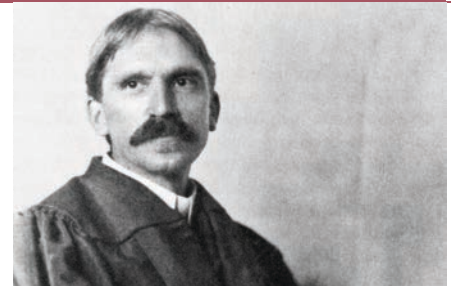


MIT Faculty Newsletter

<https://fnl.mit.edu>

in this issue we offer commentary on questions of academic freedom of expression, beginning with “Academic Freedom and Freedom of Expression” by Sally Haslanger, and our Editorial (below).



John Dewey, First President of the AAUP

Open Letter to MIT Faculty from the MIT Institute for Work and Employment Research

November 4, 2021

Dear Colleagues:

AS FACULTY IN THE MIT Institute for Work and Employment Research (IWER), we study a wide range of work and employment relations topics, including union-management relations. We do not express a view on whether or not MIT graduate students should be represented by a union; that decision is theirs to make. However, we want to offer our perspective and some background information to the community.

It is vital that faculty, as well as the administration, respect the students’ right to decide whether or not to support unionization. Doing so will ensure that faculty-student relationships will not be adversely affected, regardless of the outcome of the

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Academic Freedom and Freedom of Expression

Sally Haslanger

ACADEMIC FREEDOM AND THE right to freedom of speech or expression are related, but distinct. The legal right to freedom of speech only limits the state (originally only *Congress*) from preventing speech, and the protection only goes so far. It doesn’t protect libel, solicitation, bribery, perjury, etc. And there are restrictions on time, place, and manner. It does not allow an individual to barge into the Supreme Court to make their own argument concerning a case or to show disrespect for a judge presiding in court. It allows private institutions to restrict speech even as a condition of employment, e.g., a company can fire someone for disparaging its products or revealing a trade secret, even if the claims are true. As Ronald Dworkin says, “Free speech, at its core, is the right not to be altogether prevented from saying something, not the

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Editorial I. Protecting Freedom of Expression at MIT II. Avoiding Corporate Conflict of Interest Among MIT Leadership

Protecting Freedom of Expression at MIT

THE RECENT EAPS LECTURE cancellation has raised again questions of academic freedom, a central issue for all faculty. In this issue of the *Faculty Newsletter* we publish a series of articles very broadly addressing the questions of free expression on a campus. The articles are: “Academic Freedom and Freedom of Expression” from Sally Haslanger ([page 1](#)); “Letter by 77 MIT Faculty Re: Professor Abbot’s Lecture Cancellation” ([page 6](#)); “Is MIT Losing Control of its Own Destiny?” from Eduardo Kausel and John Williams ([Page 7](#)); “Improving MIT’s Written Commitment to Freedom of Expression” from Alex Byrne and Bernhardt Trout ([page 9](#)); “Feedback on the First Draft of MIT’s ‘Five-year Strategic Plan for Diversity, Equity and

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Inclusion” from Richard C. Larson (page 10); and “My Soviet Past: Why We Need to be Vigilant About Academic Freedom” from Areg Danagoulian (page 11).

Avoiding Corporate Conflict of Interest Among MIT Leadership

AFTER INITIALLY RESISTING SUCH calls, Boston’s Dana Farber Cancer Institute recently enacted strict new rules to avoid conflicts of interest in which Board of Trustees members might profit from investments related to the hospital’s research and technology programs (*Boston Globe*, November 13, 2021, page 1). Boston Children’s Hospital, New York’s Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center, and Cedars-Sinai Medical Center in Los Angeles are other medical institutions that are trying to limit Trustees or Board members profiting from biotech startups tied to hospital programs. Earlier *Boston Globe* articles (*Boston Globe*, October 10, 2021, page 1) describe

some of the potential problems from arrangements in which there are such conflicts of interest. For example, potential conflicts of interest might include whether a Trustee’s financial interests in hospital spin-offs could influence the governance of a hospital, including its research priorities and the way it conducts clinical trials.

Though the situation is not strictly equivalent, – is it appropriate for MIT’s leaders – President, Provost, VPs, Deans – to be serving on Boards of Corporations whose business success depends on the direction of science and technology policy? Was it appropriate for President Reif to draw substantial income (reportedly \$294,192 in 2020: <https://www.eriery.com/executive/salary/leo-reif-0x2o>) from his seat on the Board of Schlumberger, a global energy giant? Clearly, given the President’s influence on campus decisions – such as whether or not to divest fossil fuels from the MIT investment portfolio – there should not have been the *possibility* of a conflict of interest, nor the *appearance* of such a conflict. President Reif no longer sits on that Board, perhaps reflecting his awareness of the potential conflict.

