

Ad Hoc Committee on Campus Expression and Academic Freedom
Final Report
October 15, 2025

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**= Past member. Only current, active members of CAFCE contributed to this report.*

Introduction

The Ad Hoc Committee on Academic Freedom and Campus Expression (CAFCE) was [charged](#) in the fall of 2023. Broadly speaking, its mission was to establish a foundation for academic freedom, civility, and the inclusion of a diversity of voices on campus. Membership was to be drawn from the faculty and senior staff, as well as graduate and undergraduate students.

Specifically, CAFCE was asked to develop a roadmap for implementing the ten recommendations of the earlier Ad Hoc Working Group on Free Expression (FEWG) as described in its June 24, 2022 [report](#). In particular, CAFCE would itself implement Recommendation 5 by serving as a resource for the MIT community when contested matters of speech arose. CAFCE could also make recommendations on urgent matters related to academic freedom or campus expression.

While CAFCE was conceived of prior to the outbreak of the war between Israel and Hamas, it began its work during an increased period of activism on campus. CAFCE's first meeting, in January 2024, took place two months after students organized a large protest in Lobby 7. Throughout the spring semester, students continued to organize protests and walk-outs, culminating in the student encampment on Kresge Oval in April and May 2024. Protests re-emerged in the fall of 2024 and continued into the spring of 2025.

In addition, towards the end of CAFCE's work, there was a shift in national politics around diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) and whether conservative voices were fully represented on campus. This partly informed the committee's debates on how/whether minority viewpoints (whether due to identity- or ideology-based exclusion) could fully participate in free expression on campus.

Free speech questions frequently arose during this period as a consequence of the campus climate. The MIT administration, the Division of Student Life, the COD, IDHR, and various campus groups came to CAFCE for guidance and recommendations. CAFCE prioritized addressing these matters due to their urgent nature. These issues typically required open discussion across diverse views of the committee members to try to reach a balanced decision on committee recommendations. The committee developed a process, described later, to facilitate finding consensus on these often-difficult questions.

CAFCE met weekly during the academic year, beginning in January 2024 and ending in May 2025. In total, CAFCE met over 50 times. CAFCE also interacted with representatives from the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression, as well as the MIT Free Speech Alliance (MFSA). The co-chairs and a graduate student member of CAFCE participated in the 2024 MFSA conference.

Summary of Results

CAFCE worked to strengthen two policies, the poster policy, and the protest and demonstration policy. CAFCE developed the [Free Expression at MIT](#) website, implementing FEWG report Recommendation 4. The committee also provided guidance to various MIT groups and community members regarding free speech. This is discussed further under the section on “Advisory Work.”

Advisory Work

Consultative Work

Given the context described above, IDHR, the Provost Office, and COD would, from time to time, consult with CAFCE on situations on campus that may relate to free expression policies.

Other units, groups, and individuals asked us for advice, as well, either proactively or retroactively, regarding specific situations. These included:

- When free expression abuts against the requirements of your job for creating a welcoming environment for all;
- Publicly displaying posters which may express a particular political viewpoint;
- The line between free expression and harassment;
- Time, place and manner violations; and
- How to balance values when particular instances of expression violate other Institute policies.

While it is understandable that the MIT community was activated during this time, CAFCE was occasionally approached by community members about potential violations that happened to others in the community. Oftentimes, once CAFCE looked into the incident further, it turned out that the community member who raised the issue had inaccurate information. Particularly in times of heightened tension, CAFCE would urge community members to check the veracity of information being spread before furthering a potentially inaccurate narrative.

May 2024 Kresge Encampment

In May 2024, CAFCE was asked to weigh in on the student encampment on Kresge. The statement is posted on CAFCE’s website, and is below:

In recent days, we have seen statements defending the encampment at Kresge Oval on the grounds of free speech and academic freedom. We as the ad hoc Committee on Academic Freedom and Campus Expression (CAFCE) all agree that while freedom of expression protects the ability of community members to express their views about the current situation in the Middle East, it does not protect the continued use of a shared Institute resource in violation of long-established rules.

