

Political Litmus Tests Are Bad for Higher Education

**Open inquiry is under attack from both the left and
the right.**

BRIAN TAYLOR FOR THE CHRONICLE

By *Jeffrey Aaron Snyder*

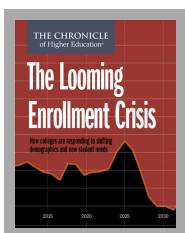
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What do the University of Chicago geophysicist Dorian S. Abbot and the Pulitzer-Prize-winning historian Jon Meacham have in common? They both recently had invited talks canceled because of their politics.

Abbot was slated to deliver the prestigious John Carlson Lecture at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, an annual talk dedicated to communicating “exciting new results in climate science to the general public.” He was planning to speak about the potential for life on other planets. MIT’s earth, atmospheric and planetary-sciences department canceled the lecture in September, after a social-media furor erupted surrounding Abbot’s public criticism of campus diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives.

Meanwhile, Samford University, a Southern Baptist institution in Birmingham, Ala., invited Meacham to deliver a talk as part of a series of special events celebrating the inauguration of the incoming President Beck A. Taylor this month. He planned to talk about the current state of civil discourse in the U.S. After students opened an online petition protesting Meacham’s appearance because of his involvement with Planned Parenthood, the invitation was officially withdrawn.

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I don’t know if canceling these talks violated any of Samford’s or MIT’s own policies. I suspect both universities acted within their rights. But did they make the right decisions?

Resoundingly: No.

If we are to apply political litmus tests to every potential campus speaker, the life of the mind at colleges and universities will be severely degraded.

The Change.org [petition](#) that Samford students organized to prevent Meacham from speaking received over 1,000 signatures. Petitioners did not object to anything about Meacham's talk itself but rather to the fact that he had given talks at Planned Parenthood events. "The problem," they wrote, "lies within the beliefs and previous engagements of Mr. Meacham." Removing Meacham from the inauguration lineup was imperative "to protect the core values and beliefs of Samford University" as a "Southern Baptist institution."

At MIT, those in favor of withdrawing Abbot's invitation embraced a similar logic. They argued that "[someone who does not align with our values](#)" should not represent the earth- and planetary-sciences department at a "public-facing" event. The main sticking point was a [Newsweek op-ed](#) in which Abbot and a co-author had sharply criticized campus diversity initiatives, calling for colleges to make admissions and hiring decisions strictly on the basis of individual "merit and qualifications." As one vocal disinvitation proponent [explained](#): "a university should not invite speakers who do not share its values on diversity and affirmative action." Another [tweeted](#) that MIT should invite someone who "*doesn't* hold deeply problematic views on equity in the sciences." Characterizing Abbot's statements about diversity efforts as "inflammatory" and "polarizing," Robert van der Hilst, the head of the earth, atmospheric, and planetary sciences department at MIT, [suggested](#) that Abbot was not an appropriate "role model" for the Carlson lecture.

Administrators at MIT and Samford further justified their decisions by asserting that the appearances of Abbot and Meacham would be a distraction. In a letter to the faculty, Provost Martin A. Schmidt of MIT [wrote](#) that the debate about Abbot's views was "overshadowing the purpose and spirit of the Carlson lecture." President Taylor of

Samford [explained](#) in a message to the campus community that Meacham’s lecture “has become a divisive issue, one that takes attention away from our opportunity to celebrate Samford.”

This emphasis on “distraction” is especially worrying. It sends a clear signal that raising a social-media ruckus about “objectionable” or “offensive” campus speakers works. Cancellations like these will inevitably have a chilling effect — those in charge of invitations of all kinds will be much more hesitant to invite speakers who have even a whiff of potential controversy about them. Who would want the headache?

In his campus message, President Taylor wrote that “some in our community have assumed erroneously that Samford’s invitation by extension endorses any perspectives or viewpoints Mr. Meacham may have about the sanctity of life and abortion rights. I can assure you,” he continued, “that no such connection should be inferred.”

We are in a world of trouble if campus communities cannot tolerate the presence of speakers whose mainstream views conflict with the prevailing campus orthodoxy.

These are wise words. Too many people on and off campus believe that colleges are necessarily endorsing the ideas, perspectives, and opinions of the speakers they invite. We must not fall into the trap of imagining that every campus speaker comes with an official institutional seal of approval for their every thought and belief. The so-called heckler’s veto — when people shout down an invited speaker in person — is bad enough. An advance, crowd-sourced version of the heckler’s veto would be even worse.

ampus disinvitations seemed to spike during the Trump presidency, when the likes of [Richard Spencer](#), [Ann Coulter](#), and [Milo Yiannopoulos](#) exploited their canceled campus speaking gigs to masquerade as free-speech martyrs. What's happening now is different. We aren't talking about whether white supremacists, conservative trolls, and right-wing provocateurs should have the right to appear on campus and throw rhetorical bombs. We are debating whether serious scholars should have formal speaking invitations revoked because some campus constituents are offended by their political views — views which, it bears underscoring, had nothing to do with the subject matter of their talks.

What's more, the allegedly beyond-the-pale views that Abbot and Meacham hold are shared by millions of Americans. Like Abbot, a majority of U.S. adults of all ethno-racial backgrounds are opposed to the consideration of race in [hiring](#) or [college admissions](#). A majority of Americans ([62 percent](#)) have a favorable opinion of Planned Parenthood. [More Americans](#) are “pro-choice” (49 percent) today than “pro-life,” per a Gallup poll (47 percent). If colleges are meant to develop students' critical-thinking skills and help prepare them for lives of engaged citizenship, we are in a world of trouble if campus communities cannot even tolerate the presence of speakers whose mainstream views conflict with the prevailing campus orthodoxy.

In cases like Abbot's and Meacham's, few can resist the urge to filter the details through a finely meshed ideological screen, invariably settling on an assessment that matches their political leanings. For many social progressives, Abbot wasn't really “canceled,” since MIT invited him to deliver a talk in a different forum at a to-be-determined future time. No matter that the new talk will be smaller and stripped of the prestige and occasion of the original. At Samford, conservative Christian proponents of nixing Meacham's talk argued that, since Samford is a private, sectarian university, it has every right to disinvite a speaker whose beliefs clash with its Christian values.

On a case-by-case basis, people who are opposed to a particular speaker will always be able to find, or manufacture, grounds for their dismissal — grounds that will seem

highly compelling to those who find the speaker’s views “problematic.” This is where [principles](#) come in.

One of the bedrock principles of academic freedom maintains that professors should be able to carry out their work — research and teaching — free of *political* interference. As the 1915 AAUP [Declaration](#) on Academic Freedom and Academic Tenure made clear, this interference takes different forms, including the “vested interests” of trustees, the “political considerations” of legislators (in the case of public institutions), and the “unconsidered impulses of popular feeling.” Any view that departed from “conventional standards” was “likely to be regarded with suspicion” by one or more of these constituencies. The university, the AAUP statement declared, should be an “inviolable refuge” from the “tyranny of the ruler” and the “tyranny of public opinion.”

The Abbot and Meacham cases are less about technical questions of policy or law than they are about the basic mission of higher education. Colleges of all kinds have a responsibility to promote and protect both the letter and the spirit of academic freedom. Open inquiry and intellectual freedom are values that need to be continually nurtured in order to flourish. This involves an unwavering commitment to the academy as an “intellectual experiment station,” to quote the same AAUP declaration. And it requires a steadfast refusal to cancel speakers based solely on which direction the campus political wind is blowing.

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[Jeffrey Aaron Snyder](#)