In light of the previous controversies surrounding gifts from Jeffrey Epstein, Mohammed Bin Salman, Stephen Schwarzman and others, MIT formed two major committees, the Ad Hoc Committee to Review MIT Gift Processes, and the Ad Hoc Faculty Committee on Guidelines for Outside Engagements. Though the focus was more on gifts and grants, certainly the receipt of hundreds of thousands of dollars from sitting on a Corporate Board would fall under concerns named by these Committees. We suspect that such conflicts would raise the “yellow light” warning, for example, with respect to a number of the listed criteria: “12. *Could this gift or engagement impede our ability to best serve the nation and the world?*” and “13. *Could this gift or engagement have the effect of committing MIT to promote a specific dogma or political agenda, in a way that is inconsistent with maintaining our academic integrity?*” We hope both Ad Hoc Committees will address the concerns raised in this editorial. ■

Editorial Subcommittee

Open Letter to MIT Faculty
continued from page 1

organizing process. Concretely, we encourage our faculty colleagues to make it clear that they will continue to mentor, support, and work with students as TAs, RAs, and in all other capacities whether or not students are unionized, and that the decision on unionization is the students’ to make.

Faculty and others may assume that union representation increases conflict, but productive labor-management partnerships are possible. Indeed, our research group has studied them in other settings and the MIT administration has a history of good relationships with represented employees and the unions of other occupational groups on campus. Should an election be held and result in union recognition, we hope and expect that all parties would pursue a collaborative relationship.

Finally, we encourage the administration and the student union to meet to discuss a protocol agreement governing the organizing process and potential first contract negotiations here at MIT. It is feasible to agree to ground rules and jointly commit to respectful communications. As just one example, at Brown University the administration and the union agreed to ground rules for the organizing, election, and initial contract negotiation if the majority of students voted for the union. The Brown students did vote to unionize, and the parties then negotiated a contract without a strike. This example, as well as experiences in other public and private universities, offer a contrast to processes at Columbia, Yale, and Harvard where communications were more adversarial, negotiations were protracted, and strikes occurred.

Whatever the outcome of this unionizing drive turns out to be, a thoughtful process and respectful interactions during this period are critical to avoid poisoning the atmosphere at MIT and to allow MIT to emerge as an even stronger institution. ■

Sincerely,

Faculty in the MIT Institute for Work and Employment Research (listed in alphabetical order)

- Emilio J. Castilla
- Erin L. Kelly
- Thomas Kochan
- Robert McKersie
- Paul Osterman
- Michael Piore
- Susan Silbey
- Anna Stansbury
- Nathan Wilmers

Academic Freedom
Haslanger, from page 1

right to continue to be supported and aided while saying it by those who think it is false or undesirable.” (Dworkin 1996, 184)

One defense of the legal right to free speech rests on a conception of deliberative democracy. In deciding how to organize our collective life, we should be open to and informed by a wide range of ideas, perspectives, and new information. We should not assume that we already have all the knowledge we need or that a belief is false just because it is unpopular. However, not all ideas are equally sound, and we should aim, together, to weed out confusions and mistakes. We cannot feasibly consider anew every idea that comes along, so we need to develop systematic ways of evaluating beliefs. Cass Sunstein suggests that an initial set of conditions for such evaluation might include: “arguments matter but power and authority do not; an absence of strategic manipulation of information, perspective, processes, or outcomes in general; and a broad public orientation towards reaching right answers rather than serving self-interest, narrowly defined” (Sunstein 1996, 94).

This conception of democracy inspired the American idea of academic freedom. In order to make good decisions, individually or collectively, we need to rely on a body of information. Given the complexity of any domain of inquiry, it makes sense to turn to experts. European universities, as early as the ninth century, aimed to provide “communities of competent inquirers” (Haskell 1996, 45). These universities were supported by religious institutions, private donors, and governments; the nature and content of research was correspondingly restricted by those who paid the bills.¹ However, as means of communication increased, the communities of inquiry expanded to include research specialists across institutions and, in time, to form what we now consider disciplines. Disciplines provide communities of intensely interactive, skilled, critical inquir-

ers who maintain an evolving set of standards for reasonable belief in a domain (Scott 1996, 175). Such disciplines (and related interdisciplinary programs) are positioned to contribute to a deliberative democracy, as long as they are not themselves managed by powerful interests and subject to strategic manipulation.

In the late 19th and early 20th c. there was concerted effort to ensure that appropriate conditions for public inquiry were met. [John Dewey, Arthur Lovejoy, and others established the American Association of University Professors in 1915](#) with the specific aim of articulating and protecting principles of academic freedom.² The issue of freedom arises at two levels: the freedom of disciplines to define for themselves, as a community of peers, the standards for their discipline; and the freedom of individual researchers to explore beyond the limits circumscribed by the discipline (Dworkin 1996, 183). These freedoms are institutionalized in tenure: members of the discipline determine the standards by which a researcher qualifies as a member of the community, and once a member of the community, the researcher is free to explore the ideas they individually consider worthy of their effort. Freedom of individual inquiry within a discipline is necessary so that its standards are exposed to critique and are responsive to new, even revolutionary, ideas. With the freedom of a community to shape a discipline, however, also comes the power to exclude some inquirers and their ideas. This can be justified as a necessary part of distinguishing better and worse belief-forming mechanisms, but it is also always a legitimate site of contestation.

This description of academic freedom is how it is supposed to work, in principle. We are all aware that in practice, things don't live up to the principle. Social power and authority have shaped disciplines explicitly

² Judith Jarvis Thomson (1929-2020), my friend and colleague in philosophy at MIT, served on Committee A (the committee on Academic Freedom and Tenure) at the AAUP for many years and was a stalwart defender of academic freedom. She is in my mind, as I write this. Currently, MIT does not host a chapter of the AAUP; I suggest we should consider starting one.