Like everyone in our community, we hope the current situation can be resolved without the violence and culture of intimidation that we have seen unfold in other campuses. We are heartened by the fact that the encampment has stayed within the bounds of nonviolent civil disobedience. We recognize and respect that civil disobedience is a

practice that some may choose as a means of protesting policies and actions that they believe to be unjust. However, a willingness to face disciplinary measures in defense of one's views is a defining feature of civil disobedience. We believe it is important to uphold the rules and norms that exist to ensure fair access to shared resources and to promote civil dialogue across diverse viewpoints within our campus.

December 2024 "On Pacifism" Essay

In December 2024, CAFCE was asked to weigh in on the essay "On Pacifism," published by the MIT student publication *Written Revolution* in October 2024. The conversations on this topic were particularly difficult, with some members of the committee concerned that an essay in an MIT-affiliated publication should not appear to endorse violence by a US-designated terrorist organization and others feeling that this essay should be protected speech. The committee was not able to resolve these differences. Some members did not sign the committee's statement.

CAFCE's statement is posted on the CAFCE website, and is below:

We have received questions regarding the essay "On Pacifism," published by the MIT student publication *Written Revolution* in October 2024, and would like to outline CAFCE's views on free expression in this context.

Freedom of Expression at MIT

The First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution protects freedom of expression from government interference or censorship, including speech that may be unpopular, offensive, or morally abhorrent. Certain forms of speech, such as harassment, defamation, fraud, and incitement of violence, are not protected by the First Amendment.

The MIT Statement on Freedom of Expression and Academic Freedom states: "With a tradition of celebrating provocative thinking, controversial views, and nonconformity, MIT unequivocally endorses the principles of freedom of expression and academic freedom." However, as a private institution, MIT has the legal right to apply further internal policies that align with its mission and values—even when they have the effect of limiting some forms of expression. Not all speech protected by the First Amendment is permitted by MIT. MIT can take action against speech or conduct that MIT determines is harmful to community values or creates a hostile environment.

Read more about the principles and governance of free expression at MIT at: <https://free-expression.mit.edu>.

Context and Intent Matter

The context of speech is crucial in determining its impact within our community. Scholarly discussions of violent resistance movements in a classroom setting differ in purpose from advocating the use of violence as a vehicle of change within a community. This may apply to words, images, and their combined message. For example, a history textbook that includes imagery of Ku Klux Klan rallies may serve the purpose of

examining racism in an academic context, while a blog post using the same imagery alongside language promoting white supremacy changes the purpose and meaning of the images.

Use of the MIT Name and Affiliation

Publications associated with MIT are held to a stricter standard than independent writing by MIT-affiliated individuals. Publications by MIT-recognized student organizations fall within these stricter standards. MIT policy prohibits using the Institute's name, logo, or affiliation in ways that may imply endorsement of content contrary to its values. Specifically, the "Mind and Hand" policy (p. 66) states:

"The Institute's name must not be used in ways that suggest or imply the endorsement of other organizations, their products, or their services."

Implications for the Case of "On Pacifism"

Regarding "On Pacifism," CAFCE believes that it is not permissible for an MIT-recognized student organization to publish imagery linked to groups currently designated as terrorist organizations by the U.S. State Department in an MIT-affiliated publication in the context of advocacy.

Free Expression at MIT Website

One of the FEWG recommendations was to "create an FAQ webpage that succinctly addresses common questions about freedom of expression and academic freedom and refers readers to relevant MIT policies and offices." Over the summer of 2024, a small subset of the committee (lead mainly by one of CAFCE's excellent graduate student members, Angie Jo), developed the [Free Expression at MIT](#) website. The website is broken up into three sections: Learn; Engage; and Resources. Learn takes the reader through the fundamental principles of free expression, and explains several scenarios from the FEWG report.

The Engage section details programs at MIT that help students learn to engage in dialogue with one another, gives examples of how it is appropriate to exercise your right to free speech to disagree, and engages with demonstrations as a form of free speech. It also explains what community members can do if they feel that an MIT policy has been violated.

