a time of crisis. Each factor alone would provide compelling enough reason to reject the compact.

At a superficial level, MIT's interests might be served by accepting the administration's offer of preferred status. In the short term, maybe we could garner more federal grant money, maintain higher indirect cost rates, smooth hurdles for our students, and avoid legal wranglings in the coming months or years. But in return, we would need to agree to a list of demands, several of which are plainly incompatible with our academic mission. For instance, we would become subject to ideologically motivated organizational changes, "including but not limited to transforming or abolishing" departments or programs that conflict with "conservative ideas." We would have to seek "a broad spectrum of viewpoints" within every field and department. We would be asked to favor "hard science" majors over others, by selectively waiving tuition. No first-rate university could subject itself to anything like this. An MIT where off-topic opinions matter more than scholarly substance and where entire departments can be drowned in the political currents of the day cannot possibly maintain its quality.

Along with our overall academic status, MIT is renowned for its special celebration of objective merit and honest achievement. When we admit applicants, we consider their grades and test scores, not where their parents went to college. We ask our students to work hard, and we do not grade on a curve. We are successful because of our innovation and industry, not because we accept hand-outs from questionable sources. Even if every provision of the administration's compact were consistent with our existing practices, our Institute's honor demands that we refuse to be favored by backroom deals; our way is to earn support through fair and open competition. If a consequence of not signing the compact is that our grants and petitions are discriminated against, then we should lead the charge against this injustice. That would be far better than abandoning our core principles by accepting illicit benefits through corrupt negotiations.

Service to the nation is another core component of what MIT stands for. Our Institute was conceived with the egalitarian purpose of offering practical training to ordinary people, at a time when America was struggling bitterly to live up to its ideals of liberty and justice for all. In the 20th century, we were instrumental in developing technologies that won wars both hot and cold against brutal foreign foes. MIT's leadership helped usher in over 80 years of US supremacy in science and technology through creation of the federal infrastructure for funding cutting-edge research and development. This infrastructure, and the environment of free inquiry it sustains, has been crucial to our country's success as an economic dynamo, a military superpower, and a magnet to the best and brightest from around the world. The administration's compact now promises to apply Soviet-style political oversight to our

activities, if we agree to sign. Academic freedom and civil rights on campus would be curtailed, as part of the administration's apparent effort to degrade our democratic system from within. We cannot join in this campaign. If we abet the erosion of freedoms that truly make this nation great, we will have betrayed our country in its hour of need, and MIT's record of national service will be forever blighted.

So what should we do instead? I believe that we must recommit ourselves to the values of our nation and our Institute by answering the administration's compact publicly, with a covenant of our own. In its preamble, we should highlight our immense contributions to the country, as we did also in the amicus brief filed with the recent Harvard funding lawsuit. We should then affirm our unwavering fidelity to the principles of a free society, including freedom of expression and freedom of inquiry. We should describe our dedication to a culture of merit-based admissions and assessments, while stressing our commitment to providing rigorous training to the most promising students, regardless of their means. We should also emphasize our goal to promote equal access to a welcoming environment for learning, in accordance with our academic mission and the laws of the land. But in rejecting the administration's compact, we must declare in unequivocal terms our opposition to extralegal governmental intrusion into our community, just as Americans of all political stripes would reject similar intrusion into their businesses, households, or places of worship. We should publish our covenant together with our sister schools as cosignatories, to the extent their support is forthcoming – a coalition of the willing will likely be the strongest. But if need be, we should take courage and leverage MIT's unique prestige to say by ourselves what must be said, clearly and out loud.

As a witness to the government's actions against Harvard, Columbia, and others, I recognize the peril we could face in confronting the administration. As a scientist dependent on hard-won federal funding, and as a mentor to many talented but potentially vulnerable trainees, I personally have much at stake. But never before have I found my sense of patriotism and allegiance to the ideals of academia invoked so powerfully in favor of a cause. I hope that MIT's leadership feels the same way. The current situation gives us a chance to become greater leaders, both as individuals and as a community. Perhaps this is a blessing in disguise; it is certainly a test we cannot fail.

# MITCAF Statement on the “Compact for Academic Excellence in Higher Education”

MIT Council on Academic Freedom

MITCAF statement on the “Compact for Academic Excellence in Higher Education”

**Summary.** The MIT Council on Academic Freedom objects to the proposed draft compact between the federal government and MIT. Its two core objections are that (i) the compact violates principles of academic freedom, and that (ii) the compact’s stance on institutional neutrality needs clarifying.

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The MIT Council on Academic Freedom is a faculty organization devoted to promoting and defending freedom of expression and academic freedom at the Institute. We comment here on the parts of the Trump administration’s proposed compact that are most relevant to MITCAF’s mission. Accordingly, we say nothing about the compact’s sections concerning admissions, hiring, student equality, learning, financial responsibility, and foreign entanglements. We also do not comment on whether the MIT administration should negotiate the terms of the compact, or else reject it wholesale; neither do we comment on the compact’s legality. The relevant parts of the compact for our purposes are Section 2, “Marketplace of Ideas and Civil Discourse,” and Section 4, “Institutional Neutrality.”

## “Marketplace of Ideas and Civil Discourse”

There are some sentiments in this section that align with MITCAF’s commitment (following the MIT faculty Statement on Freedom of Expression and Academic Freedom) to intellectual diversity, open inquiry, and civil discourse. For instance:

Truth-seeking is a core function of institutions of higher education. Fulfilling this mission requires maintaining a vibrant marketplace of ideas where different views can be explored, debated, and challenged.

[T]he freedom to debate requires conditions of civility. Civility includes protections against institutional punishment or individual harassment for one’s views.

However, while intellectual diversity (including political diversity) is welcome and should be encouraged, the compact seems to require its enforcement:

Signatories commit themselves to revising governance structures as necessary to create [a vibrant marketplace of ideas on campus . . . with a broad spectrum of ideological viewpoints present and no single ideology dominant, both along political and other relevant lines].

This is incompatible with one component of academic freedom, namely the ability to hire faculty without external interference, in particular by not imposing political litmus tests. Faculty should be hired on scholarly merit and teaching ability, not on political views. The compact’s statement on this point is also



incompatible with Section 3's "steadfast commitment to rigorous and meritocratic selection."

Section 2 of the compact continues:

Signatories commit themselves to revising governance structures as necessary to create such an environment [a vibrant marketplace of ideas on campus], including but not limited to transforming or abolishing institutional units that purposefully punish, belittle, and even spark violence against conservative ideas.

One problem with this statement is the partisan focus on "conservative" ideas, whatever these may be. But that problem would not be fixed by replacing "conservative ideas" with "political ideas." Naturally no one should be punished or physically attacked for their ideas, political or otherwise. But academic freedom permits "belittling" *any* ideas. Just which ideas get belittled, and by whom, is settled by the "marketplace of ideas." If all the Economics faculty members were to belittle tariffs (or, for that matter, the *Communist Manifesto*), that would be well-within the scope of academic freedom.

Section 2 also says:

Signatories shall adopt policies prohibiting incitement to violence, including calls for murder or genocide or support for entities designated by the U.S. government as terrorist organizations.

Incitement to imminent lawless action is not protected by the First Amendment. However, political (as opposed to material) "support" for organizations with violent aims is protected by the First Amendment, and is therefore protected speech on public university campuses. MIT should not be an exception.