¹ [See my earlier article in the FNL](#) about academic plutocracy.

or implicitly by excluding women, persons of color, the disabled, members of certain religious groups, and all but the wealthy. And strategic economic and military interests have had a huge impact on the content of research and have shaped the standards of the disciplines: what counts as an interesting question, what counts as evidence, what methods are considered reliable, what outcomes are envisioned. Because marginalized researchers have succeeded in breaking through the tenure barrier, standards are changing; interdisciplinary programs often provide intellectual communities for such innovation. Such inclusive research is better suited, also, to provide the basis for public deliberation.

On this account, academic freedom is a freedom one has as a member of a discipline at an institution of higher education. Crucial here is a distinction between speaking *as a representative of* an educational institution and speaking *as a member of* the public. For example, if President Reif signs a political petition and puts his MIT affiliation next to his signature, the right way to do it is to add (or have the petition make clear) “for identification purposes only.” If he identifies himself on the petition as President of MIT, he should take steps to guard against any suggestion that he is signing *as a representative of*, or *for MIT*. In other words, he is signing it as a member of the public – he is exercising his right to freedom of expression – but not *as President of MIT* (though he may also be using the status and credibility MIT affiliation brings). Relying on or even indicating academic status can cause confusion: a faculty member may be taken to be speaking as a representative of a university or a discipline when they are simply speaking as a member of the public. And it can be tempting to take advantage of such confusion to claim authority. But the distinction matters when evaluating the rights and wrongs of speech.

All members of the MIT community are members of the public, and MIT should not limit our speech in public contexts, unless we purport to speak as representatives of MIT. This is where academic

[continued on next page](#)

Academic Freedom

Haslanger, from preceding page

freedom comes in. In what ways can MIT limit what someone says *as an MIT faculty member*? Given the purposes and principles of academic freedom sketched above, MIT cannot rightfully limit the content of a faculty member's research or the conclusions drawn. It cannot legitimately tell me what to teach or ban teaching controversial material. However, MIT can limit some of my speech on campus – how I talk to students, how I interact with staff, etc. It can also limit some content of my speech in certain roles or contexts. For example, an admissions officer cannot, in their role, say that people from certain groups are not welcome at MIT or that they will be unsuccessful, even if they, as an individual, hold those beliefs; they are constrained by their role as representative of MIT. But things quickly get complicated.

If I speak *as an MIT faculty member* and make claims based on my research that go against MIT's values, how does that connect with academic freedom? Academic freedom protects the right, as a researcher, to convey the results of one's research (or other academic/creative production), even if it is at odds with the values of the institution, or the standards of the discipline. Our research represents MIT's commitment to open inquiry and so the institution cannot silence us and remain committed to that value. But it doesn't need to endorse our conclusions, and so even if we speak *as a researcher* at MIT, we cannot claim we speak *for* or *represent* MIT when we make the content of our research public. We speak as MIT faculty to the extent that we uphold the value of open and responsible inquiry.

The hard cases come when my speaking *as a member of the public* has played a significant role in public debate and MIT is looking for someone to serve as its representative.³ MIT would be within its rights

not to choose me as its representative, if my position on public issues makes me a poor representative of MIT's values. I have no inherent right to serve as MIT's representative. It is an honor to be in the role of representative, and MIT is within its rights to choose who represents it. MIT should stand behind its faculty's right to speak about their research, but even there, MIT is permitted to select someone else to represent the institution on a particular occasion, if my conclusions or my reputation are at odds with the message MIT aims to convey. Representing MIT is not just a matter of freedom to speak. (Note that this does not tell us how to make an *all things considered judgment* about when to invite someone or rescind an invitation to represent MIT, or how that should be decided.)

I've just argued that MIT is within its rights to pick its representatives based on its values. Given the longstanding history of exclusion in the academy and the commitment to knowledge production, it makes sense to include a commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion as a factor in its decision-making. DEI enhances our ability to gain knowledge by expanding what experiences and perspectives are included in the research process.

One might argue further, however, that MIT should select its representatives *based on a commitment to knowledge-based contributions to political debate*; as noted above, this is one crucial function of universities. There is a temptation to think that there are no experts on normative matters, and so no experts when it comes to political speech. But this is simply wrong. First, normative inquiry, i.e., inquiry into what we ought to do and what is valuable, relies on empirical knowledge of the domain in which action is being considered. Warranted intervention in the social domain depends on social scientific inquiry and engagement with populations not well-represented in the academy. Second, normative inquiry is disciplined. In deliberation and debate, we should give

reasons for moral and political claims; as in the scientific domain, some forms of reasoning in the normative domain are more warranted than others. That said, however, the discipline of moral philosophy does not yield a single set of absolute moral truths, but instead a set of concepts and distinctions that contribute to richer, deeper, and clearer deliberation. The long history of the discipline has, of course, included exclusions and distortions, but there is no question that there are better and worse ways to engage in moral deliberation.

