



October 4, 2021

Dear Professor van der Hilst,

The Academic Freedom Alliance (AFA) is a coalition of faculty members from across the country and across the ideological spectrum who are committed to upholding the principles of academic freedom and professorial free speech.

We are dismayed about the recent decision to disinvite Dorian Abbot who was scheduled to deliver the 10th annual John Carlson Lecture in the Department of Earth, Atmospheric and Planetary Science at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. As you know, he was invited to deliver the Carlson Lecture, and his lecture was to be delivered on October 21, 2021 with the announced title of “Climate and the Potential for Life on Other Planets.” The lecture is a significant professional honor and important venue for the communication of scholarly knowledge to a professional and public audience. Professor Abbot, a tenured professor in the Department of Geophysical Sciences at the University of Chicago, intended to share his scholarly expertise on climate and exoplanets. Soon after the public announcement of the lecture, activists began a campaign to have Professor Abbot disinvited on the explicit grounds that he held disfavored political views (as it happens, on matters utterly unrelated to the topic of his Carlson Lecture). On September 30, he was informed that this campaign had successfully pressured the department into rescinding its invitation and cancelling this year’s Carlson Lecture.

I write on behalf of the Academic Freedom Alliance to express our firm view that this disinvitation represents an egregious violation of the principles of academic freedom and an abnegation of MIT’s own stated commitment to freedom of thought.

MIT’s own [Policies and Procedures 4.1](#) avows a broad freedom of faculty to engage “in the expression of their ideas in the academic community.” [Policies and Principles 14.2](#) commits the university to “a policy of open research and free interchange of information among scholars.” [Policies and Principles 9.0](#) recognizes that “the free and open exchange of ideas and viewpoints reflected in the concept of academic freedom may sometimes prove disturbing or offensive to some,” but that “the examination and challenging of assumptions, beliefs or opinions is, however, intrinsic to the rigorous education that MIT strives to provide.” Adherence to such principles is deeply inconsistent with disinviting scholars from presenting on their academic work simply because their opinions are controversial or disfavored by members of the campus community. The fact that some might regard Professor Abbot’s ideas disturbing or offensive provides no justification for suppressing his speech and denying other members of the community the opportunity to engage in the free exchange of ideas.



Universities are places where individuals with diverse beliefs, ideas and commitments can gather and civilly discuss their views. Universities are founded on the belief that the free exchange of ideas is essential to the advancement of human knowledge and that our society is improved by working through our disagreements by discussion rather than coercion. Universities should not shy away from controversy. They should certainly not yield to intimidation. They should be seeking to provide a forum in which disagreements can be openly expressed. Those disagreements will sometimes be intense and might be expressed in strong terms, but universities will be sacrificing their core values if they seek to suppress speakers who might elicit controversy or silence debate before it has even begun.

When universities extend invitations to speakers, it is imperative that they stand behind those invitations and not rescind them under political pressure. Caving in to disinvitation campaigns emboldens those who would seek to suppress the expression of dissenting views and sends a message that universities will not stand up for their own principles and will not protect the campus as a place where ideas can be freely debated. If threatened protests can force universities to cancel events, then vocal agitators across the ideological spectrum will be incentivized to organize themselves to shut down any speech or speaker with which they disagree. This threat is particularly grave when it interferes with activities that are at the very center of a university's academic enterprise. If the faculty cannot gather to listen to the presentation of scholarly arguments out of fear that some might object to giving a fellow scholar an audience, then the university can no longer fulfill its most basic functions. Universities have a particular responsibility to stand up to such threats.

Empowering those who disagree with ideas to cancel events subverts the principles of freedom of speech that ought to guide university life. Justice William O. Douglas observed in *Terminiello v. Chicago*, 337 U.S. 1, 4 (1949) that “a function of free speech under our system of government is to invite dispute. It may indeed best serve its high purpose when it induces a condition of unrest, creates dissatisfaction with conditions as they are, or even stirs people to anger. Speech is often provocative and challenging.” The alternative to the robust protection of such speakers and the expression of their ideas is the “standardization of ideas either by legislatures, courts, or dominant political or community groups.” In *Sweezy v. New Hampshire* 354 U.S. 234, 262 (1957), Justice Felix Frankfurter emphasized the “dependence of a free society on free universities” and strong protections against “action that inevitably tends to check the ardor and fearlessness of scholars, qualities at once so fragile and so indispensable for fruitful academic labor.”

The First Amendment scholar [Harry Kalven](#) coined the term “heckler’s veto” to point to the problem of authorities silencing a speaker because some members of an audience “do not like what the [speaker] is saying and wishes to stop it,” effectively transferring “the power of



ensorship to the crowd.” Writing in the mid-twentieth century, Kalven was particularly concerned with how segregationists could use the threat of their own disruptive activities to silence black civil rights activists. If, “by being hostile enough,” a heckler can prevent a willing audience from hearing the words of a willing speaker, then the freedom of open intellectual inquiry is at an end. In the midst of the protests of the 1960s, Kalven famously authored a [report for the University of Chicago](#) stressing that “a good university, like Socrates, will be upsetting.” A good university “cannot insist that all of its members favor a given view of social policy” but instead “must embrace, be hospitable to, and encourage the widest diversity of views within its own community.”

If MIT were to cancel the planned and announced lecture of a scholar invited to discuss his academic work with a community of his peers, then it would be repudiating its own stated commitments to academic freedom, sending a chilling message to its own faculty that their rights of intellectual inquiry will not be respected when objections are raised, and diminishing its own standing as one of the great institutions of higher education. The Academic Freedom Alliance stands firmly behind Professor Abbot in this matter and calls on MIT to adhere to its academic freedom principles and allow the Carlson Lecture to go forward without interruption.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "KW", with a long, sweeping horizontal line extending to the right.

Keith Whittington
Chair, Academic Committee, Academic Freedom Alliance
William Nelson Cromwell Professor of Politics, Princeton University