The Resources section provides campus resources that are available to community members if they feel upset by hearing something that is protected by free speech principles, and the committees who have worked on free expression at MIT.

Policy Review - Introduction

CAFCE was originally charged with developing a roadmap for implementing the FEWG recommendations; however, given the context described above, President Kornbluth and the

Office of the General Counsel requested that the committee review additional policies and provide guidance.

Having the assistance of a representative from the Office of the General Counsel (with expertise in crafting policies) and representatives from Student Life (with detailed knowledge of real issues that were encountered in writing the postering policy) greatly helped the committee understand both the process by which a policy is formed, as well as real implications for how CAFCE proposals could be interpreted or help or harm those tasked with enforcing policies. This helped the committee's discussion remain rational and realistic. In fact, much of what the committee struggled with on various policies had been discussed and debated by those who write policies, but working through these discussions ourselves helped to clarify the committee's own thinking.

In some ways, having the committee review and comment on policies as they were being tested in real time benefited both the committee and those tasked with writing and enforcing policies.

To promote consensus building on contentious issues, CAFCE developed a process that could be useful for other committees, as outlined here. More details are given below on how the process worked in individual cases.

Much of the committee's work happened outside of committee time. First, the committee reviewed the existing policy as it was written. As mentioned above, having a member of OGC there to explain the history and rationale behind the policy was useful. Next, the committee marked up the policy in Google Docs, identifying areas that were unclear, confusing, or with which a committee member disagreed. Sometimes committee members suggested additional text or removals, and the committee debated this in the comments.

Next, the committee chairs created a Google Form including representative cases and asked the committee to respond to two questions for each case. For example, in evaluating the poster policy, members were shown photos of posters from campus and asked, is the poster allowed under the current policy (by which the committee was trying to assess the clarity of the policy) and whether the poster should be allowed, regardless of the current postering policy (by which the committee was trying to assess whether the policy was sensible). Committee members were also allowed to leave comments for each case.

The results of the poll were reviewed at the next meeting. Cases with a strong consensus were useful in understanding where the policy was clear and sensible, so further discussion was unnecessary. In cases lacking a consensus, the committee debated.

Finally, the recommendations were written up and circulated. Each committee member had to add their name under either "Endorsed," "Dissenting Opinion," or "Abstention." If a committee member wanted to dissent, they were asked to write and submit a dissenting opinion. Generally, committee members only abstained if they were unable to be substantively involved in the discussion of recommendations.

This helped CAFCE come to agreement on its recommendations and also provided space to record the diversity of opinions on the committee if the committee was unable to converge on a single recommendation.

Poster Policy

One of the first policies that CAFCE reviewed was the poster policy. In October 2023, based on a postering controversy in the spring of 2023, MIT rolled out a new policy on bulletin boards, postering, and display spaces (P&P 12.5.5).

The committee began by reading the policy, understanding the principles within this policy, and then identifying places where the policy was unclear or conflicted with other policies. There are three types of areas where postering occurs: Association for Student Activities (ASA) boards that are supposed to be used by ASA recognized groups only; ASA boards that are controlled by ASA, but anyone is allowed to post there; and spaces that are controlled by DLCs. The committee also had a long discussion about what constitutes a poster (e.g. is a sign directing people to a bathroom a poster, and should that only be allowed in a designated area?).

To focus the committee's discussions, a Google Form was created with examples of posters from around campus. CAFCE members were asked to weigh in on whether they thought the poster was allowed under the current policy and whether they thought the poster should be allowed, regardless of the current postering policy.

During CAFCE's next meeting, the committee reviewed the responses. In some cases, there was clear consensus by the group. In others, as shown below, there was clarity about whether the poster was a violation of the current policy, but there wasn't consensus about whether it should or should not be prohibited.

Do you think the posters in the photo below are a violation of the current poster policy?