One of the insights of democratic theory is that any member of the general public ought to be free to share their ideas about how we, as a people, ought to be governed. Competing points of view should be carefully listened to and considered. But it doesn't follow from this that all points of view are equally sound. In addition to upholding the value of DEI, MIT has reason to uphold the value of well-disciplined thought on matters of public concern. Controversial thought is not out of bounds, but arguably, certain kinds of undisciplined thought and speech should not be rewarded or supported. After all, expertise on matters of public concern is what universities stand for.

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³ Who is MIT? In my view, MIT is not just the administration or the Corporation. It is a structured organization of roles and relationships with a mission statement, (soon) an explicit set of values, and a set of rules and regulations, that guide those who occupy the

roles in fulfilling their responsibilities as members of MIT. To say that MIT "looks for" someone to represent it is to say that someone, functioning in their role at MIT, looks for someone to represent their unit, or the Institute as a whole.

Sally Haslanger is Ford Professor of Philosophy and Women's Gender Studies (shaslang@mit.edu).

Letter by 77 MIT Faculty Re: Professor Abbot's Lecture Cancellation

WE, A GROUP OF CONCERNED Faculty, believe that the cancellation of the scheduled EAPS Carlson Lecture by invited speaker Professor Dorian Abbot of the University of Chicago casts a shadow on MIT's commitment to free and open speech, to the diversity of viewpoints and to tolerance. We view this cancellation as an issue of utmost importance to MIT as a whole and not merely to the EAPS Department or its Department Head.

Given the importance of this matter and its coincidence with ongoing efforts at MIT to promote diversity, we believe that MIT should formulate and communicate a statement that will clarify MIT's policies with respect to embracing viewpoint diversity, tolerance, and the sanctity of freedom of speech. We ask the Chair of the Faculty to establish a group composed of faculty to lead a "lessons learned" process. The findings with respect to this

event and recommendations with respect to viewpoint diversity and freedom of speech should be communicated to the entire community.

Signed in name by the below (an additional nine faculty have signed the letter but do not wish that their names be made public). An earlier version of this letter was sent on Monday, 10.18.21, to Diane Greene, Rafael Reif, Marty Schmidt, and Lily Tsai. ■

Hal Abelson
Pierre Azoulay
Ronald G. Ballinger
Arnold Barnett
Martin Bazant
Jacopo Buongiorno
Wit Busza
Alex Byrne
Wai Cheng
Bruno Coppi
Areg Danagoulian
Kerry Emanuel
Pavel Etingof
Nicholas Fang
Yoel Fink
Robert Freund
Stephen Graves
Michelle Hanlon
Alan Hatton
Neville Hogan
Juejun Hu
Yasheng Huang
Ian Hunter

Gordon Kaufman
Sang-Gook Kim
Jing Kong
S. P. Kothari
Monty Krieger
Richard Lanza
Richard Larson
J. Chappell Lawson
Leonid Levitov
Mingda Li
John Lienhard
Richard Lindzen
Hong Liu
Andrew Lo
Harvey Lodish
Nuno Loureiro
Kenneth Manning
John Marshall
Ron Parker
Roger Petersen
Robert Pindyck
Bjorn Poonen
Drazen Prelec

David Pritchard
Edward Roberts
Caroline Ross
Daniel Rothman
Harvey Sapolsky
Edward Schiappa
Antoinette Schoar
Michael Scott Morton
Yossi Sheffi
Michael Short
Bradford Skow
Gerald Jay Sussman
David Thesmar
Senthil Todadri
Bernhardt Trout
Vladan Vuletic
Roy Welsch
Dennis Whyte
John Williams
Jack Wisdom
Sidney Yip
Barton Zwiebach

Is MIT Losing Control of its Own Destiny?

Eduardo Kausel
John Williams

MOST PEOPLE WILL TAKE for granted that MIT is currently the most preeminent technical university in the world, and that it will remain so for the foreseeable future. Its prestige and aura as the place where geniuses are at work is unrivaled in the public perception as well as in the news media at large. This enviable position was attained in no small part because of how the Institute functioned over its long 160-year history. Some of the key reasons for this functioning were:

1) MIT was, and continues to be, a highly *elitist* institution, as are other Ivy League sister institutions like Stanford, Caltech, or Yale. It has consistently discriminated in favor of the intelligent and the super-talented both in the selection of its students as well as in the hiring and retaining of its faculty. In so doing, MIT has never really wondered how people from various backgrounds and places of origin have gotten to be valedictorians and super-achievers in the first place, but has routinely chosen the best among the best. It also seems clear to us that no institution can simultaneously be elitist and egalitarian. Indeed, these two concepts are polar opposites. Give up the elitist and meritocratic values and you surely will affect the course of the institution's evolution.

2) The Institute has always had a vertical command structure: Department heads have ruled over departmental faculty when deciding on salary raises, promotions and possible tenure, even if wise DHs have still sought the input from the senior departmental faculty; Deans in the various Schools have ruled over their respective department heads; and the

senior administration in the Academic Council has ruled over the Deans. All the while, the balance of power between faculty and their various Heads was maintained by the ability of the tenured faculty to speak out their minds. And all of the *Illuminati* in this hierarchy were usually chosen by a rigorous search process that promoted and called upon faculty to serve in the upper ranks following again the principle of the *best among the best*. This process worked very well indeed, and in no small part contributed to the extraordinary success of the Institute

3) All of the important administrative and academic decisions were made by members of the long-term faculty, and never by students and/or the non-academic administration. Thus, the system relied on the talent, wisdom, experience, and knowledge of the senior faculty to direct and advance the institutional goals.

