



On Responding to Linda McMahon's *National Call to Action*

23 September 2026

U.S. Secretary of Education Linda McMahon last month issued an open letter titled *A National Call to Action to University Presidents and Governing Boards*. The Washington University chapter of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) condemns the McMahon letter as an attempt by the Trump administration to interfere with the educational autonomy of private and public colleges and universities.

The letter demands that leaders of every U.S. college and university publicly state how they will implement various policies, including “ensur[ing] admissions decisions are based on merit [and] achievement”; “encourag[ing] an ethic of free speech”; implementing “hiring and evaluation practices” that “[take] all relevant perspectives . . . seriously”; and “protect[ing] academic programs from foreign influence.” Taken in their most innocuous senses, the policies the letter mandates are already in place almost everywhere in higher education. Therefore, the letter must not mean its mandates innocuously. It uses these seemingly bland platitudes to stand for well-known ideological priorities of the Trump Administration, including evisceration of DEI programs, favoring right-wing candidates for faculty hiring regardless of merit, xenophobic persecution of international students and scholars, and crackdowns on public dissent.

Washington University AAUP strongly believes that the best response to McMahon's “call to action” is no response at all. Her demands are either trivial or authoritarian. If they are trivial, no response is necessary. If they are authoritarian, any response amounts to collaboration with a malign government effort to bend higher education to its preferred ideology. Painful history has taught us all that collaboration with tyranny leads not to restraint by the tyrant but rather to escalating, increasingly corrosive demands that the collaborator loses all leverage to resist.

Since the failure of the first Trump compact, principled institutional leaders have shown us the best way to respond to the Trump administration's illegal demands. Lawsuits brought by Harvard, the national AAUP, and other leaders in higher education have met success after success by using their financial resources and intellectual credibility to prove that American education governs itself with law

and reason rather than the partisan whims of a flailing and unpopular political regime. If long history has taught us that collaboration is ruin, recent events have shown that resistance to authoritarianism conserves the strength of our democracy.

We therefore commend Chancellor Andrew Martin for not responding precipitously to the McMahon letter. Unfortunately, the Chancellor has signaled that he intends to bow to McMahon's demand for a public response. The only participation he has authorized for the University community will come from an advisory committee, composed entirely of tenured faculty (and the Provost), with no systemic mechanism for gathering views from the broader University community. That advisory committee consists of

Heather Corcoran, Sam Fox School

Adrienne Davis, WashU Law

Gerald Early, Arts & Sciences

Marcus Foston, McKelvey Engineering

Andrew Knight, Olin Business School and Bauer Leaders Academy

Dwight McBride, Arts & Sciences

Steve Mennerick, WashU Medicine

Cynthia Rogers, WashU Medicine

Abram Van Engen, Arts & Sciences

Although the Chancellor is not bound to follow the committee's recommendations, he has agreed that the committee may publish those recommendations as an independent report of faculty views about McMahon's letter.

We encourage the broadest possible engagement with the advisory committee's process. We believe the WashU community must make the most it can of the opportunity to register our views on the public record. We can do this in two ways:

1. We urge our members and everyone in the University community to email their views about the McMahon letter to a member of the Advisory Committee or to a [Faculty Senate Council representative](#).
2. We ask willing faculty to help us compile an online public archive of submissions to the committee [by sending us](#) copies of their comments with indication of whether we may publish

them, with or without attribution. We hope to compile a significant set of comments that may become a resource in this and future struggles over political interference in the university.

Any response to the McMahon letter must not give an inch to tyranny. A model of what to avoid is the *Statement of First Principles* released in June by Vanderbilt University, the domain of Martin's frequent collaborator, Chancellor Daniel Diermeier. That edict, imposed from on high on the Vanderbilt community, suppresses free speech and academic freedom. It threatens a neo-McCarthyite censorship regime by forbidding faculty from "subordinat[ing] scholarly standards" to whatever the University deems "a political and social agenda." It stifles the vital democratic right of public dissent by sweepingly "prohibit[ing] [expressive] conduct that disrupts operations." It removes the university from a central role in public discourse by commanding "university leaders at all levels to abstain from actions or speech relating to political and social matters that are not directly connected to [the University's] core purpose." And it creates a regime to "vet" all "visitors, employees, and students for relevant national security risks" according to the "national security determinations" of "federal agencies." Each of those mandates severely threatens the integrity and value of higher education in the United States and the indispensable role it has played in the global flourishing of democracy and scientific progress for nearly a century

At our own university, the AAUP Executive Committee notes with concern [the announcement](#) of an "[Advisory Board on Advancing Community Excellence](#)," with only one member appointed from the faculty, holding vaguely specified responsibilities for vetting university programs for legal compliance. This committee's work appears to circumvent normal channels of faculty governance and thus deserves faculty scrutiny. We must not open the door to government censorship over our classrooms, our studios, and our labs.

The next few months may constitute a moment that future histories will regard as the time that the American system of higher education either stood with integrity and resolve in order to lead a new era of democratic flourishing, or else was undone by authoritarians who would do away with so many of our most vital institutions. We urge Chancellor Martin to avoid any response to the McMahon letter that would commit the university to suppressing the democratic rights to public dissent and free intellectual inquiry. Washington University AAUP will fiercely oppose any such capitulation.