Photo 2

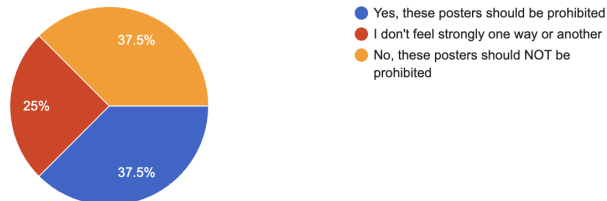
Do you think the posters in the photo below are a violation of the current poster policy? [Copy chart](#)

8 responses



In your opinion, SHOULD the posters shown in Photo 2 above be prohibited (regardless of the current policy)? [Copy chart](#)

8 responses



This helped the committee understand how the community might interpret the policy (in this example, the policy is fairly clear), and what was sensible (in this case, the committee was divided on whether the posters in the example above should be allowed).

Two main themes emerged from the discussion. The first was around clarifying what information should be available to the community about rules for different spaces. For example, while CAFCE suggested that local spaces, controlled by local offices, should write up (and enforce) their own rules, the committee believed these rules should be clearly posted so anyone walking by understands what is and is not allowed there.

The second, which permeated CAFCE's work for the rest of the semester, was that it would be useful to include a philosophical preamble to any policy that explains what the policy is intended to do, and why it is necessary.

The final recommendations on the Postering Policy can be found on CAFCE's [website](#).

Demonstration Policy

In January 2024, the Division of Student Life published updated guidance on protests and demonstrations, which were formalized as rules in August 2024. Some faculty noted that the new rules used a particular phrase, "of any size," which barred any community member from protesting individually. CAFCE was asked to review the rules and provide guidance.

The policy was circulated for comments and discussion. The committee also reviewed other schools' protest and demonstration policies.

The analysis revealed that much of the protest policy actually mapped to existing policies, whether that was in Policies and Procedures, the Mind & Hand Book, or an event planning guide. In the areas where it differed from current policies, CAFCE discussed whether the committee agreed with where it differed (for example, event registration requires 10 days notice, but the protest policy required 3 days notice. It seems reasonable to be more lenient with a protest where protesters may be reacting to outside events where they have no control over the timing).

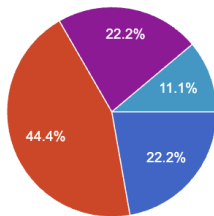
The committee was asked to think of scenarios that could be used to test against the protest policy. A poll was created and circulated, which again asked if the scenario was a violation of the current policy, and whether it should be a violation. The responses were separated into three categories: cases where the committee agreed with each other and the policy; cases where the committee agreed, but are not in line with policy; and cases where the committee was in disagreement.

For example, scenario 4A was "A student is silently walking up and down the Infinite with a sandwich board that says MIT DIVEST FROM FOSSIL FUELS."

Do you think scenario 4A is a violation of the current protest policy?

[Copy chart](#)

9 responses

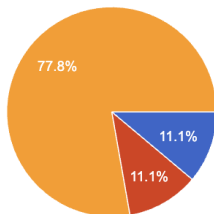


- I am confident that the scenario violates the current policy
- I think that the scenario above violates the current policy, but I'm not sure
- I can't tell whether or not this is a violation
- I think that the scenario does NOT violate the current policy, but I'm not s...
- I am confident that the scenario does...
- It depends on whether or not this crea...

In your opinion, SHOULD scenario 4A be prohibited (regardless of the current policy)?

[Copy chart](#)

9 responses



- Yes, this should be prohibited
- I don't feel strongly one way or another
- No, this should NOT be prohibited

In order to guide the discussion on the second set of cases, the chairs asked the committee to think about why the policy doesn't allow this, and what about these scenarios make them acceptable?