4) Although MIT is a private institution, it belongs to nobody in particular. Instead, it is chartered as a non-profit organization governed by a privately appointed Board of Trustees known as the MIT Corporation. Historically, MIT has had very few explicit, written rules, and this has been by deliberate design. That way it was able to deal with complex situations as they arose, and was not hampered by time-invariant precepts and needless bureaucracy. For example, nowhere at MIT is there any rule governing that classes must be taught on Mo-We-Fr for one hour, and/or Tu-Th for 1:30 hours, even though that has been – until recently at least – the unwritten norm. Nor are there any rules as to

whether or not a department must require a graduate student to write a master's thesis to graduate with an SM. Perhaps more importantly still, MIT has never openly declared if tenure is granted by the home department or by the Institute. Indeed, when years ago Gene Brown, Dean of the School of Science, saw fit to dissolve the Department of Nutrition and Food Science, MIT did its best to accommodate all tenured faculty in other departments, yet never openly clarified the issue as to where tenure resided. And so on and on and on. Add detailed explicit rules as well as *MIT values*, and that will surely add sand to the rails of institutional evolution and slow down or even obstruct academic life at the Institute.

5) MIT has given tenure to its senior faculty to guarantee freedom of opinion and expression. This has been the key, universal academic privilege that is granted to faculty so they can engage in controversial ideas that not everybody, not even a minority, might agree with. By its very definition, life at a university requires allowing to be exposed to “dangerous” ideas or to personal opinions that may cause moral pain in some, i.e., the “feeling of being insulted.” But you cannot experiment with ideas if these are corralled by a fence of “permitted” thoughts and acceptable values.

We observe with some alarm that this hallowed, well-functioning tradition in the organization of MIT is now being undermined. We note that many reports and decisions of the senior administration are now *faculty-light*, produced mainly by

[continued on next page](#)

Is MIT Losing Control of Its Own Destiny?
Kausel and Williams, from preceding page

a cadre of administrators and perhaps also lawyers. For example, of the 22 members of the current draft of the Values Report, only some seven are faculty, and of these only three are from the School of Engineering. This report is rather long and contains “values,” some of which we disagree with. But more importantly, we question the very premise of establishing rules under the guise of “MIT Values” to begin with, especially if these were never discussed and approved by the faculty at large. Whose values? Will these values remain in force for decades to come? Any such values will invariably be tainted by the dominant, ideological currents *du jour*, which will favor strident political activists over reasoned debate – think of modern day McCarthyism. These do not represent lasting organizational principles. Instead, the codification of these temporary values into instruments of coercion will prove to be straight-jackets restraining the very principle of diversity aimed at by the Institute, not to mention that it will severely constrain the freedom of thought and opinion.

In lieu of the proposed set of MIT Values, we recommend instead adoption by MIT of an excellent set of recommendations outlined by the University of Chicago’s Kalven Committee report on *The University’s Role in Political and Social Action*, which can be found here: [https://provost.uchicago.edu/sites/default/files/documents/reports/KalvenRprt_0.pdf].

A summary of the Kalven Committee recommendations is as follows:

The mission of the university is the discovery, improvement, and dissemination of knowledge. Its domain of inquiry and scrutiny includes all aspects and all values of society. A university faithful to its mission will provide enduring challenges to social values, policies, practices, and institutions. By design and by effect, it is the institution which creates discontent with the existing social arrangements and proposes new ones. In brief, a good university, like Socrates, will be upsetting.

The instrument of dissent and criticism is the individual faculty member or the individual student. The university is the home and sponsor of critics; it is not itself the critic. It is, to go back once again to the classic phrase, a community of scholars. To perform its mission in the society, a university must sustain an extraordinary environment of freedom of inquiry and maintain an independence from political fashions, passions, and pressures. A university, if it is to be true to its faith in intellectual inquiry, must embrace, be hospitable to, and encourage the widest diversity of views within its own community. It is a community but only for the limited, albeit great, purposes of teaching and research. It is not a club, it is not a trade association, it is not a lobby.

Since the university is a community only for these limited and distinctive purposes, it is a community which cannot take collective action on the issues of the day without endangering the conditions for its existence and effectiveness. There is no mechanism by which it can reach a collective position without inhibiting that full freedom of dissent on which it thrives. It cannot insist that all of its members favor a given view of social policy; if it takes collective action, therefore, it does so at the price of censoring any minority who do not agree with the view adopted. In brief, it is a community which cannot resort to majority vote to reach positions on public issues.

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. It finds its complement, too, in the obligation of the university to provide a forum for the most searching and candid discussion of public issues.

When we consider the actions of our leaders and ask what impact they have made on the morale of the faculty, it is rather telling that a majority within a large group of faculty recently polled by the Institute responded affirmatively to the

question: “Do you feel on an everyday basis that your voice, or the voices of your colleagues, are constrained by MIT?” Moreover, the second question “Are you worried given the current atmosphere in society that your voice or your colleagues’ voices are increasingly in jeopardy?” was answered in the affirmative by a whopping 77% of the group.