#### "Institutional Neutrality"

This part of the compact appears to endorse the University of Chicago's 1967 Kalven Report. Quoting from Kalven:

The neutrality of the university as an institution arises then not from a lack of courage nor out of indifference and insensitivity. It arises out of respect for free inquiry and the obligation to cherish a diversity of viewpoints. And this neutrality as an institution has its complement in the fullest freedom for its faculty and students as individuals to participate in political action and social protest.

That last sentence is echoed by the compact:

All university members, including students, faculty, and staff, are encouraged to comment on current events in their individual capacities, provided they do not purport to do so on behalf of the university or any of its subdivisions.

However, Section 4 of the compact is unclear on one point:

All university employees, in their capacity as university representatives, will abstain from actions or speech relating to societal and political events except in cases in which external events have a direct impact upon the university.

That can be read as (unreasonably) preventing the Director of a Center for Human Rights from speaking, as Director, on abuses of human rights.

More clarity is needed. Further, the Kalven Report recognizes – which the compact does not – some nuance in the practical application of institutional neutrality:

[T]here emerges, as we see it, a heavy presumption against the university taking collective action or expressing opinions on the political and social issues of the day, or modifying its corporate activities to foster social or political values, however compelling and appealing they may be.

These are admittedly matters of large principle, and the application of principle to an individual case will not be easy.

MITCAF has no official position on Kalven, for or against. However, if Section 4 of the compact is intended to summarize Kalven, it should explicitly say so. If the intent is to depart from Kalven, that should also be explicit.

For the above reasons, then, the compact in its present form is not acceptable and MIT should not sign it.

## An Impossible Choice: How Trump's "Compact" Threatens Our Universities\*

L. Rafael Reif

**As a former university president — of MIT** — I have been thinking about how I would act if I'd been on the receiving end of the Trump administration's proposed "Compact for Academic Excellence in Higher Education." The administration sent it to nine top universities on Oct. 1. They have until Oct. 20 to respond.

Calling it a "compact," however, is misleading. It's an ultimatum. The letter that accompanied the compact promises that if a school becomes a signatory, it will get "multiple positive benefits" that include "substantial and meaningful federal grants." These are vague assurances of favor in a research funding system that, until Trump took office a second time, had been scrupulously merit-based and that the administration wishes to slash to the bone in any case.

If, however, these universities fail to sign on to the government's meddling in everything from admissions to grading, pricing, hiring, and political expression on campuses, the compact says they are electing to "forego federal benefits." In other words, they either lose their independence and academic freedom or they lose access to research grants, student loans, federal contracts, visas for their students, and preferential tax treatment.

This is the excruciating choice now being faced by MIT, Brown University, Dartmouth University, the University of Arizona, the University of Texas at Austin, Vanderbilt University, the University of Virginia, the University of Pennsylvania, and the University of Southern California. The goal, clearly, is to completely rewrite these universities' partnerships with the government so they become subjects, not partners, and willing vehicles for conservative ideas.

Speaking for the Trump administration, May Mailman, senior adviser for special projects, expressed the hope that university leaders find the agreement "highly reasonable." The compact is reasonable only in its tone, not its content. While professing to encourage a marketplace of ideas and to end discrimination of all kinds, the agreement would force universities into "transforming or abolishing" institutional units that "belittle" conservative ideas. Would university faculty no longer be allowed to talk about the science of climate change or vaccines?

While there is much to object to throughout the compact, its provisions on free expression are particularly upsetting. Universities would be forced to audit their students, faculty, and staff for a "broad spectrum of viewpoints" and to make these assessments public. Is "viewpoint" code for party registration? All university employees would have to "abstain from actions or speech relating to societal and political events" in their capacity as university representatives. This seems challenging, in that every university asked to sign the compact has social and political scientists among its faculty. Would professors be allowed to weigh in even on their own areas of expertise?

Most of the university presidents who sign this agreement will sign not because they believe the compact's provisions are reasonable or necessary. As a group, American universities are widely acknowledged to be the best in the world precisely because they are self-governing. There is nothing that demands the imposition of an array of government-led directives. Legal remedies already exist for the discrimination the compact purports to correct, and universities are already making course corrections. The Supreme Court has already ruled on race-based affirmative action. Do we really need the federal government to go further and to insist that universities only use "objective criteria," such as SAT scores, to admit students?

Universities that sign the agreement will sign it largely because they feel coerced. Yet they may find that they have given up a great deal for little in return. Enforcement of the compact would be up to the Department of Justice, with no apparent opportunity for an appeal. With a violation, *any* money advanced to the universities by the government during the year would have to be returned. The punishment does not have to fit the offense. These universities would have to give back not just government funds but also private donations if the donor wanted them back.

Moreover, with this administration, agreements seem to be abandoned and renegotiated on a whim. At the end of July, Brown University agreed to a settlement with the federal government that promised it would be considered for federal funding in the future "without disfavored treatment." A mere two months later, Brown is among those being threatened with the loss of all federal benefits if it does not adopt the compact's "models and values."

I would like to think that I would stand on principle if asked to sign this document, which is unlikely to be the last word in a virulent campaign against higher education by this administration.

On the other hand, university presidents are under tremendous pressure to accept because the administration has a seemingly infinite number of thumbscrews at its disposal and is willing to use all of them to hurt recalcitrant institutions. At Harvard, for example, which has sued the administration, almost every source of revenue has been threatened or successfully cut by the Trump administration, including research funding, student tuition, endowment income, federal student aid, patent licensing, and donor gifts. Even universities with the largest endowments will not survive long if the federal government decides to starve them.

I know where I stand on the question of whether to sign or not to sign. But my certainty is easily won precisely because I am *not* running any institution. I do not have a board to convince of my position. I do not have faculty who will be angry if I cost them federal research funding or, conversely, if I don't act honorably in their view. I don't have alumni and donors on both sides of the issue. I do not have to think about the students who won't be educated, the ideas that won't emerge from the university laboratories, or the employees who will no longer have jobs if I don't take the pragmatic course and pick up the pen.

This is an impossible choice that threatens to destroy one of our greatest assets as a nation — our universities and the brilliant people and ideas they attract and nurture. Any government that asks universities to make that choice is utterly destructive.

\*This article was originally published in the October 7, 2025 edition of *The Boston Globe*.

## Thoughts About the Compact

Balakrishnan Rajagopal

Dear Colleagues,

**I would like to share some thoughts about the compact** proposed by the federal government to MIT and certain other universities although I am on sabbatical and don't check my mail regularly. I understand that urgent discussions are underway about how to respond and I hope that these thoughts help to arrive at a wise decision.

1. The compact poses an existential threat to higher education as a whole and in particular, to academic freedom, free expression, and autonomy. Instead of engaging with the merits and demerits of specific elements of this compact, I urge MIT leadership to reject the very concept of the compact as an existential threat and an attempted extortion.
2. No university worth its name can accept a mafia-style demand for compliance with government-dictated teaching and research under threat of financial penalty. The compact may in fact lead to more extortionate demands which may be a slippery slope towards even more government control of education.
3. Imposing a political litmus test to promote conservative – or liberal – views undermines free speech and chills dissent at a time of deep divisions when people need to be able to freely express themselves, not punished.
4. Restrictions on admission and policing gender identity undermines inclusion and diversity and flattens a campus into a monochrome of dull compliance.
5. There are serious legal and procedural violations with this compact including violations of Title VI (national origin discrimination), vague standards that are inherently arbitrary and thus unconstitutional, and a gross violation of free speech and right to education legal standards under international human rights law which are binding on all actors including universities like MIT.