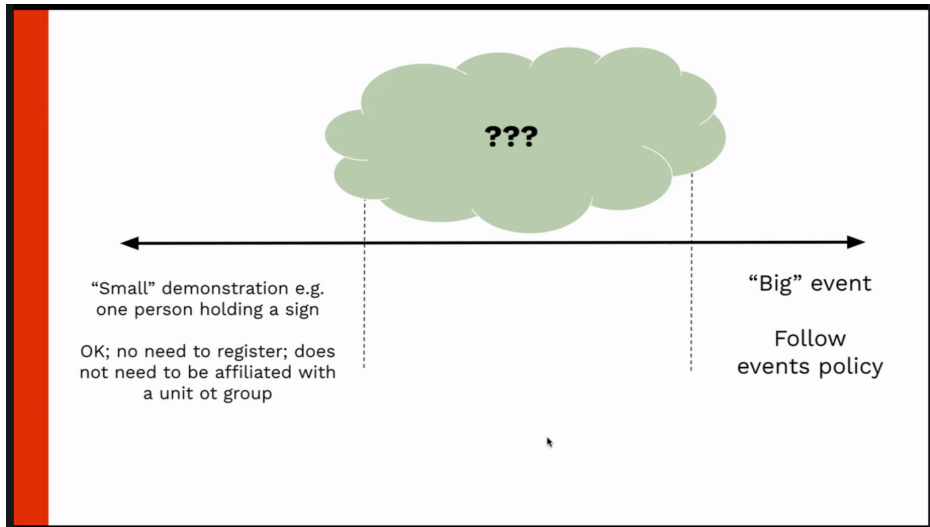
During discussions, a number of key issues arose. The first was that disruption depends on the location and situation. For example, a dance party on Killian Court at night after finals are over is less disruptive than a dance party on Killian Court during finals.

Another issue was whether or not a potential demonstration planner was required to be affiliated with a DLCI, recognized student organization, or employee union (as the policy stated).

The process to register an event and reserve space can be a lengthy and complicated process (this could be streamlined, and this information has been passed along to the appropriate offices). This is understandable when a student organization wants to host an event, but is a barrier to organizing a protest to respond to an external trigger. However, CAFCE understands the need to coordinate with various offices, to ensure that appropriate safety measures are in place and that the time and place of the protest do not interfere with previously arranged Institute activities.

It made sense to CAFCE that if a community member wanted to plan a protest that could potentially become disruptive, then they should be required to talk to event staff who have appropriate expertise and can help with planning. However, if a community member wants to individually protest quietly, then there is less need to alert MIT. The committee debated amongst

itself whether there was a cut-off size at which the need to register (thereby alerting offices who could ensure proper resources were allocated) outweighed the need to allow for spontaneous events (see figure below).



In the end, there was no number that the committee could land on that made sense to everyone. Instead, it made more sense to focus on the potential for disruption. Many, but not all, protests are designed to be disruptive. Some protests that are not meant to be disruptive turn disruptive, either when counter-protestors show up, or when members of the protest deviate from the proposed protest plan. CAFCE thought it would be best to encourage students to reach out, as the event management team has experience to be able to think through potential scenarios. The committee decided to suggest that any protests that had the potential to become disruptive should be required to meet with the event management team, but that anyone who reasonably believed that their protest lacked the potential to be disruptive should be allowed to organize without meeting with the event management team (e.g., one person with a sign standing somewhere).

The final recommendations can be found on CAFCE's [website](#).

Recommendation for Future Committee

As part of CAFCE's charge, the committee was asked to "assess[...] whether the committee should be extended for a defined time or succeeded by a more permanent body." The committee felt that, on the whole, the committee worked very well together, and lessons learned from CAFCE's work could be useful for a future committee. Both of these are discussed in detail below.

Committee Policies That Worked Well

The topics that the committee discussed were thorny and controversial. It helped to have some ground rules to ensure respect, collegiality, and productive conversations. Especially around a

topic such as free expression, the ability to disagree and speak up was paramount. Selecting students who are able to do this well was key to the committee's success. It was important to welcome all members' voices among faculty, staff, and students, considering the potential for a power differential.

The committee found it helpful to require that, internally, committee members put their name next to their opinion, and allow the opportunity to add addendums or comments to the statements that CAFCE published. In particular, members were pushed to write up their disagreement in a timely manner, especially encouraging them to express it in a way that could be used or articulated. However, CAFCE never published the names of who approved, dissented or abstained outside of the committee.

The committee found it essential to give committee members opportunities to think through and share their opinions outside of meeting times. This included allowing people time to comment on documents produced by the group, and creating online polls. The online polls were a good way to allow people to think through the issues before the meeting, but it was important to ask the poll questions in a way that would not calcify opinions.