Given this compelling evidence, we believe that MIT sorely needs a written document of import and clarity that lays out MIT’s defense of freedom of speech. Indeed, we are amongst the faculty who are proposing that MIT adopts the Chicago Principles formulated by the University of Chicago’s *Committee on Freedom of Expression*, which has already been adopted by nearly 80 universities in the U.S., among them Princeton, John Hopkins, Columbia, and Boston University. More details can be found here: <http://freespeech.mit.edu/>. It is our understanding that Professors Byrne and Trout address this matter elsewhere in this same issue of the FNL (see page 9).

We strongly believe that the direction of MIT as an institution should be the sole province of the faculty leadership and of the faculty as a whole, and not of a mélange of political actions committees, lawyers, untenured administrators, and students. Indeed, it is the faculty who are trained in education and research and it is they who ultimately provide luster to the Institute. Thus, it seems to us that the widespread adoption of democratic and egalitarian principles into the stewardship of MIT may well end up killing *La poule aux œufs d’or*. ■

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Improving MIT's Written Commitment to Freedom of Expression

Alex Byrne
Bernhardt Trout

THERE IS NO SINGLE PLACE in MIT's official documentation where the Institute's commitment to free expression on campus for all community members is clearly and prominently set out. *Policies & Procedures* has some scattered remarks in [Section 4.1.1](#) and in the preamble to [Section 9.0](#). President Reif noted in a recent [letter](#) to the MIT community that "freedom of expression is a fundamental value of the Institute."

In our view, this omission needs rectifying. And that can easily be done by MIT's joining 82 [universities and colleges](#) in adopting the Chicago Principles on freedom of expression, as articulated in a 2014 University of Chicago [report](#). The Principles are entirely consonant

with *Policies & Procedures* and statements from the upper administration.

To that end, we have set up a website, <https://freespeech.mit.edu>, which contains the Chicago Principles (adapted for MIT only by removing the Chicago-specific references and replacing them with MIT-specific references), along with links to resources on academic freedom and free expression, and a petition to urge adoption. Faculty members can add their names to the petition by emailing freespeech@mit.edu.

The petition is intended in a constructive spirit. Adopting the Principles would be no panacea and would not absolve us from confronting difficult and at times distressing issues about freedom of speech. But it would be a positive step, signaling that MIT

community members are encouraged to speak their minds and that disagreement with others is a path to learning. The MIT community is much more than – to borrow a phrase from Tocqueville – "a flock of timid and industrious animals." We are certainly industrious beavers, but we are also bold thinkers who cherish a multiplicity of perspectives. Emphasizing that the Institute prizes vigorous debate and discussion can only promote its [mission](#) to "advance knowledge." ■

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letters

MIT's Endowment Returns and Fossil Fuels

To the Faculty Newsletter:

THE ANNOUNCEMENT ON OCTOBER 14 of MIT's spectacular endowment returns frames a question: How much less spectacular might the return have been if MIT had been divested in fossil fuels? If the returns would have been lower, is this a

price we would have been willing to pay for taking the ethically correct step of divestment? It is obvious to even the most casual observer that every dollar invested in the fossil fuel industry is a quantifiable disregard for our children's future.

If this ethically bright line is not enough to move MIT to divest, then

perhaps a straightforward exercise in accounting will be.

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Associate Professor
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Feedback on the First Draft of MIT's “Five-year Strategic Plan for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion”

Richard C. Larson

THANK YOU FOR INVITING all members of the MIT community to submit their feedback on this important report. I am an MIT lifer who entered as a freshman in 1961, lived at Phi Beta Epsilon, and eventually received three degrees from Course 6, (then called the Department of Electrical Engineering). I joined the faculty in 1969 and have been on the faculty ever since, having – over the decades – five different home academic departments. I love MIT and would do virtually anything to help the Institute to achieve its goals. I recall fondly the numerous times I have walked the Infinite Corridor and smiled as I passed by such a diverse set of students, faculty, and staff, from over 100 countries and representing virtually all major ethnicities, religions, and cultures on Earth.

MIT is a world-recognized bastion of the scientific method. Any problem addressed in the “MIT way” follows the scientific method: Define the Problem; define all terms used, state the research hypothesis, provide preliminary evidence in support of the hypothesis, and then map out a plan to carry out related research, which may lead to revising the hypothesis, and finally responding to the research results with a constructive action plan.

The [Five-Year Strategic Action Plan for Diversity, Equity and Inclusion \(DEI\)](#) does none of these things. It does not define precisely what is meant by the words, “Diversity, Equity and Inclusion.” For instance, today, “equity” is often interpreted as “equal outcomes.” Is this what MIT means in the report? It does not define precisely what is meant

by “Structural Racism.” It does not provide specific examples of Structural Racism needing to be corrected on campus. Without data, it simply seems to assume that Structural Racism is pervasive throughout MIT. And it seems to assume that “the solution to the problem” (still undefined) is the dispersion of DEI officers throughout the campus. Over my 50+ years at MIT, this DEI process is unprecedented in its manner of operation.

