



Alliance
For Higher
Education



A Call for Unity in the Aftermath of the Department of Education's "National Call to Action"

On Aug. 3, 2026, Department of Education Secretary Linda McMahon sent a [letter](#) to the presidents and governing boards of the country's 4,000 colleges and universities, calling for action on admissions, hiring, free expression, research, affordability and technology to better serve the nation.

We agree that higher education should be transparent, accountable, inclusive, rigorous and responsive to public concerns. But McMahon misidentifies the myriad ways higher education already serves the nation and the opportunities the sector has to do more and do things differently.

Educational opportunity remains unevenly distributed, limiting access to the institutions that most influence economic mobility, political leadership and civic participation. This administration, however, is misusing continuous improvement models for political control, rather than to uplift family earnings or innovations in science and technology. And affordability remains an issue despite the fact that many institutions — two-year colleges and regional public universities among them — model strategies to keep education costs low.

We can collectively fix these issues, but any collaboration requires transparency about the tensions between partners. The government's adversarial posture is impacting students, families and communities — not just our institutions. **For the good of the country, higher education leaders must not only consider the moment's politically expedient posture but also the long-term needs of their communities and the nation.** When we need to put time and energy into maneuvering around the administration's political and rhetorical attacks, we cannot focus on the substance of bettering the nation through higher education. This is all by design and part of the administration's political strategy.

As a result, **we offer these alternative recommendations to presidents and boards and the associations that represent them in hopes that collective transparency about the obstacles this administration is placing in front of us can catalyze public trust and, ideally, shift the Department of Education's posture.**



Recommendations to Presidents and Boards

Before Responding, Understand How This Letter is Meant to Fracture Us

The implicit “carrot” that the Call to Action offers is that the government will prioritize certain institutions for federal research funding if they adopt what is outlined in the Call. This is a tactic to fragment rather than unite the higher education sector. If institutions that embrace the Call to Action are prioritized for funding, then those that do not will be financially vulnerable.

A fractured sector does not serve the collective whole. As we learned from the fall 2025 Compact, collective rejection strengthened trust among students, faculty, staff and the public. It also crystallized the absolutes in our sector: institutional autonomy, students’ right to learn and thrive, and scholarly inquiry free from political coercion. While this Call to Action is less combative than previous directives, it threatens to fracture the sector and its core values in the same way. We encourage the sector to recognize this Call to Action for what it really is — a document designed to divide and weaken higher education — while also acknowledging the importance of meeting the needs of the nation’s people, security and economy through accountability for our sector and for the government.



Use Clear Eyes in Reading the Language of the Call to Action

Nearly all institutions are addressing affordability, innovation and student success as identified in the Call to Action. To be sure, the sector must act with greater speed than it has in the past to address those and other issues. However, the rhetorical strategy that the Department of Education used in the Call to Action is to claim 1) that some problems are scaled across all institutions when they are actually few and far between and 2) that the administration is acting as a partner to the American people when it has been operating as anything but.

The Call is the Administration’s Way to Have Institutions Make Changes That the Government Cannot Legally Require

Even if the Call to Action’s language is softer in tone than last year’s Compact, the letter seeks to impose a consensus with superficial readings of serious questions. The self-selection of presidents and scholars who align with the administration’s view of the academy does not do justice to the academy’s viewpoint diversity; what’s more, it does not support academic freedom, sector autonomy or broad access but rather undermines them. In its use of the vague benchmark of “fairness,” this letter echoes the administration’s and its surrogates’ efforts to sue colleges for millions of dollars and also to establish state legislation that the courts have [ultimately been found unconstitutional](#). We must recognize that this letter is another tactic to compel institutions to comply with ideological stances that the administration has been unable to impose through law or legal means.



Questions and Guidance for Institutions to Consider

Quantify and Communicate Your Institution's Service to Families and the Nation

Using tools from the Alliance, PEN America, and other organizations, share on your institution's website and/or through other communications vehicles your responses to the following:

TOPICS

The Hardest Part of College Should Be in the Classroom — How Financial Cuts and Threats Have Made College Harder for Students

QUESTIONS AND GUIDANCE

- What sort of funding and partnership from state and federal governments would you need to increase student success and lower costs?
- What has the threat of or actual funding cuts meant to student support services on your campuses?
- What have been the costs to families and knowledge creation resulting from the funding cuts?
- Quantify changes in demographics in enrollment, retention and completion since funding has been cut.

RESOURCES

[Messaging Tool to Aid Stakeholder Communications Regarding Fiscal Year 2027 Federal Budget Proposals](#)

Illustrate How an Adversarial Relationship Impacts Educational and Democratic Outcomes

- What is the impact that threats to federal funding tied to political viewpoints have had on operations and student outcomes?
- Explain the role of diversity in democracy and how your institution supports both.
- Explain your institution's philosophical definition of excellence as requiring outcomes that are equal among all student types and how current federal intrusion has injured this definition.

[Framework for Autonomy in Difficult Contexts](#)

Questions and Guidance for Institutions to Consider

TOPICS

Free Speech and
Campus Discourse

QUESTIONS AND GUIDANCE

- Recognize that student protest is almost always safe and that First Amendment rights support it. Take a supportive posture toward student voices rather than a suppressive one.
- Articulate your institution's commitment to the principles of freedom of speech and campus discourse. Explain that these values are inherent to the mission of higher education and that your institution is committed to the robust defense of free speech and academic freedom for all students, faculty and staff.
- Hold open and honest discussions on your campus about free speech so that everyone is aware of your community standards and that you will not abandon free-speech rights for faculty, students and staff under government pressure.
- Use resources on campus free speech and deescalation from higher education and free expression organizations.
- Find three to four partner institutions of a similar type to articulate a unified posture.

RESOURCES

Campus Free
Speech Guide

Intellectual
Pluralism,
Research and
Faculty

- Reject the notion that academically rigorous research is somehow partisan. Assert that academic research transcends partisan politics and is truth-seeking.
- Make overt statements about the support for courses, programs and student services that are focused on race, class, gender and sexuality, and situate those statements in the context of current state and federal law.
- Continue to hire faculty and staff and to enroll students based on merit. Refuse ideological litmus tests, and recognize that hiring based on partisan and/or liberal or conservative viewpoints rather than academic merit is illegal.

Talking Points for
Presidents this Fall

Executive Orders on
Race, Gender and
Citizenship

Questions and Guidance for Institutions to Consider

TOPICS

Affordability,
Student Debt and
Educational Value

QUESTIONS AND GUIDANCE

- Explain how the decades-long retreat from public investment has made higher education less affordable for millions of Americans.
- Continue to create degree pathways from one institutional kind to another that reduce costs for students. Make these pathways and their cost legible and accessible to students.
- Explain the political landscape limiting cost-effective bachelor's degrees, especially in rural areas.

Academic Rigor,
AI, and Teaching
and Learning

- Highlight your teaching and learning centers, your values when it comes to grading and assessment, and how academic freedom protects the right to teach and learn.
- Explain how you are developing policies regarding AI to meet the urgency of the moment but in tandem with faculty, students, staff and trustees, thereby upholding the values of shared governance.

Research Security
and Foreign
Influence

- How will the federal government and higher education balance legitimate security concerns with the openness and international collaboration that have made American higher education the envy of the world?

Serving the
American People

- Develop program reviews on long-term economic benefits of graduating (not just the first three years after college), and replace simplistic return on investment metrics with criteria that reflect graduates' happiness in their chosen life and professional paths.
- Ensure that your institution has policies, procedures and strategies that reflect a commitment to expand economic mobility, political leadership and civic participation.



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