



Statement by the AAUP-Penn Executive Committee on the Compact for Academic Excellence in Higher Education

October 2, 2025

We were alarmed to read [reports](#) that Penn has been “invited” to sign a so-called “[Compact for Academic Excellence in Higher Education](#)” by the federal government, and that failing to do so would jeopardize federal funding. Compliance would be subject to ongoing review by the Department of Justice, and insufficient obedience would result in a loss of access to student loans, grant programs, federal contracts, funding for research, approval of visas, and tax exemption. When an invitation is accompanied by consequences for not accepting it, it is in fact a [threat](#), not an [invitation](#). Decisions about hiring, tuition, admissions, grades, and discipline are made according to shared governance procedures that are essential to the independence and academic freedom of the University. Penn must not allow itself to be threatened into ceding its self-determination. Whatever the consequences of refusal, agreeing would threaten the very mission of the University.

This attempt at coercion is just one of the many examples of intensifying [political interference into higher education](#). The compact characterizes efforts to improve diversity as discriminatory, a continuation of other efforts to undermine the [Civil Rights Act of 1964](#). It makes other demands about admission, like requiring the use of standardized tests and limiting the admission of international students, that directly flout the shared governance rights of [faculty](#). It redefines sex and gender according to rigid binaries incompatible with both science and [Penn’s values](#); forcing members of the University to accept these definitions would be a violation of our academic freedom. Finally, it instructs universities to ensure a “vibrant marketplace of ideas on campus.” Given recent government actions to suppress the expression of ideas with which it disagrees, such as the [unconstitutional policy](#) of arresting, detaining, and deporting noncitizen students and faculty members for their pro-Palestinian advocacy, this can only be interpreted as a thinly-veiled attempt to restrict academic freedom to those who express government-approved views, defeating the very purpose of academic freedom and of higher education as a whole.

While the loss of federal funding would threaten Penn’s ability to perform its vital education and research work, agreeing to this compact would not forestall that outcome. As the AAUP-Penn executive committee [warned](#) when the Penn administration became the first in the country to make a closed-door, secretly negotiated deal with the Trump administration, a concession to threats will simply embolden the Trump administration to come back for more. Funding cuts are also not insurmountable. For example, the University could temporarily raise the rate of spending on its endowment, as it has done [before](#) in times of crisis, while collaborating with other institutions to sue for the restoration of unconstitutionally withheld funds. Sacrificing our values, on the other hand, would irreparably damage the fabric of our university. Penn’s Latin motto, *Leges Sine Moribus Vanæ*, is usually translated to “Laws Without Morals are Useless.” It is time to put that principle into practice.