I would urge that MIT openly reject this attempt to extort it. I would propose in fact that MIT lead and form a "counter-compact" of academic freedom with all universities that can resist the ongoing and (anticipated) future assaults on higher education in the US. That's the surest way to preserve the excellence that MIT has achieved so far.

Balakrishnan Rajagopal is UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Adequate Housing

# The University Compact – My Take

Yossi Sheffi

**When I first read *The University Compact*, I did not see a threat** – I saw a mirror. A mirror held up to American higher education in general and MIT in particular. It's tempting to react contemptuously, to dismiss such a document as political intrusion or external meddling. But perhaps this moment calls for something different: reflection rather than reflex.

MIT, for all its achievements, is not immune to drift. Over the years, we have grown in prestige but not always in purpose. We have built wealth, but perhaps lost touch with the working spirit that once made this place an engine of discovery and social mobility. The Compact, for all its rough edges, gives us a chance to ask whether we are still the Institute we think we are – or whether we have become something else.

Rather than reject it wholesale, let's consider separating its parts into four categories: things we already do, things that don't apply, things that could make us better, and things that should be negotiated. Seen that way, the Compact becomes not a decree imposed on us, but an opportunity handed to us – to strengthen MIT academically, financially, and morally.

## 1. Equality in Admissions

MIT's incoming class has changed in ways that challenge our educational standards. The shift away from merit-based admissions, the watering down of standardized testing, and the decline in K-12 preparation have led to remedial courses for first year students, and unhealthy grading leniencies opened for abuse.

Re-centering admissions on academic merit could help restore excellence. MIT has already reinstated standardized testing. But, given the state of these tests, we should go further: define *our own* measure of academic excellence – even if it means creating a new, MIT-designed SAT that others might one day adopt.

## 2. Marketplace of Ideas

This section of the Compact is, at its core, a free speech statement – a call for viewpoint diversity over identity and racial diversity. Occurrences such as speaker cancellations, mandatory ideological statements, re-education courses, and "approved" narratives<sup>[1]</sup> reveal that we still fall short of genuine intellectual freedom. The Compact's demand to protect *all* viewpoints aligns deeply with MIT's founding spirit of inquiry. For some communities, especially Jewish and Israeli students, that protection has not been experienced in practice. This is a chance to reaffirm that MIT is a home for *all* ideas, not just fashionable ones.

### 3. Nondiscrimination in Hiring

Affirming meritocracy in faculty and staff hiring is not just in compliance with the law – it's fidelity to MIT's values. Excellence should remain the only criterion and a central value of MIT.

### 4. Institutional Neutrality

Institutional neutrality is already our formal policy. Extending it across all Schools and centers, just like all other MIT policies, will ensure consistency. Neutrality protects inquiry; it keeps science from becoming political advocacy unrelated to one's scientific field and protects science's role as a trustworthy source of knowledge based on evidence and empirical data.

### Student Learning

MIT's mission is to educate, not to shelter. Students cannot be treated as both mature thinkers whose insight we should seek and fragile exceptions to responsibility. Our compassion must not come at the expense of rigor. Education is not therapy; it is preparation for truth and consequence.

### Student Equality

To treat students as individuals, not identities, is to honor Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s vision of judging them by "the content of their character." Admissions should be blind to race, gender, or nationality, and campus life should ensure belonging and safety for all. MIT's recent failures to protect Jewish and Israeli students and reluctance to enforce its own policies have been painful. The Compact's call for universal equality is not radical, it's overdue.<sup>[2]</sup>

### Financial Responsibility

MIT's prosperity allows for both generosity and restraint. Modest financial discipline can strengthen our core.

- **Transparency:** Publishing post-graduation earnings by School would reflect favorably on MIT and serve the public interest.
- **Military Credits:** Recognizing the academic value of military service honors both merit and experience.

However, the Compact's call for tuition freezes or exemptions for STEM students are misguided. STEM is MIT's essence, and its graduates already fare well financially. Our need-blind financial aid accomplishes the intent of this requirement in a more responsible fashion; in fact, 87% of undergraduate students in the MIT class of 2024 graduated with zero student loan debt.

### 8. Foreign Entanglements

The Compact's call for transparency in foreign funding echoes existing law. This requirement is simply a reminder to remain vigilant.

### 9. Exceptions

This provision regarding religious and single-sex schools is not relevant to MIT.

## 10. Enforcement

The Compact proposes anonymous third-party surveys of faculty, students, and staff – with results made public. This is a strength, not a threat. Transparency is, and should remain, an MIT value. As Justice Brandeis wrote, “sunlight is the best disinfectant.”

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In closing, MIT has long stood as a place where ideas triumph over ideology – where curiosity, not conformity, rules. But that identity is fragile. Over time, we’ve drifted toward one-sided political docility and elitism, and away from the “hands-on, mind-on” ethos that once connected us to the broader American experience. The Compact reminds us – uncomfortably – that our public legitimacy depends on our willingness to align our commitments with those who ultimately support us: the citizens and taxpayers of the United States.

Yes, the Compact comes from outside. Yes, it comes from this specific administration. The right response is not outrage – it is ownership and engagement. A clear-eyed reading of the Compact, stripped from our own biases, may reveal that it is not the monster asserted by some publications. Let us claim the pieces that make us stronger, discard what is irrelevant (or that we are already compliant with), and negotiate the rest with confidence and clarity. If we do that, this moment will not be one of imposition, but of renewal.

[1] Some MIT departments still require DEI statements as a condition for employment, as well as mandatory re-education courses.

[2] Adoption may require replacement and re-education of the current DEI officers, as well as a campus-wide culture change.



## MIT AAUP Chapter on the "Compact for Academic Excellence in Higher Education"

MIT Chapter of the American Association of University Professors

**MIT has been invited by the federal government** to sign a so-called "Compact for Academic Excellence in Higher Education." The Introduction to the Compact concludes: "Institutions of higher education are free to develop models and values other than those below, if the institution elects to forego federal benefits." In other words, the "invitation" is in reality a threat to withhold at least some forms of federal funding from universities that do not accept its terms. An accompanying cover letter invites the nine solicited universities to offer "limited, targeted feedback to ensure mutual alignment."

That last phrase speaks volumes about the purpose of this proposed deal and its dangers to academic freedom. Universities do not exist to fall into "alignment" with the ideological agendas of the administration of the day. MIT serves the nation and the world, but its ability to do so depends precisely on not being held in a stranglehold by narrow, politicized conceptions of the national interest and the challenges facing the world as a whole.

The Compact proposes broad mechanisms for an unprecedented degree of government intrusion into academic freedom and institutional governance. Under the guise of "fostering a vibrant marketplace of ideas," the Compact demands viewpoint diversity "not just in the university as a whole, but within every field, department, school, and teaching unit," thereby giving weight to considerations other than academic merit, in violation of academic freedom. The document places special protections around "conservative" ideas and obligates institutions to revise their governance structures accordingly, including "transforming or abolishing institutional units" that purposefully "belittle" conservative ideas. Effectively this means that the government would have a broad mandate to suppress any ideological viewpoint with which it does not agree. As scholars of constitutional law Chemerinsky and Lakier have noted, the requirements in the Compact are almost certainly unconstitutional both in placing impermissible constraints on federal funding and in restricting speech protected by the First Amendment.

