THE SECRETARY OF EDUCATION
WASHINGTON, DC 20202

August 3, 2026

A National Call to Action to University Presidents and Governing Boards

Dear University Presidents and Board Members:

As America celebrates 250 years of freedom, I call upon university leaders and governing boards to reaffirm their commitment to serving the American people.

America's oldest universities were founded almost 400 years ago and have, since the colonial era, helped to forge the political leaders, institutions, and public culture that made this country the greatest in the world. For centuries, American colleges and universities were a source of immense national pride: they excited in students a love of beauty and truth; they advanced science and opened opportunities in a growing national economy; they powered the modern research enterprise that secures our sovereignty and military might; and they served as indispensable repositories of our civilizational inheritance.

Yet, as higher education has drifted from the principles that built up so much public esteem, Americans' trust in universities has reached record lows.

Several university leaders have publicly recognized the need to chart a new course to rebuild public confidence and trust. In May, Yale's Committee on Trust in Higher Education boldly acknowledged that the dilution of academic standards, opaque admissions policies, and a domineering monoculture have badly eroded public trust. Last month, in response to a charge from the presidents of Vanderbilt and Washington University, a committee of leading scholars documented the politicization of the humanities and humanistic social sciences.

These courageous documents evince a generational opportunity for self-reflection and institutional renewal. For the good of the Nation, university leadership must seize this occasion to drive essential reforms—a process some began by adopting positions of institutional neutrality and improving policies related to campus protests.

Before the end of 2026, I call on every postsecondary institution to describe to the American public your commitments to rigorous teaching, pathbreaking research, and national service—commitments that make our universities a bedrock institution of the American republic.

These statements of principle should be posted prominently on institutional websites. Only full candor and transparency can begin to strengthen the bonds between higher education and the American people.

I know that there is no single template for academic excellence, and I hope we will witness a variety of institutional types, each with distinct missions and priorities, issue landmark declarations of purpose that will revitalize higher education in the years ahead. In detailing your

commitments to your students and the American people, I ask institutional leaders to **address the following questions**, detailing adopted and planned reforms:

1. The opacity of university admissions has caused allegations of favoritism, unjust outcomes, and illegal discrimination. Every prospective student is legally entitled to equal treatment regardless of protected characteristics, and credible accusations of covert attempts to evade the Supreme Court's ruling in *Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard* will persist as long as admissions criteria remain shielded from public view. **How will your institution ensure that admissions criteria are transparent and wholly described to prospective applicants? And how will your institution ensure admissions decisions are based on merit, achievement, and your university's educational purpose?**

2. Institutions must encourage an ethic of free speech and foster a thriving marketplace of ideas, guided by open inquiry and honest debate. The collision of opposing viewpoints is necessary to advance learning and prepare students for the duties of citizenship. **How will your institution protect the free exchange of ideas, wide-ranging debate, and open-minded campus discourse? And how will you guarantee that unruly and violent protestors do not harass students or disrupt classes, research, public lectures, and campus operations?**

3. Some academic disciplines and departments have subordinated the scholarly pursuit to political and social goals, as documented in the recent *Report on the State of Scholarship in the Humanities and the Humanistic Social Sciences*. When disciplines skew toward one side of the ideological spectrum, the truth-seeking function of the university suffers and public trust declines. **How will your institution encourage intellectual pluralism in all its academic units? How will your faculty hiring and evaluation practices support academic vitality and ensure that all relevant perspectives are taken seriously? And how will your school ensure the research enterprise is dedicated to advancing knowledge, deepening understanding, and serving the American people who fund it?**

4. The price of some postsecondary degrees seems out of reach for many American families—in significant measure due to ever-rising administrative costs and other expenses unrelated to core university functions. Rates of student attrition and student loan defaults are too high, and universities should take responsibility for ensuring better outcomes. Schools should be transparent about the value of their degrees and prioritize offering education that fosters employment. **How will your institution ensure that families can access affordable, high-return, degrees? What can your school do to contain costs, improve pricing transparency, and ensure that every academic program equips students to repay their loans?**

5. High academic standards are essential because rigor and learning go hand-in-hand, equipping students with the skills and knowledge they need to succeed in life and contribute to their country and community. Artificial intelligence has upended traditional methods of teaching and assessing student learning. Some schools recently have announced steps to combat grade inflation. **How will your institution incentivize rigor in the age of AI, combat grade inflation, and prioritize excellence in teaching and learning?**

6. University-sponsored research can drive economic growth and deliver medical innovation and technologies with vital military applications. University leaders must ensure that the research enterprise is oriented toward advancing the U.S. national interest—not our adversaries'—by refusing gifts with problematic conditions and ensuring that foreign actors do not unduly influence academic programming, research personnel, researcher assignments, or student admissions. Institutions must also ensure that malign foreign actors do not gain access to sensitive research or technology. **How will your school protect academic programs from foreign influence and safeguard the integrity of the research enterprise?**

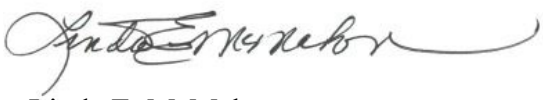
7. American taxpayers invest hundreds of billions of dollars into higher education every year. American universities must put Americans, and American interests, first. That means prioritizing American students and faculty, orienting the research enterprise to support the country's economic and security needs, and putting American societal success ahead of global commitments. **How will your institution answer this national call to action? How can your campus and faculty advance American security interests, deliver academic programs that meet urgent workforce needs, and contribute materially to the Nation's prosperity?**

I encourage universities to respond concretely to these questions and provide full transparency to the American people.

This forthright conversation with the American people is long overdue. And it is the essential first step toward rebuilding trust in the sector.

Bold university reformers will bring excellence and accountability to American higher education. A renewed academy, in turn, will usher in a new era of opportunity, prosperity, and American leadership.

Sincerely,



Linda E. McMahon