



October 18, 2021

Dear Provost Martin Schmidt,

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 wrote](#) to the leadership of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology about the disinvitation of Professor Dorian Abbot on October 4 calling on the Institute to reaffirm its commitment to academic freedom.

Unfortunately, the Institute has not taken positive steps to rectify the situation, and we find ourselves quite discouraged by [your recent letter](#) to the faculty regarding this matter. I write now not to repeat the points that we made in our earlier letter, but to respond to the new issues raised by your letter to the faculty.

You note in your letter that the Department of Earth, Atmospheric and Planetary Sciences “had to make a difficult decision” when an organized petition campaign was launched to pressure the Institute to disinvite Professor Abbot. It is true that universities are sometimes put in the difficult position of upholding their values of academic freedom and open inquiry when particular instances of speech become controversial and universities are being pressured to suppress speech. Identifying the correct principle and the university’s proper responsibilities in such circumstances is not difficult, however.

The university’s duty is clear – *once a university has extended an invitation to a speaker to speak to members of the campus community, the university must not rescind that invitation because some object that the speaker or ideas that the speaker has expressed are unacceptable.* The Institute seems to have lost sight of that very basic principle in this case, and in doing so has subverted its own institutional mission to foster the free exchange of ideas.

You suggest in your letter that the faculty will need “to reflect together on how we collectively balance and apply the values of our community.” I have no idea what values you think a university should be balancing in these circumstances. A respected scientist, scholar and colleague was invited to speak on the university campus. His speech was cancelled because some individuals found some of his ideas objectionable. There is only one singular and paramount imperative here – to allow a willing speaker to speak to a willing audience on a university campus.

Your letter implies that no serious loss of academic freedom occurred in this incident because the department has expressed a willingness (for now) to host Professor Abbot at some other



less public event, one that could be limited to scholars and not involve any effort “to inspire young people to consider careers in STEM,” an event that would not involve impressionable members of the public or high school students. This is quite misguided and severely underestimates the damage that MIT has done and is doing to its core values of open scientific inquiry and intellectual freedom.

What message does MIT intend to send with such a disinvitation? Are we to understand that scholars with controversial ideas are to be allowed to present their scholarly work to small, private audiences but they are not to be the recipient of university honors like named lectureships nor held up as models of their profession to members of the public? Shall we presume that the Department of Linguistics would not tolerate Professor Noam Chomsky, esteemed for his contributions to the field but highly controversial for his political ideas, delivering a lecture at an outreach event if anyone were to object? Shall we presume that the Department of History would not tolerate allowing Columbia Law Professor Kimberle Crenshaw, a pioneering contributor to critical race theory, to deliver a planned speech at a public event if Republican politicians objected to her doing so? Should the Institute’s faculty conclude that they can be held up as exemplars of their field only if their ideas are so anodyne that no one would be moved to disagree with them or if their personal politics is so conventional no one would notice their views?

Or perhaps MIT intends to send a rather more specific message. Perhaps the Institute would not feel that it had any “difficult decisions” to make if activists called for the Institute to disinvite a speaker whose ideas were consonant with those of the majority of the faculty and students. Perhaps it is only scholars with political opinions that are heterodox on the university campus, no matter how mainstream in American society, who can expect to be disinvited from public lectures – or not invited at all. Is the lesson that the Institute hopes its faculty will take away from this incident that they should carefully avoid extending any invitations or honors to speakers with disfavored political views so as to avoid the eventual necessity of disinviting that speaker? Shall the Institute’s faculty and alumni, and members of the general public, understand that university honors will be reserved only for those who cause no offense to campus orthodoxies?

The Academic Freedom Alliance stands firmly behind Professor Abbot in this matter and calls on MIT to reaffirm its own academic principles that have been badly tarnished by the Institute’s actions in this incident.



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

cc. President L. Rafael Reif