

MIT Statement on Freedom of Expression and Academic Freedom

The following statement, drafted by the MIT Ad Hoc Working Group on Free Expression and amended by the MIT Faculty through extensive discussion and debate, was adopted by the Faculty on December 21, 2022.

The influential 1949 Lewis Report observed that MIT's mission was "to encourage initiative, to promote the spirit of free and objective inquiry, to recognize and provide opportunities for unusual interests and aptitudes," and to develop "individuals who will contribute creatively to our society." With a tradition of celebrating provocative thinking, controversial views, and nonconformity, MIT unequivocally endorses the principles of freedom of expression and academic freedom.

Free expression is a necessary, though not sufficient, condition of a diverse and inclusive community. We cannot have a truly free community of expression if some perspectives can be heard and others cannot. Learning from a diversity of viewpoints, and from the deliberation, debate, and dissent that accompany them, is an essential ingredient of academic excellence.

Free expression promotes creativity by affirming the ability to exchange ideas without constraints. It not only facilitates individual autonomy and self-fulfillment, it provides for participation in collective decision-making and is essential to the search for truth and justice. Free expression is enhanced by the doctrine of academic freedom, which protects both intramural and extramural expression without institutional censorship or discipline. Academic freedom promotes scholarly rigor and the testing of ideas by protecting research, publication, and teaching from interference.

MIT does not protect direct threats, harassment, plagiarism, or other speech that falls outside the boundaries of the First Amendment. Moreover, the time, place, and manner of protected expression, including organized protests, may be restrained so as not to disrupt the essential activities of the Institute.

At the intersection of the ideal of free expression and MIT community values lies the expectation of a collegial and respectful learning and working environment. We cannot prohibit speech that some experience as offensive or injurious. At the same time, MIT deeply values civility, mutual respect, and uninhibited, wide-open debate. In fostering such debate, we have a responsibility to express ourselves in ways that consider the prospect of offense and injury and the risk of discouraging others from expressing their own views. This responsibility complements, and does not conflict with, the right to free expression. Even robust disagreements shall not be liable to official censure or disciplinary action. This applies broadly. For example, when MIT leaders speak on matters of public interest, whether in their own voice or in the name of MIT, this should always be understood as being open to debate by the broader MIT community.

A commitment to free expression includes hearing and hosting speakers, including those whose views or opinions may not be shared by many members of the MIT community and may be harmful to some. This commitment includes the freedom to criticize and peacefully protest speakers to whom one may object, but it does not extend to suppressing or restricting such speakers from expressing their views. Debate and deliberation of controversial ideas are hallmarks of the Institute's educational and research missions and are essential to the pursuit of truth, knowledge, equity, and justice.

MIT has played a leading role in the continuing transformation of communication technology, and recent digital and networked modes of speech make our campus more accessible to all. At the same time, those technologies make our campus more disembodied and more vulnerable to the pull of ideological extremes. Although new modes of speech change the character of expression, such technologies need not and should not lessen our commitment to the values underlying free speech, even as we adapt creatively to meet the needs of our physical and virtual landscapes.