Under the rubric of institutional neutrality, the Compact requires universities to prohibit "all university employees, in their capacity as university representatives" from "actions or speeches related to societal and political events" unless they "have a direct impact upon the university." Under this policy, the Director of a Center for Human Rights could be prohibited from speaking out against abuses of human rights for fear of being in violation of institutional neutrality. Such a situation is not a "vibrant marketplace of ideas" but an educational failure. In a deliberative democracy, experts have an obligation to contribute to public debate.

The Compact demands that international students be screened for "hostility to the United States and its allies". How is "hostility" to be measured? Who is an "ally?" If a university's interpretation of these terms does not accord with the current administration's, who is to decide between the two? Does the university

lose federal benefits if it guesses wrongly? And if the administration's definitions are to be preferred, what is the point of asking universities to do the screening in the first place? Courts long ago gave up on trying to square such arbitrary loyalty tests with the First Amendment.

Finally, the Compact mandates that universities adopt a trans-exclusionary definition of gender. This is a definition that conflicts with academic freedom insofar as it suppresses teaching, scholarship, and institutional practices that operate with the definitions of gender established by the scholarly and medical literature. Adopting such a definition at MIT would also betray the trans students, faculty, and staff who have placed their trust in our institution and see MIT as a safe place for them to live, work, teach, learn, and thrive.

These are just some of the reasons to reject the Compact and any effort to negotiate its terms. To sign the Compact is to debase the very values of academic excellence, freedom, integrity, and intellectual merit the Compact claims to advance. It would cause grave harm to MIT's academic reputation.

Moreover, it is a fool's errand to try to negotiate a "better" version of this document.

The compact will lead to ongoing federal oversight and control of MIT. The issue is not whether some ideas in the Compact are sensible, or could be adjusted to become so. The issue is that, under our laws and Constitution and the American tradition of academic freedom, the executive branch cannot coerce independent institutions of higher learning to "align" with the ideological orthodoxies of the moment.

We urge MIT leadership and the MIT Corporation to reject the Compact wholesale. Federal funding for higher education research should be based not on political litmus tests, but on academic, scientific, and intellectual criteria that serve the nation and the world.

## Statement by Some Members of the MIT Council on Academic Freedom on the “Compact for Academic Excellence in Higher Education”

John Marshall, Yossi Sheffi, David Thesmar, Bernhardt L. Trout, John R. Williams

**As members of The MIT Council on Academic Freedom**, we generally support the Compact as an opportunity for the MIT administration to promote its obligations of intellectual diversity, non-discrimination, institutional neutrality, and fiscal responsibility. We expect that the MIT administration will want to negotiate some of the economic terms, and in supporting the Compact we in no way support any restrictions on protected speech as stated for example in the MIT Statement on Freedom of Expression and Academic Freedom.

# Democratic Campus Expression Has Been Key to US Science and Technology Leadership

Jonathan A. King

**Faculty and students on US college and university campuses** were key to the emergence of US leadership in science and technology in the period after WWII. This includes the revolutions in molecular biology and biotechnology, computing and computer science, chemistry and materials science, astrophysics, telecommunications and many other disciplines.

The proposed Compact from the Trump administration is completely contrary to the conditions that led to this extraordinary productivity. It needs to be actively rejected to protect our national ability to tackle essential scientific and technical problems.

The initial leap in campus contributions to the growth of knowledge was the establishment of the land grant universities following passage of the Morrill Act and later Hatch Act. This opened higher education to the children of farmers, mechanics, and tradesman across the nation. Many of the land grant campuses grew into world class institutions of teaching and research, such as the Universities of California, Michigan, Minnesota, North Carolina, Oregon, Rutgers, and Wisconsin. Even though women and Blacks were still limited, higher education in the US was made accessible to a far broader sector of the population than for example in China, France, Germany, Great Britain, Japan, and Italy, whose education systems provided almost exclusively to elites. Even today a significant number of MIT graduates come from these geographic and culturally diverse institutions.

After WWII, the GI Bill provided access to college education to more than two million Americans from all walks of life. Many became teachers themselves. Subsequently the National Institutes of Health and National Science Foundation were established. These agencies invented the uniquely productive "bottom-up" mechanism for supporting science and engineering research and education on campuses throughout the country. This process, now fully mature, involved scientists and scholars themselves in conceiving and initiating investigations. Their proposals were and are evaluated by "Study Sections", teams of working scientists, engineers, and scholars who evaluate the proposals in terms of likelihood of generating valuable new knowledge. This model, coupled with significant public funding, led to the extraordinary development of campus faculties leading to the most productive advances in the growth of new knowledge in human history.

From the beginning, these organizations recruited working scientists and engineers to set scientific priorities. Though occasionally attacked by elected officials, such as Senator Proxmire's taunting of NSF grant topics with the Golden Fleece Awards. In fact the public funding through peer-advised agencies has insured that the diversity of subjects taught and studied responded to scientific, social, and economic needs, and the prior growth of knowledge. Efforts to control or suppress areas of investigation were continually and effectively resisted by the academic community. During the repressive period of McCarthyism, the American Association of University Professors played a key role in protecting faculty from McCarthy's censorship.

During this period there were ongoing social movements to include sectors of the population who were not white males, into the academic work force. This first successful struggle was waged by women, and slowly opened the doors of academe. (This *Faculty Newsletter* was the first to publish the report on the "Status of Women Faculty at MIT," which subsequently significantly improved the academic environment for female faculty.) With the growth of the Civil rights movement, campuses opened to Black academics and other scholars of color. The diversity – economic, geographic, gender and ethnicity – all contributed to the robust growth of knowledge in all fields of human endeavor. The contributions of historians and social scientists played a key role in supporting the integration of the academic work forces. This human diversity further insured that the boundaries of investigation continued to widen and deepen.

It is the interaction of diverse faculty membership, with support for diverse investigations, that was and continues to be key for the expansion of knowledge and technology.

Of course Congress and governmental bodies were constantly setting new priorities, many of which led to new agencies, including NASA, NOAA, Environmental Protection Agency, Occupational Health and Safety Agency, and the National Institute of Environmental Health. However, these priorities were almost always set by committees of lay scientists, engineers and scholars. They were not enforced from above, but always in continual and creative tension with the instincts of individual investigators. They shaped funding priorities, but did not dictate or censor. As a result program goals were constantly informed by the growth of new knowledge. For example cancer research programs were transformed when the advances in molecular biology and molecular genetics clearly established that it was mutations in the DNA of cancer cells that led to the malignant pathology.

My own early research was funded through the National Institutes of Health Institute of General Medical Sciences, which identified virus structure and assembly as a general priority. Strong programs were funded at Albert Einstein School of Medicine, Brandeis, Harvard, Mass General Hospital, Purdue, UC Berkeley, University of Oregon, University of Wisconsin, University of Pittsburgh, and of course MIT. Thus Salk's polio virus vaccine was developed at Pittsburgh because they had hired biophysicist Max Lauffer, whose expertise in purifying tobacco mosaic virus provided the environment for the purification of polio virus particles required for the polio vaccine.

