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Science professor's MIT lecture cancelled over views on affirmative action

A guest lecture by Dorian S. Abbot, an associate professor of geophysics at the University of Chicago, was cancelled by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) on September 30 after a group of faculty and students accused the professor of causing harm by opposing aspects of affirmative action and diversity programs.



Massachusetts Institute of Technology (mit.edu)

Abbot was scheduled to speak on October 21 in a featured public lecture entitled, “Climate and the potential for life on other planets,” when he was informed by the head of MIT’s earth, atmospheric and planetary sciences department, Robert van der Hilst, that the program had been terminated.

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In videos and published comments, Dr. Abbot has argued against aspects of diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) programs in academia where “group membership is a primary aspect of a candidate’s evaluation.” Abbot has also said that treating people as members of a group “rather than as individuals” is “repeating the mistakes that made possible the atrocities of the 20th century.”

In responding to questions about the cancellation, MIT’s van der Hilst said, “Besides freedom of speech, we have the freedom to pick the speaker who best fits our needs. Words matter and have consequences.”

In the face of a widespread public backlash against the decision, MIT President L. Rafael Reif sent a mass email on Tuesday defending van der Hilst and stating that “controversy around this situation has caused great distress for many members of our community, in many quarters” and that faculty members, students and young alumni have “suffered a tide of online targeting and hate mail from outside MIT.”

Reif claimed that van der Hilst had determined that his department, “could not host an effective public outreach event centered around Professor Abbot” and “there is no doubt that this matter has caused many people inside and outside our community to question the institute’s commitment to free expression. Some report feeling that certain topics are now off limits at MIT.”

The MIT administration decided to offer Abbot the opportunity to deliver his lecture to fellow scientists but not the general public. Despite his defense of the blatant act of censorship, Reif then asserted, “Freedom of expression is a fundamental value of the institute.”

Abbot had been planning to deliver the MIT annual John Carlson Lecture on climate change to a public audience since 2020. Upon the cancellation, Robert P. George, director of Princeton’s James Madison Program in American Ideals and Institutions, invited Abbot to deliver his lecture there on the same day as previously scheduled at MIT. Dr. George said, “MIT has behaved disgracefully in capitulating to a politically motivated campaign. This is part of a larger trend of the politicization of science.”

The *New York Times*, a consistent proponent of the identity politics that has become a core principle of the Democratic Party, quoted Phoebe A. Cohen, geosciences professor and department chair at Williams College, who supports MIT's decision to cancel Abbot's lecture. Cohen said that "a university should not invite speakers who do not share its values on diversity and affirmative action." The *Times* reported that Cohen also said she was not "enamored of MIT's offer to let him speak at a later date to the MIT professors."

Cohen went on to say, "This idea of intellectual debate and rigor as the pinnacle of intellectualism comes from a world in which white men dominated."

In August, Abbot wrote, along with associate professor at Stanford Graduate School of Business Ivan Miranovic, a comment that was published by *Newsweek* entitled, "The Diversity Problem on Campus." In their opinion piece, the professors criticize DEI as a "new regime" at American universities that is "enforced by a large bureaucracy of administrators."

Abbot and Miranovic picked apart the discriminatory methodology of DEI, writing, "Most importantly, 'equity' does not mean fair and equal treatment. DEI seeks to increase the representation of some groups through discrimination against members of other groups." Furthermore, they wrote, "The underlying premise of DEI is that any statistical difference between group representation on campus and national averages reflects systemic injustice and discrimination by the university itself."

The professors further elaborated on their critique of DEI and likened its promotion of racial and ethnic identity to Nazism, "Ninety years ago Germany had the best universities in the world. Then an ideological regime obsessed with race came to power and drove many of the best scholars out, gutting the faculties and leading to sustained decay that German universities never fully recovered from. We should view this as a warning of the consequences of viewing group membership as more important than merit and correct our course before it is too late."

The decision to cancel Abbot's lecture because of his views on affirmative action establishes a precedent where any professor or lecturer can be blocked from speaking on any subject if they do not accept the dominant narrative, particularly as it relates to racial and gender politics.

The cancellation of Abbot's lecture followed the move by the University of Michigan to legitimize charges of racism against renowned composer Bright Sheng for showing the 1965 film version of *Othello* starring Laurence Olivier, who plays the role in black makeup. Sheng was pressured to remove himself from a class on undergraduate composition.

After a public backlash, the University of Michigan this week announced it was dropping an investigation into Sheng for alleged violations of the university's policy relating to "equity" and civil rights. However, there has as of yet been no apology issued to Sheng, and he has not been reinstated to his class.

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