

# Admissions and Commitment

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Following the Valentine's Day massacre of 17 students and faculty at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, there has been an explosion of activism among students in Parkland and across the country advocating for action to prevent future mass shootings. Stoneman Douglas students are leading the charge: their Facebook group, Never Again MSD (hashtag #NeverAgain) is followed by nearly 160,000 people. They are organizing a national march on Washington, DC and other locations including Greenville, for March 24. They have also inspired action on a number of other fronts across the nation. The nearest upcoming event is the National School Walkout, scheduled for March 14, organized by Women's March Youth EMPOWER. The walkout will begin at 10:00am and last for 17 minutes.

School administrators have reacted to these plans in a range of ways. Some (including some area schools) have planned sanctioned substitute events. These schools and a number of others have indicated that students participating in the walkouts will face disciplinary action. Such actions appear on student records and may be reported to universities when the students apply. Many colleges and universities take account of these reports when considering students for admission, and they may also reconsider admission based on students' post-admission high-school records.

A growing number of colleges and universities have taken the initiative to issue public statements clarifying that they will not treat disciplinary action related to peaceful protest and nonviolent activism as negative factors in admission decisions. The list at <http://neveragaincolleges.com> currently counts 267 such institutions, including the University of South Carolina, and most ACC schools, including North Carolina, NC State, Wake Forest, Boston College, Duke, Syracuse, Miami, Pitt, Virginia, and Virginia Tech. I call on Clemson's Admissions Office to do the same. If this is already Clemson's policy, then such a statement would reassure applicants. If there

is no policy addressing this matter, then there is no better time than now to consider it.

MIT Dean of Admissions Stuart Schmill has posted a blog entry explaining MIT's policy that "a disciplinary action associated with meaningful, peaceful participation in a protest will not negatively impact [an applicant's] admissions decision, because we would not view it as inappropriate or lacking integrity on its face." Schmill makes a cogent and compelling case for MIT's position.<sup>1</sup> I quote his essay here at length (with permission), because I believe it reflects values consistent with the purpose of any high seminary of learning.

Schmill writes:

We have long held that students should not make decisions based on what they think will get them into college, but instead based on values and interests that are important to them. We believe students should follow compasses over maps, pursuing points of direction rather than specific destinations and trusting they will end up where they belong. As such, we always encourage students to undertake whatever course of action in life is most meaningful to, and consistent with, their own principles, and not prioritize how it might impact their college applications. We do not expect or prefer any particular choice in the abstract, and even if we did, it shouldn't change what students do.

However, as part of the Turning the Tide report, we have also committed to using our process to "promote greater ethical engagement among aspiring students," because we believe that college admissions operates in the public interest. And in this case, when the threat of being denied from MIT solely on the basis of being disciplined for participating in a protest is being held, explicitly or implicitly, over the heads of our applicants, we believe it is important to clarify what's important to us as an office and as an Institute.

We believe an MIT education is about learning more than mere facts and figures, but about developing the ability and passion to work wisely, creatively, and effectively for the betterment of humankind. This conviction is nothing new. In 1949, the Lewis Report, which established the School of Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences, argued that "since we attract some of

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<sup>1</sup><http://mitadmissions.org/blogs/entry/policies-principles-and-protest>

the best youth of this and other countries, the Institute is obligated to educate them to be not only capable technical [people but also] aware of their responsibilities as citizens.” In 1966, B. Alden Thresher, the inaugural Director of Admissions at MIT, noted the “demands of the entire polity for an increasingly literate society, an increasingly knowledgeable electorate, and a citizenry with a depth of cultural awareness that would scarcely have been thought of a generation ago.” And, in an essay published last fall, Professor Susan Silbey, the current Chair of the MIT Faculty, observed that the goals of “responsible citizenship and civic responsibility” remain as, if not more, pressing today as at any point in the Institute’s history.

We also believe that civic responsibility is, like most things at MIT, something you learn best by doing: indeed, to be civically responsible is to put into practice the obligation we owe to each other and to the common good. At MIT our students govern and manage their residences, serve on influential committees that inform Institute affairs, make policy recommendations to serve social goals, and, yes, protest, at the local and national level. They’ve done all these things for generations. Indeed, the broad autonomy awarded to—and the responsibility expected from—MIT students is a core feature of our educational mission and culture: we hold our students to a high standard and give them a wide berth. It would be at best quixotic, and at worst hypocritical, if we treated our applicants differently, penalizing them for engaging in responsible, responsive citizenship as the students at Stoneman Douglas and elsewhere have done.

So: if any admitted students or applicants are disciplined by their high school for practicing responsible citizenship by engaging in peaceful, meaningful protest related to this (or any other) issue, we will still require them to report it to us. However, because we do not view such conduct on its face as inappropriate or inconsistent with their prior conduct, or anything we wouldn’t applaud amongst our own students, it will not negatively impact their admissions outcome. We hope that this explanation will clarify the principles and policies that guide our decisions, articulate the importance of responsible citizenship, and give students the freedom to follow their own compasses wherever they lead.