During all my 45 years on the MIT faculty I was politically active in progressive politics. For example I was a Jesse Jackson delegate in the 1984 and 1988 Presidential campaigns. That didn't interfere with my research group publishing hundreds of peer-reviewed papers on virus assembly and protein folding and misfolding. Under the current Trump "Compact" I find it hard to imagine my group would have been able to continue that work.

As a postdoctoral fellow at Purdue University in West Lafayette, Indiana, a significant fraction of biomedical grad students were the children of midwestern farmers. In subsequent postdoctoral work at the Lab for Molecular Biology in Cambridge, UK in 1970, and later a sabbatical visitor at the Institute Pasteur in Paris, I was struck by the limited representation of fellow scientists from non-elite communities and institutions. In the subsequent decades France, Britain, Germany, Japan, and the Netherlands instituted reforms which followed the NIH and NSF models, permitting them to diversify their scientific and academic communities.

Rejecting the Trump Compact will protect the independence of faculty and students upon which our future depends.

## A Call for Solidarity: Queer Lives at MIT

Marah Gubar

**Recently, my synagogue organized a gathering** to support parents of LGBTQ+ kids. The youngest mom there described how her nonbinary tween had been viciously bullied at school, while the most elderly couple confided that their recently transitioned adult trans daughter is scared she will lose her military office job. Why? Because, after the first Trump administration forced trans troops to get a diagnosis of "gender dysphoria" in order to continue serving in the military, the second one is now using that diagnosis as grounds for kicking them out.[1]

My husband and I were in the room to hear these stories because we have our own trans child to love and worry about. Her coming-out experience and subsequent medical care were utterly unlike the panicked narratives that dominate media accounts of pediatric transition: her doctors did not rush to medical treatment and were frank about its pros and cons; the process was both liberating and exploratory. She just started her first year of college in a faraway town and now we worry that when she flies home, she'll be hassled at the airport because she has a nonbinary gender marker on her state ID and one of the "X" passports that the Trump administration are trying to stop issuing.[2] The more we hear from others about travelling while trans, the more anxious we get.[3]

If you are not hearing stories like these from trans, nonbinary, and other gender-nonconforming Americans and the people who love them, please know that they are nevertheless unfolding all around you.[4]

Consider your students. Recent surveys suggest that nearly 30% of Gen Z – the generational cohort that most MIT students now belong to – is LGBTQ+. Those of us who teach subjects that tend to enroll high numbers of such students – like "Representing Girlhood," my current Women's and Gender Studies (WGS) course – are hearing increasingly fearful questions about whether MIT will continue to be a community where these students feel safe being themselves and able to concentrate deeply on learning.

"I just don't know if I can trust MIT to stand up for me and make sure I'm allowed to exist on this campus." That was the gist of what two separate students said to me a few days ago, one of them at a reading group for graduate students and faculty, the other at a quickly organized yet crowded WGS community gathering convened to offer support and sustenance to anyone who felt they needed it, as we waited to find out how MIT would respond to the federal pressure to sign the "Compact for Academic Excellence in Higher Education," which would have required MIT officially to define both sex and gender in terms of "reproductive function."

Many of the students who came to this event were gender nonconforming in some way, and they were scared. One shared that she was afraid of losing medical access to hormone treatment. Another anxiously asked whether the WGS program might be dissolved before they could graduate with a WGS major that they regard as crucial to their future career plan.

I wanted to reassure this student that MIT would never cave to federal political pressure by dissolving a program so many faculty and students have adopted as an academic home on a campus we often find inhospitable. But how could I? That same day, some of my WGS colleagues told me they were so afraid that we might become a target of conservative ire that they didn't think WGS should put out any kind of public statement regarding the Compact. A climate of silencing and self-censorship is already taking hold, undermining the Compact's promise it will promote a "vibrant marketplace of ideas where different views can be explored, debated, and challenged" before anyone even signs it (2).

A few lines later, a truer intention slips out when the Compact states that "signatories commit themselves to [. . .] transforming or abolishing institutional units that purposefully [. . .] belittle [. . .] conservative ideas." This conservative intolerance of liberal dissent is particularly threatening to WGS programs, since our discipline emerged in the late 1960s and 70s to challenge a patriarchal status quo that ignored what even the most accomplished women in the past had said, done, discovered, and created, even as it largely excluded modern-day women from the professoriat and other positions of power.

My students today consider the 1970s ancient history, but to me they feel relatively recent, because my mother was one of those pioneering feminist professors. Her scholarship involved recuperating the work of many unjustly forgotten or maligned women writers. When she walked into the English Department office on her first day of work, a male colleague curtly handed her a handwritten manuscript and ordered her to type it up. There were so few female professors in that department that he assumed she must be a secretary.

Every woman I know who entered the academy back then has similar and usually worse stories to tell about the sexism they endured. Many were so discouraged that they never made it through graduate school. When I got my first job as part of an academic couple, my philosopher husband and I were taken aback by how often the stay-at-home wives of his male colleagues would pull me aside at department parties to tell me poignant stories about when, why, and how they had deferred their own dreams of becoming an academic or pursuing some other profession.

All lovers of wisdom owe a debt of gratitude to early WGS scholars whose scholarship and activism helped push open the doors of the aptly named "Ivory Tower" so that many more brilliant women and members of other underrepresented groups could get in and go on to transform how we think about everything from the social cognition of babies to the British novel, from how to detect exoplanet atmospheres to how to ameliorate global poverty.

Surely, no one at MIT would deny that this diversification of our faculty has enriched the academic excellence of our institution, as well as higher education as a whole. Yet if MIT agrees to obey any federal dictate forcing us to define "'male,' 'female,' 'woman,' and 'man' according to reproductive function and biological processes,"[5] we would be repudiating the feminist insight that opened these department doors: namely, that true equality for women requires delinking our "reproductive function" from social norms that constrict the range of opportunities open to us.

Such backtracking constitutes a problem for multiple reasons, beginning with the fact that although much progress has been made to achieve more equitable representation in STEM, we still have some way to go, as indicated by the fact that the full professor cohort at MIT remains male-dominated: 78% of those at the top of our faculty tree are men; only 22% are women.[6]

Then, too, it is a clear violation of the academic freedom of WGS scholars and programs when the US government tries to bully us into accepting a conservative conflation of sex and gender that almost all the scholarly literature in our field has rejected. To move backwards and reinstate biological essentialism undermines gender equality and female leadership at the Institute as well as our competitiveness, credibility, and impact both in the United States and in the world at large.

Furthermore, this reduction of gender to “reproductive function” does not reflect the lived realities of many members of our MIT community. On the contrary, it actively seeks to erase the existence of trans and nonbinary students, faculty, and staff who came here hoping that our institution would be a safe place for them to live, learn, and work.

In contrast to such erasure, the students in my “Representing Girlhood” class excel at recognizing gender nonconforming folks even when they turn up in unexpected places. Before we even meet as a class to begin discussing Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women* (1868), a student posts a query on our online discussion board about how “trans” the character of Josephine March seems. As evidence, she notes how Josephine renames herself “Jo,” self-identifies as “the man of the house,” and – when urged by her older sister to “remember that you are a young lady” – stoutly maintains, “I ain’t!”