Future Committee Considerations

One of the reasons that CAFCE worked well was its deliberate make-up of students, faculty and staff. This allowed a diversity of voices and perspectives on issues, from the theoretical to the practical, to be brought into conversations around free expression on campus. This variety of perspectives was important when the committee assisted with and grappled with policy development.

Because CAFCE spent much of its time responding to the current moment, the committee did not finish a free expression roadmap for the Institute. Though some progress was made on several FEWG Recommendations, the committee feels that more work is needed, particularly for the following: Recommendation 3 (All Institute faculty, especially those in leadership roles, should affirm and celebrate the Institute's commitment to freedom of expression and academic freedom and seek to incorporate supportive efforts throughout the life of the Institute), Recommendation 7 (We recommend that the faculty explore ways of infusing into the curriculum in all departments and for all students opportunities to advance expression), Recommendation 9 (we recommend periodic review of relevant Institute policies to ensure consistency with the MIT Statement on Freedom of Expression) and Recommendation 10 (We recommend that campus leaders undertake a promotional and educational program to advance free expression).

In addition, CAFCE's work was primarily on matters of free speech, and the committee rarely discussed academic freedom. CAFCE recommends that a future committee should refocus on both issues, and continue work on developing a roadmap around free expression and academic freedom.

CAFCE members were asked to reach out to their constituents to understand how CAFCE had been useful over the past three semesters, as well as what is needed going forward. The committee internally discussed what the campus is currently facing around free expression, and what it will be facing in the next five years.

CAFCE heard that it was helpful to have a “panel of experts” who have some institutional memory and insight into how similar issues are resolved across the Institute to give advice when matters of contested speech arose, and that it would be helpful to have a body that could proactively be consulted regarding the new protest policy (see section above).

CAFCE also heard it would be helpful for a future committee to focus on programming and educational efforts.

Another interesting line of discussion was whether the next committee should focus on academic freedom or free expression purely from a principles perspective, or whether it should weigh the principles against other practical considerations regarding the health of the Institute.

In the current moment, with free expression and academic freedom as contested topics within and outside MIT’s community, CAFCE believes it is prudent to formalize a faculty-led standing committee whose charge involves free expression and academic freedom.

The committee envisions this body as consultative, though they may occasionally be asked to assist with community education. It is imperative that this committee is made up of a diverse range of backgrounds and representations, but also that everyone who joins the committee is non-partisan and committed to the committee working together - willing to listen and compromise.

Given the timing of this report, CAFCE would suggest that this new committee go through the usual faculty nomination process, and therefore be an active committee for academic year 2026-2027. The committee should be reviewed by the Faculty Officers on a regular cadence, perhaps every three years, to ensure it is still necessary and useful. For academic year 2025-2026, the committee would advise that a group of current CAFCE members, as well as a few new faculty chair-appointed faculty and student leadership-recommended students, continue on an ad hoc basis.

It will be important to be upfront with members of the committee that this committee requires a substantial time commitment, both for committee meetings as well as outside of meetings for thinking and writing. It’s also important that committee members be able to meet on short notice to discuss an issue.

CAFCE recommends that in the ground rules of a future committee, all members go on record to endorse, dissent, or abstain on committee recommendations. Written dissenting opinions would be strongly encouraged to help the broader community understand different sides of difficult issues. However, the next committee must decide its own requirements among themselves.

Finally, CAFCE recommends that a facilitator, possibly the staff to the committee, be tasked with providing feedback, either to the chairs or to members of the committee, to help ensure that discussions stay focused and productive.

Future Chair Considerations

There are also important qualities that should be looked for in the next chair(s) of the committee. The chair should set a tone to offset power dynamics by always speaking last, and ensuring everyone is able to have a turn to speak. This might include calling on students if they haven't raised their hands yet, or skipping over someone in line if they have already spoken before.

It will be important for future chairs to exhibit humility, openness, genuine interest in everyone's opinion and curiosity about other people and their perspectives. They should model respectful exchange, encourage everyone, including themselves, to be open to being challenged, and avoid self-censorship.