

ANNOUNCEMENT

Penn's written response to the Compact for Academic Excellence

October 24, 2025

SENT ON BEHALF OF

J. Larry Jameson, MD, PhD
President

To the Penn Community,

As I communicated to you on October 16, 2025, we sent a letter to the Department of Education in response to their request for limited, targeted feedback about the proposed *Compact for Academic Excellence in Higher Education*.

Since then, many of you have requested access to the actual letter and in the spirit of transparency, I share its text with you below.

We have not had any further discussions with the government regarding the Compact. However, as emphasized in our letter, we believe there remains opportunity to advance the long-standing relationship between American higher education and the federal government which has greatly benefited our community, nation and world.

I take great pride in Penn as a scholarly community built on the open exchange of ideas, and the ideals that knowledge is a ladder of opportunity, a positive force in the world, and a driver of discovery and innovation. I will continue to work with all of you to ensure this remains our focus and our future.

Sincerely,

J. Larry Jameson, MD, PhD
President

October 16, 2025

Dear Secretary McMahon,

I write in response to the proposed *Compact for Academic Excellence in Higher Education*. At Penn, we share your view that American higher education is among our nation's greatest strengths and a cornerstone of prosperity, security, health, and competitiveness.

I. A Shared Commitment to Excellence and Partnership

Founded by Benjamin Franklin, The University of Pennsylvania has long served the public good, advancing research and education for societal benefit. Penn has educated generations of civic, scientific, business, and cultural leaders. Our partnership with the federal government has yielded extraordinary achievements: the world's first digital computer, mRNA vaccine technology, CAR T-cell therapy, among many other discoveries that have enriched and saved lives.

Our support of the nation is enduring. Penn generates nearly \$40 billion in annual economic activity. Penn's affiliated startups attract more than \$1 billion in investment yearly. Penn's research has led to more than 40 FDA-approved drugs in the last decade.

We agree that universities must uphold the highest standards of excellence grounded in merit, integrity, and accountability. Penn's values state that we are "imperfect but self-improving." We listen to critics, deploy feedback surveys, regularly review policies and educational programs, and adapt to a constantly changing world.

II. Alignment with Core Principles

Our university policies and practices are already aligned with many of the core principles of the Compact with relevant policies such as:

We attract some of the world's most promising students through merit-based admissions processes that are fully compliant with federal nondiscrimination laws. We require standardized testing and publish annual demographic reports. International students are carefully selected based upon merit, and comprise about 13% of undergraduates.

Our rigorous hiring and promotion standards rely on qualifications and peer review, and are consistent with federal law.

Penn strives to make education more affordable. Undergraduate aid is entirely need-based, without loans, and meets 100% of a family's demonstrated financial need with grant funds and work-study. Nearly half of our undergraduates receive financial aid from Penn. As part of Penn's *Quaker Commitment*, students from families earning less than \$200,000 a year with typical assets pay no tuition.

We strongly protect the right to express all views, regardless of perspective. We prohibit the "heckler's veto" that shuts down others' opinions. Our policy of institutional neutrality ensures the University does not take positions that might silence other views. These principles are written, enforced, and foundational to our mission.

We share concerns about grade inflation and believe there may be an opportunity to engage the higher education community to seek a broader solution.

We maintain viewpoint-neutral rules governing time, place, and manner of expression. While the freedom to protest and express opinions is important to learning and a free society, students must feel safe to discover, debate ideas, and go to class undisturbed.

Penn is compliant with all federal foreign gift regulations and other accountability laws including Titles IV, VI, VII, and IX to ensure public trust and institutional excellence.

III. Areas of Concern

In response to the request for limited, targeted feedback, we find that significant portions of the Compact and its overarching framing would undermine Penn's ability to advance our mission and the nation's interests including:

The Compact offers preferential treatment to its signatories. Research and our nation are better served by competition that rewards promise and performance. Penn seeks no special consideration beyond fair and merit-based funding.

Academic freedom is the bedrock of our national system of higher education. The Compact should explicitly include this foundational principle.

It preferences and mandates protections for the communication of conservative thought alone. One-sided conditions conflict with the viewpoint diversity and freedom of expression that are central to how universities contribute to democracy and to society.

It selectively prioritizes tuition-free education for students pursuing "hard sciences," which is likely to have unintended consequences. We celebrate the sciences. However, we focus our financial aid efforts on those who cannot afford to pay, ensuring that a Penn education is accessible to those who are offered admission.

The Compact threatens severe financial penalties and claw-backs of public funds and private donations based on subjective standards and undefined processes. When metrics and assessments potentially vary over short intervals, teaching and research become perilous, and bold strategies aimed toward distant horizons may be left unexplored. Universities must be accountable for their actions. We believe that existing laws and policies suffice to achieve compliance and accountability.

IV. Conclusion and Path Forward

America's great universities already have a compact with the American people. It is built on the open exchange of ideas, merit-based selection and achievement, and freedom of inquiry to yield knowledge. It affirms that knowledge should serve the public good, that education should remain a ladder of opportunity, and that discovery should make life better, richer, and freer.

Penn respectfully declines to sign the proposed Compact. We hope this feedback is useful and we remain open and committed to partnering with the federal government to advance discoveries, educate future leaders, and serve our community, nation, and world.

Sincerely,

J. Larry Jameson, MD, PhD
President