While reading this student’s post, it occurs to me that a relevant teaching tool would be the “gender unicorn” graphic that a scholar in Texas recently shared with her children’s literature class to help her students understand distinctions between biological sex, gender identity, and gender expression – only to be fired after a student complained that President Trump’s recent Executive Order acknowledges only two genders. The more we learn about the details of this case, the more evident it is that government intrusion into the issue of how to define gender is already undercutting the academic freedom of scholars who study and teach about this topic.[7]

Those who presume that all this talk about trans people in contemporary classrooms is a modern imposition should know that Alcott herself remarked late in life that she felt she had a “man’s soul, put by some freak of nature into a woman’s body.”[8] And those looking for good role models for how to conduct ourselves in turbulent times should visit Orchard House in Concord, where Alcott lived while she was writing *Little Women*.

With the possibility that MIT might sign the Compact hanging over our heads, my “Representing Girlhood” class and I went on a field trip to Orchard House and learned from the tour guides about how Alcott and her family hid enslaved people there as part of the Underground Railroad, risking their own safety and wellbeing to do the right thing by resisting unjust laws that were oppressing members of other, less privileged social groups.

Students were awed by how fully the Alcotts lived in line with their most deeply held values, even when that meant enduring serious personal deprivations and hardships. For example, Louisa’s father Bronson Alcott accepted a Black pupil into a school he was running despite knowing that he might (and in fact, did) lose the financial support of the white families who were funding him.

The actions and fate of another Alcott relative, Samuel Sewall, illustrate the risks of moral panics that fuel deadly persecution. He served as a judge during the Salem Witch trials, then spent the rest of his life repenting his own participation and trying to make amends to the families of the girls and women whose lives he helped destroy.

At a moment when the government has already created fear and vulnerability – from demonizing rhetoric to attacks on gender-affirming care, passport restrictions, military exclusion, and more – it is vital for MIT to be a place of inclusion, acceptance, and support for trans, nonbinary, and other gender-nonconforming people.

If we stand by without protest as a modern moral panic denies some members of our community the right to enjoy the same freedom from government interference that others take for granted, history suggests that, like Sewall, we will live to regret it. For that reason and many others, let us instead emulate Bronson and Louisa May Alcott, by standing in solidarity with queer students, staff, and colleagues to resist collectively the political oppression they are currently facing.

[1] See <https://www.npr.org/2025/09/03/nx-s1-5504670/pentagon-trans-troops-gender-dysphoria> and <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cvgwwwv3k5wxo>



[2] See <https://www.scotusblog.com/2025/10/transgender-americans-ask-supreme-court-to-leave-order-in-place-allowing-them-to-choose-sex-markers-on-passports/>.

[3] See <https://www.propublica.org/article/tsa-transgender-travelers-scanners-invasive-searches-often-wait-on-the-other-side>

[4] 90% of LGBTQ+ young people surveyed by the Trevor Project in 2024 said their well-being was negatively impacted due to the political situation in the U.S.; see <https://www.thetrevorproject.org/survey-2024/>

[5] See “Compact” (5), but also President Trump’s Executive Order asserting that “It is the policy of the United States to recognize two sexes, male and female”: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/defending-women-from-gender-ideology-extremism-and-restoring-biological-truth-to-the-federal-government/>

[6] To see these statistics, visit <https://ir.mit.edu/projects/demographic-dashboard/>; click on the “Faculty” tab above the chart; then scroll down underneath the chart to select “Sex.”

[7] See <https://www.texastribune.org/2025/09/19/texas-a-m-welsh-firing-professor-gender-mccoul/> for a detailed account of what happened in this instructor’s classroom and then online.

[8] For a thought-provoking exploration of how we might interpret this and other similar Alcott statements, see <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/12/24/opinion/did-the-mother-of-young-adult-literature-identify-as-a-man.html>

## The Endless Frontier 2

Alex Byrne, Antoinette Schoar, Brad Skow

The “compact” MIT was invited to sign, along with eight other universities, is flawed, to put it mildly. Setting aside the issue of conditioning “priority for grants” on compliance with the Trump administration’s agenda, the compact is incompatible with free speech principles, despite at some points paying lip-service to them. The compact’s proposal to “freez[e] the effective tuition rates charged to American students for the next five years” might well have regressive effects, reducing the amount of support that universities can offer students most in need. And so on – no doubt every flaw will be painstakingly enumerated in this special issue of the FNL.

Still, the compact does recognize some real problems. Americans have amassed a staggering amount of student debt (although MIT students are fortunate exceptions). Even worse, this financial strain is sometimes imposed by universities that do not prepare students to succeed in the labor market. Grade inflation is rampant at Harvard and elsewhere. Unclear and poorly motivated notions of “diversity” have long been deployed in admissions and hiring. University presidents often signal support for fashionable causes, forgetting that the university “is not itself the critic.” In some parts of the academy there is a stifling political and intellectual monoculture, leading to mediocre research. Academic freedom and free expression on college campuses are nowhere near as healthy as they should be; self-censorship is reportedly common among both students and faculty.

The compact as drafted should not be signed. Among the MIT faculty, that is probably uncontroversial. The important question is whether MIT’s response should be constructive or dismissive. Should we reject the very idea of a compact and repel any attempts at reform?

Pulling up the drawbridge and threatening interlopers with boiling oil implies that they have no reasonable concerns: that inside the ivory tower, all is well. But it is obvious to many people, both inside and outside universities, that there is much room for improvement and innovation. Recent years have seen the founding of Heterodox Academy, the Academic Freedom Alliance, the Council on Academic Freedom at Harvard, and MIT’s own Council on Academic Freedom, among others. These organizations were formed in response to disturbing trends on campuses. And universities cannot count on a majority of the public to support a refusal to engage, or to be outraged by the government’s demands: One survey found that six in ten Americans think that “the higher education system is going in the wrong direction.” If MIT pulls up the drawbridge, that will only reinforce the perception that the Institute is complacent about its own shortcomings.

MIT and other American universities already operate under an agreement with the federal government, and by extension with the American public that the government represents. Under that agreement, federal funds flow to universities – in the form of grants, student loans, etc. – if in return universities adopt certain policies and provide certain benefits to the public. The policies tend to be those demanded by justice – universities are not to engage, for example, in wrongful discrimination. Less salient to the conversation are the already-existing obligations universities have to benefit the public, obligations that go beyond “provide a high-quality education.” Land grant universities, for example, are required to provide

education, and produce research, of a particular kind – in the agricultural sciences. This is not seen (nor should it be) as tyrannical interference with the operations of those universities. A president of a land-grant university who said their school intended to get out of the business of agriculture research, but was still entitled to all the federal funds it had been receiving, would have misunderstood the compact under which they were operating.

In 1945, Vannevar Bush, former Vice President of MIT and Dean of the School of Engineering, wrote a report for President Franklin D. Roosevelt, ***Science: The Endless Frontier***. That report was the blueprint for the extraordinarily productive post-war partnership between the American state and its research universities. But it has been 80 years since that report, and in that time, universities, and the world around them, have been transformed. Among other things, the cost of research and teaching, the path for the commercialization of science, and the international competition for talent, have changed dramatically. Thus revisiting and revising that partnership now is an excellent idea.