I believe that the unspoken intent of the effort is valid and important at the highest national level. The intent, as I read it, is to assure that every young person in the USA has the same opportunity to achieve his or her lifetime goals, to reach for the stars, to effect change for the betterment of all. For MIT to make a transformative contribution, we need to think of this as a complex systems problem, extending the boundaries of the system far beyond the MIT campus, focusing on the *k-12 educational pipeline* that is supposed to produce highly qualified high school graduates. For many students today, especially in urban and rural areas of the U.S., this pipeline is broken. Many high schools are far from providing the type of education needed for our next generation of young people to succeed.

From my point of view, there is nothing more important to a nation than the education of its young people. If the education system fails our upcoming generations, eventually the nation will fail. MIT has contributed substantially in the past to needs at a national level. This includes major support for the country during World War II. In 1956, examina-

tion of the teaching of science in our high schools revealed huge weaknesses, for instance with physics often taught formulaically via rote learning rather than fundamentally – with the excitement associated with discovery science. Led by MIT physics professors, Jerrold Zacharias and Francis Friedman, MIT stepped up with the creation of PSSC Physics for high schools (PSSC = Physical Science Study Committee). Within a year, in 1957, we as a nation were shocked and frightened as Sputnik, launched from the Cold War foe USSR, was circling overhead while the U.S. had no such Earth-orbiting satellite. Funding for PSSC Physics was substantially increased, resulting in the new physics for high school being implemented quickly and successfully.

While there is no new satellite circling overhead today, I think we are at another “Sputnik moment,” call it “Sputnik II.” This national emergency is the failure of our public-school system to educate our young people, especially those from underserved communities, those having socioeconomic challenges, in both urban and rural America. Regarding issues related to opportunities available to all, this is the system we need to study, analyze and help to improve fundamentally. It’s a tall order, more complex organizationally than PSSC Physics in the 1950s. But if the MITs of the world do not step forward to offer to redesign and reconstruct the educational pipeline, who will? ■

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My Soviet Past: Why We Need to be Vigilant About Academic Freedom

Areg Danagoulian

IN SEPTEMBER OF THIS YEAR, MIT's Department of Earth, Atmospheric, and Planetary Sciences decided to cancel the prestigious Carlson Lecture, which was going to be delivered by Professor Dorian Abbot. The reason for the cancellation, as it transpired, was the complaints by a number of alumni and students about a [Newsweek article](#) co-authored by Professor Abbot where he critiqued Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) efforts on academic campuses. This cancellation has led to a major controversy at MIT, causing many faculty to question whether MIT is truly committed to the highest principle of academia – that of freedom of thought. To understand the scale of the problem, three Institute-wide faculty meetings on freedom of expression were convened and polls were held to gauge the climate. During one of these polls, 52% of the participating faculty indicated that they feel that their voice, or the voices of their colleagues, are constrained at MIT on an everyday basis. Additionally, 77% indicated that they are worried that the current atmosphere in the society is jeopardizing their voice.

You can agree or disagree with Dorian Abbot's views on DEI (I personally disagree with them, and with the way in which he chose to word them). However, to state that DEI is off limits for criticism is absurd. Deifying DEI would turn it into the opposite of freedom of speech. This would be the worst outcome, as it is bound to hurt DEI efforts. Such reductionism would drive us into the zero sum "you are with us or against us" dangerous sectarian mindset that was and still is

common in the former Soviet space where I grew up. It is also dangerous to demand rejection of thinkers who disagree with a university's current policies: such an approach throughout history would have resulted in universities that would still be governed by their 19th century racist and sexist policies. It is precisely the openness to criticism that has allowed progress and reform in academia.

I grew up in Soviet Armenia in a family of physicists. As such, I saw firsthand what damage Soviet-style "political correctness" inflicted on Soviet scholarship and scientific thought. To this day academic and scientific institutions in the former USSR have not recovered from that blight. Humanities and social sciences became tools of ideological propaganda, weapons of indoctrination by Soviet authorities. Critical thinking was discouraged and replaced with endless repetition of "truths." Expressions of "dangerous ideas" were punished. STEM fields didn't escape the scourge of Soviet political correctness. Trofim Lysenko, a pseudoscientist botanist, "proved" in the 1920s that plants' properties were entirely determined by the environment and declared genetics a false "bourgeois science" – a conclusion adored by his Marxist overlords, who could then extrapolate to humans and claim that humans are entirely shaped by their environment. The [Lysenkovshchina campaign](#) that followed enforced political orthodoxy in the sciences and brought about the destruction of Soviet genetics: even in the 1980s our textbooks on biology had barely any serious discussions on the workings of DNA. The message to

Soviet scientists was simple: keep quiet, toe the party line, and never produce any science that contradicts the ideological orthodoxy *du jour*. The few heroic dissidents who did (Andrey Sakharov, Yuri Orlov, et. al.) were punished with professional and social ostracism (or "canceled," to use today's terminology). It is then of no surprise that the Soviet intellectuals – who should have been the loudest voices – instead kept mute and silent while autocracy and corruption flourished after the collapse of the USSR.