Harvard's Danielle Allen has argued that the compact "introduces a chance to establish a much-needed fresh relationship between America and higher education." In effect, an invitation to take a leading role in this effort has dropped into MIT's lap. One of the compact's initial architects has suggested that it is an opening bid, which "remains subject to further input and discussion, including from campus leaders." President Kornbluth should lead now, as Professor Bush led before. A coalition of all or some of the universities asked to sign the compact could frame a new compact, with no compromises to academic freedom or other fundamental principles, but which would help restore public trust. The executive and legislative branches would both be involved, with the ambition of producing bipartisan support for amendments to the Higher Education Act (last amended, as Allen points out, in **2008**).

This is a moment for MIT to seize the initiative, to the potential advantage of higher education and the country. Naturally such an effort could easily fail. But as the President – Trump, not Kornbluth – has advised, "if you're going to be thinking anything, you might as well think big."

# Reconstruction, Reclamation, and the New Compromise

Ceasar McDowell

**After the Civil War, the United States entered** a brief but transformative era known as Reconstruction, an ambitious national experiment in democracy and racial inclusion. For the first time in the nation's history, the federal government sought to rebuild the country on principles of freedom, equality, and multiracial citizenship. The promises were profound: reunite the Union, abolish slavery, and guarantee newly freed African Americans the rights of citizenship, voting, land ownership, and education. For a fleeting moment, the United States envisioned a future where democracy could be truly universal.

But those promises ignited fierce resistance from those determined to reclaim white dominance. Across the South, Redeemers – former Confederates and white elites – mobilized to dismantle Reconstruction's gains through terror, fraud, and political manipulation. The Compromise of 1877, which ended federal protection of Black citizens, was the formal surrender of Reconstruction's ideals. It allowed Southern states to impose Jim Crow laws, suppress Black voters, and restore white supremacy under the guise of "states' rights." The massacres in Eufaula, Alabama (1874) and Wilmington, North Carolina (1898) stand as brutal reminders of this backlash – moments when multiracial democracy was literally murdered.

At the same time, this post-Reconstruction project expanded westward. Through Indian boarding schools, the federal government waged a campaign of cultural genocide against Indigenous peoples, removing children from their families, erasing their languages, and attempting to "civilize" them into white norms. These schools not only destroyed cultures and lives – thousands of Indigenous children disappeared or died – but also served the economic goal of clearing Native lands for white settlement. Together, Jim Crow in the South and boarding schools in the West marked the reassertion of white control under the banner of civilization and progress.

Nearly a century later, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 inaugurated what many have called a Second Reconstruction. Like its 19th-century predecessor, it sought to restore the democratic promise of inclusion – this time focusing on equal access to education and public life for African Americans and Latinos. Schools, universities, and public institutions became central battlegrounds where America again attempted to redefine itself. Affirmative action, integration programs, and later DEI initiatives were not simply bureaucratic policies; they were the instruments of this renewed vision of justice and shared belonging.

But history has repeated itself. Just as the first Reconstruction was undone by the Compromise of 1877, the new Reconstruction of civil rights is being eroded through a modern compromise, disguised as the dismantling of "diversity, equity, and inclusion." Under slogans of "colorblindness" and "merit," these rollbacks represent a coordinated effort to reclaim institutional power for white elites, particularly in education, government, and business. Across the country, DEI offices have been defunded or eliminated, and Black women – who were among the key leaders and beneficiaries of equity programs – have been

disproportionately targeted and displaced. Their recent loss of jobs and influence in academia and corporate America mirrors the post-Reconstruction purges of Black teachers and officials in the late 19th century.

The Compact on Higher Education, promoted by the Trump Administration, continues this trajectory. Behind its language of “neutrality” and “academic excellence” lies the same political logic as the 1877 Compromise – a strategic concession that preserves the primacy of whiteness while claiming to restore order and meritocracy. Like the reclaimers of the 19th century, today’s anti-DEI coalitions seek to reverse decades of progress by cloaking racial retrenchment in bureaucratic and moral rhetoric.

Just as the dismantling of DEI has curtailed Black and Latino advancement in higher education, the erosion of tribal education support represents a continuation of the US government’s long-standing resistance to Indigenous self-determination. Both reflect how the “new Reconstruction compromise” functions: using claims of neutrality and fiscal prudence to sustain racial hierarchies and maintain control over the institutions that shape knowledge, opportunity, and identity.

The story of Reconstruction – both the first and second – teaches a painful truth: every step toward racial inclusion in America has been met with an equally determined backlash. Each period of progress is followed by a compromise, a recalibration of white supremacy to fit new political and cultural conditions. What was once justified through segregation and lynching is now defended through “colorblind” policy and “academic freedom.” Yet the goal remains the same – to maintain racial hierarchy while denying that it exists.

## **A Call to Refuse the New Compromise**

The so-called Compact on Higher Education is not a policy of reform – it is a reconstruction of exclusion, a modern compromise that trades diversity for dominance, and justice for compliance. Like every compromise before it, it asks universities to surrender moral clarity in exchange for political convenience. Accepting it would mean legitimizing the erasure of Black, Latino, and Indigenous progress in the name of “balance” and “neutrality.”

MIT and the eight universities invited to consider this Compact must refuse – unequivocally and collectively. They must not sign it, negotiate around it, or lend it the credibility of engagement. To “compromise” here is to participate in a familiar cycle: the surrender of justice disguised as administrative prudence. Higher education cannot claim to be a beacon of truth while bowing to a framework built to silence it.

This moment demands courage – not consensus. Just as Reconstruction once asked the nation to imagine democracy anew, today’s universities must defend that vision against those who seek to rewrite it. The question before them is not bureaucratic but moral: Will they stand with the Redeemers, or with the unfinished work of Reconstruction?

History is watching.

## Academic Freedom in a Deliberative Democracy

Sally Haslanger

**Why is the Trump administration**, and the broader anti-intellectual movement that supports him, taking aim at universities? Why are we being asked to sign the “Compact for Academic Excellence in Higher Education”? There are different explanations and any of them is, of course, controversial. However, it is clear that the conservative “mandate” articulated by the Heritage Foundation opposes several key liberal principles, derived from Enlightenment values (**Mandate For Leadership: The Conservative Promise** 2023).

One central principle – articulated by Locke, Kant, and Mill, among others – is that the role of the state is to promote the autonomy and equality of individuals in the pursuit of their own conception of the good. In contrast, the contemporary conservative agenda valorizes one conception of the good as imperative for all. For example, in decrying LGBTQ+ rights, they insist on a re-entrenchment of the traditional heteronormative family structure: “Our Constitution grants each of us the liberty to do not what we want, but what we ought. This pursuit of the good life is found primarily in family – marriage, children, Thanksgiving dinners, and the like” (**Mandate** 2023, 13). Another key Enlightenment principle at stake is that the state should be secular and rely on deliberation in terms that all, regardless of religious or cultural background, could, in principle, accept, (**Rawls 1996**, 139). This principle is key to a pluralist democracy.

There was a time when most universities were supported – and to some extent controlled by – religious institutions, private donors, and governments; the nature and content of research was restricted by those who paid the bills. However, such control over knowledge production is incompatible with inquiry that aims to be objective – to provide knowledge of the world itself. Such inquiry doesn’t always yield convenient truths and can overturn accepted hierarchies, popular business models, and regulatory regimes (consider research in public health, climate science, political economy). The current attack on higher education is an effort to control knowledge production: to suppress evidence that challenges the interests of those in power, to threaten those who do not fall in line, and to defund the projects that reveal the flaws in the vision being imposed on us.

European universities, as early as the ninth century, aimed to provide communities of inquiry that permitted academic freedom and relied on procedures of self-evaluation in order to resist the undue influence of political interests. The model of faculty self-governance over academic freedom and tenure was designed to resist the manipulation of inquiry, and it can serve us well now.

In deciding how to organize our collective life, we should be informed by a wide range of ideas and perspectives, and have the resources to develop new knowledge. However, this requires procedures to weed out confusions and mistakes. Disciplines (and interdisciplinary programs) assess expertise, and tenure guarantees the right of inquirers, once they have proven themselves, to explore unpopular or (initially) unpromising ideas. This is a decentralized process that diffuses power across multiple reviewers, editors, and subfields. Such procedures generate the wide range of ideas needed in a flourishing deliberative democracy. To allow the government, **or their plutocratic allies**, to manipulate the academy, compromises not just the integrity of research, but also our social responsibility.

The reliance on experts poses a challenge, however. We need experts in our efforts to design and implement policy, but a state built upon expertise that is beyond the epistemic powers of the people would be one in which they are ruled by technocrats rather than self-ruled. This, I believe, is one concern that has motivated the shift to the right in the United States. We are, in some sense, a technocracy governed by economists, lawyers, entrepreneurs, and the like. The workings of the government are beyond our (collective) ken, and thus it is tempting to feel left out, and to look for conspiracies behind the scenes running things.

The question arises, then, how expertise can legitimately function in a deliberative democracy. Of course institutions, including academia, can become narrowly self-endorsing and insulated from the public. It is important to guard against this. But should we sacrifice a commitment to merit-based decisions in evaluating students, job candidates, tenure, and academic programs, in order to promote a particular ideology?

In recent decades the concept of "merit" has been going through a re-evaluation, and rightly so. Our collective understanding of merit cannot be static, for it must be responsive to the evolution of knowledge and the challenges we face. In short, there are procedures internal to the academy for critique and change, and we must rely on those for self-examination and reform. Now is the time to strengthen those procedures: reinforce faculty governance; create firewalls to block funders from topic control; curb administrative bloat; default to open science and conflict-of-interest transparency; strengthen tenure lines and reduce precarity; and create democratic oversight mechanisms that protect inquiry from both state and plutocratic direction.

If scientific inquiry (broadly construed) is considered a standard for public deliberation, and it does not support the conservative agenda, then it looks like there is a practical two-stage process for removing it as a barrier to political power: first, discredit it, and second, use the claim that it lacks legitimacy to destroy the institutions that enable it. The academy has been the target of a crafted effort to undermine trust in research through misinformation and false allegations. And withdrawal of funding has already been incredibly destructive. This not only threatens knowledge production, but our democracy.

The ideal of a democratic state is one that protects freedom and equality to explore ideas and live in accordance with our own values; it is a secular state organized through the exercise of public reason informed by responsible expertise. Academic freedom and open inquiry – without the interference of the state, church, or big money – are pillars that keeps democracy standing. Those who believe in expertise and collective self-government must stand firm in resisting the "Compact."

## Join, or Die

Malick Ghachem

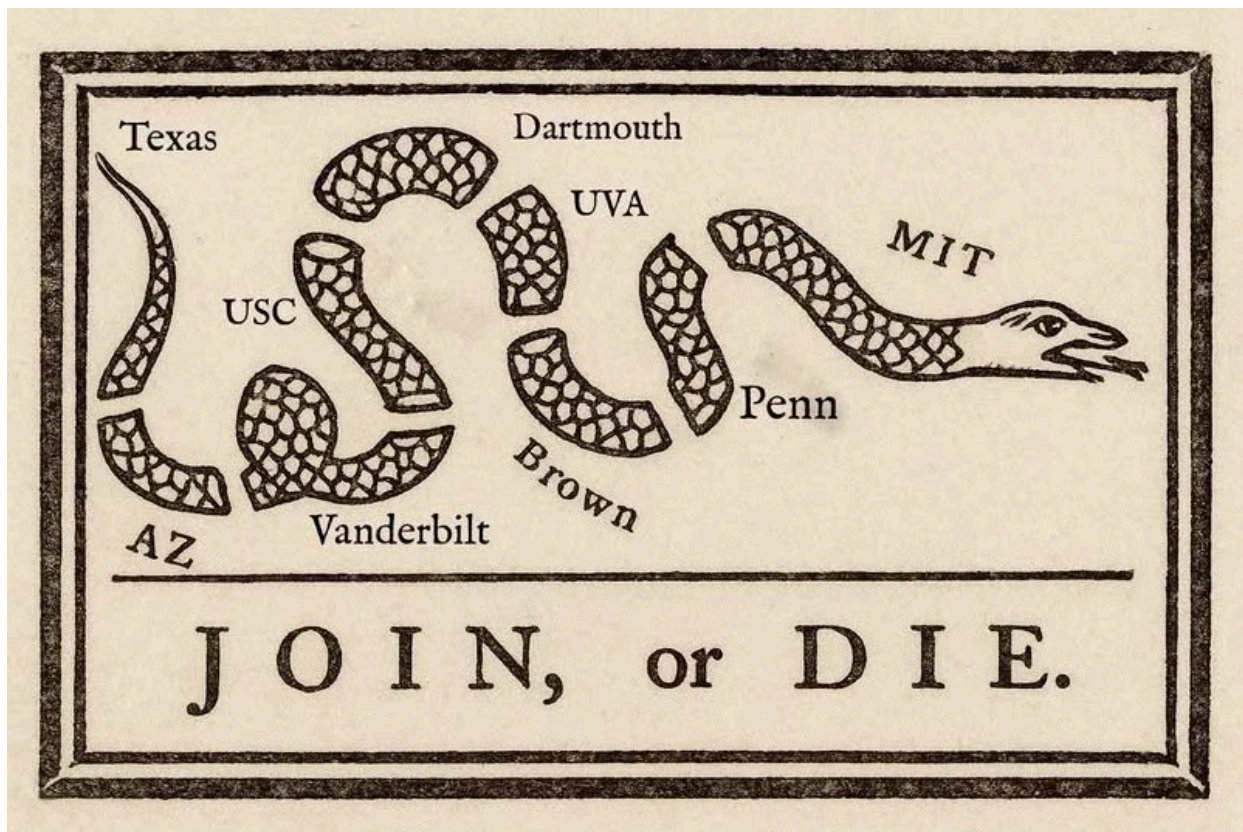


Image by Benjamin Nathans

In this brilliant adaptation of a 1754 political cartoon and woodcut by Ben Franklin, the University of Pennsylvania historian Benjamin Nathans reimagines the problem of collective action for our own time. You can find the original cartoon and its story [here](#). Suffice to say that Franklin's cartoon was conceived at the time of the Albany Congress, the precursor to the Continental Congress, to encourage the British American colonies to unite in opposition to French forces and their Native American allies on the eve of what would become the Seven Years War (1754-1763). The original depicts the four New England colonies as a single section of the snake; Georgia and Delaware are missing. The cartoon was subsequently used to mobilize colonial opposition to the British empire and is one of the most iconic images of the American revolutionary era. As we approach the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of American independence, the Nathans adaptation of Franklin is a reminder of the indispensable role that history and collective action can and must play in meeting the challenge of this moment.