When I immigrated to this country in 1993, I was exhilarated by the culture of tolerance of different opinions: seeing two colleagues with diametrically opposite political views working together was nothing short of amazing for me at the time. After the oppressive atmosphere of Soviet thought it felt like a breath of fresh air. "I disagree with you but I will fight for your right to state your opinion" – this is one of the uniquely American values that I hold most dear to my heart. I grew to believe that it is our tolerance towards diversity of opinion that makes America such a vibrant and unique country. And it is diversity of thought that fosters innovation and scholarly pursuit without which we would suffer the kind of stagnation that ultimately undid the Soviet Union.

Some might be tempted to dismiss these comparisons as a hyperbole: after all, America is so different from the USSR . . . surely it can't happen here. To those who think this I simply ask: Would you have guessed in 2014 that in just a few years we would have an extremist like [continued on next page](#)

My Soviet Past

Danagouliau, from preceding page

Donald Trump as a president? As someone who grew up in the USSR I am very worried that the vector of our social momentum is increasingly pointing to that of the Soviet Union. Over the last 10 years we have seen a real erosion of American liberal values and a rise of ideological intolerance. The Abbot incident is by far not the only one – there have been [many other ones](#) (Foundation for Individual Rights in Education lists 471 such incidents since 2015). Furthermore, the issue is a very bipartisan one: the attacks on freedom of speech are by no means only from the extreme left, but also from the opposite side of the political spectrum, as illustrated by the [2014 firing of Steven Salaita from his job at UIUC over his criticism of Israel](#). We now see a rise of political correctness and cancel culture in academia that is eerily similar to many aspects of Soviet thought.

It has been correctly stated that the freedom of speech is not absolute. To quote – freedom of speech comes with consequences. True. However just as there are some limits on speech, there should also be a proportionality and reasonableness in consequences. For example, if a biologist spreads false information about AIDS being a “myth,” as Professor Peter Duesberg of Berkeley did in the 2000s, then it would be justified for him to be excluded from the process of scholarly knowledge production in his field on the grounds of engaging in highly dangerous pseudoscience (Duesberg’s lobbying in South Africa [has been estimated to have contributed to 330,000 avoidable deaths from AIDS](#)). On the other hand, if a legitimate climate scientist expresses political views that don’t sit well with the university policies, that is not grounds enough to cancel their public lecture on climate science. Because it amounts to censorship.

There are some faculty who will justify ostracism of scientists holding views similar to Abbot’s, e.g., by stating that minority students on campus experience

exclusion and feel marginalized by the very presence of scientists who hold such “extreme opinions.” This view assumes three axioms: that Abbot’s views are extreme; that the minority students suffer by feeling marginalized; that students should be protected from any form of ideological discomfort on campus. Let’s start with the first one: is there any evidence to show that Abbot’s views are extreme? Pew Research conducted [a survey in 2019](#) of various demographic groups in America, which indicated that 73% of Americans believe that race should not be considered as a factor during university admissions. Sixty-two percent of African Americans agree with that view as well. Next: is there any evidence that the minority students suffer? For example, is there any data showing that academic performance of minority students drops after visits of speakers who hold views similar to Abbot’s? Do we see a reduction in applications to MIT after such visits? I am not aware of any data that corroborate such an assertion. And finally the third: do the students need to be ideologically protected? While a university should be a space that is free of harassment and racism, higher education is not supposed to be comfortable or easy. Students should be taught to grapple with controversial ideas, to hear out and debate difficult and even offensive concepts.

Other than the above argumentation for the decision to cancel speakers with dissenting views, we hear some colleagues mention that it is the students who do not want to hear voices that criticize DEI. I am not aware of any hard evidence that supports this view. In fact, Gallup Inc. has performed surveys of university students’ opinions of freedom of speech, including speech on campus. Their [2020 survey](#) involving about 3000 students across many campuses indicated that 80% of the participants believe that students should be exposed to all types of speech without any prohibitions thereof. These numbers are important for two reasons: they evidence a readiness on the part of the students to engage in difficult debates; they

counter the widely held stereotype that “kids these days” are fragile snowflakes in need of a university bureaucracy that plays the role of the ideological nanny. Perhaps the problem is not “kids these days” but rather the “administrators these days” who are too fragile to deal with the slightest controversy?

Here at MIT a Values Statement Committee recently drafted [a proposed set of MIT Values](#); the proposed set includes charming statements about “quirkiness” and “nerdiness,” but does not have even a single clear stipulation on freedom of thought. The list does include welcome features like creativity, originality, and (my favorite) creative irreverence – but how can those be practiced without free thinking? Does this imply that on an administrative level MIT doesn’t consider such freedom a value worth mentioning?

The poll results from the MIT faculty meetings on freedom of expression acutely illustrate the crisis that we are in: there is an atmosphere of fear among faculty. A fear that is bound to cripple honest scholarship and free scientific pursuit. It is thus paramount that MIT makes a clear statement formulating its position on the issue. I believe that the Institute needs to take multiple urgent steps that are necessary to rectify the situation. Those should include, at the very least:

- A faculty-led MIT committee on academic freedom which will:
 - * Work with faculty, students, and staff to achieve a deeper understanding of the climate on campus;
 - * Produce a statement on the part of MIT, similar to the Chicago principles, that clearly articulates the importance and the meaning of academic freedom;
 - Ensure that future revisions of the MIT Values include clarification on MIT’s commitment to academic freedom and on how this concept is intermeshed with the other stated values. ■

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