

This is an archived copy of an open letter to Carnegie Mellon University's administrators from its faculty and staff, who are “deeply troubled by a recent appointment to the Institute for Politics and Strategy.” The link to add signatures has been removed in the interest of sharing the letter more broadly.

Dear President Jahanian, Provost Garrett, Dean Scheines, Dean Hebert, Dean Sanders, and other Carnegie Mellon administrators,

As CMU faculty and staff, we write to reiterate our grave concern over the [appointment](#) of Richard Grenell as a Senior Fellow in the Institute for Politics and Strategy at Carnegie Mellon University. In a memo dated June 16, 2020, Provost Garrett defended the appointment on the grounds of academic freedom. We categorically reject this framing of the matter and urge the administration to take responsibility for the damage that this appointment does to CMU’s academic integrity.

Concerns about the Misapplication of the Concept of Academic Freedom

Provost Garrett defended this appointment stating that it was a clear case of academic freedom for IPS Director, Dr. Kiron Skinner. But academic freedom does not in fact comprise an individual right to make appointments in a university, and it certainly does not remove the obligation to properly vet candidates for faculty positions (including visiting faculty) to ensure that they meet our university standards.

An often-cited definition of Academic Freedom is [van Alstyne's](#): the “personal liberty to pursue the investigation, research, teaching, and publication of any subject as a matter of professional interest without vocational jeopardy or threat of other sanction, save only upon adequate demonstration of an inexcusable breach of professional ethics in the exercise of that freedom.” The AAUP’s 1940 statement on academic freedom and other sources are broadly similar in their focus.

What these definitions have in common is that academic freedom is about personal teaching and research. It does traditionally include speakers invited to campus, but it does not include appointing faculty, special or otherwise. An appointment is not an action by an individual, in their judgment of how to teach or do research; it is, rather, the formation of a legal employment relationship with the university. Academic freedom is simply not relevant because making appointments of this nature is an authority delegated to academic units and their faculty and is therefore subject to oversight in accordance with the institution’s governing principles and policies. When this authority is used in a way that

harms the institution's integrity, we are not talking about the exercise of a right, but rather the abuse of a privilege.

Concerns about the Appointment of Richard Grenell

This appointment discredits CMU as an institution of higher learning both by further marginalizing women and people of color in our community, and by raising serious doubts about our decision-making and oversight processes. We have a collective, fiduciary obligation to steward our reputation; we have a legal obligation to protect civil rights, which includes but is not limited to freedom of thought; and we have a moral obligation to fight oppression on and off campus. How well we uphold these obligations is the measure of our integrity. By welcoming in Richard Grenell, who has a well-documented record of sexism and support for racist political movements, the CMU administration has abandoned all of these obligations, damaged our collective integrity, and negated its [own commitments](#) to diversity, inclusion, and equity. Worse still, this is happening at a moment when hundreds of students, faculty, and alumni of Carnegie Mellon are joining people around the world in condemning institutional racism and gender-based discrimination.

It's important to note that our concerns about the appointment of Richard Grenell do not stem from the mere fact of his political party affiliation or service to the Trump administration. Our concerns are rather rooted in CMU's obligation to uphold our community standards, which include the rejection of sexism, the rejection of racism, and telling the truth. Grenell falls well short on all three counts.

1. Grenell is well-known for his [sexist comments on social media](#). Across the university, we are doing our best to encourage participation of women. Appointing someone who is notorious for objectifying professional women and mocking their appearance does not align with CMU's stated commitment to be a "[welcoming and inclusive community](#) that supports the success of all individuals."
2. As an ambassador to Germany, Grenell met with numerous members of the racist, Islamophobic and anti-Semitic [Alternative for Germany](#) (AFD) party. The AFD, for instance, has repeatedly come under fire for [condoning anti-Semitic violence](#), and its manifesto has a section on why "[Islam does not belong to Germany](#)." Grenell was also a guest at an annual dinner held by [Axis of Good](#), a blog known to publish islamophobic writings, and later invited the writer of the blog, Henryk M. Broder, to attend a Halloween party at his Berlin residence. Broder came to Grenell's party dressed as a Muslim woman in a burka.

As we work to make CMU a welcoming place for students, staff, and scholars of color and those who are Muslim, what message does this appointment send? This appointment does not align with CMU's stated commitment to ensure that "every person at CMU should feel as though [they belong here](#)."

3. We expect CMU faculty and affiliates to tell the truth; that is a basic requirement of any academic appointment. Richard Grenell's career includes numerous instances that raise concerns about his honesty, including [failing to disclose financial conflicts of interest](#) and [spreading misinformation](#).

In 2012, Reuters veteran writer and editor [Irwin Arieff said](#) that Grenell was "the most dishonest and deceptive press person I ever worked with ... He often lied, even more frequently offered half answers or withheld information that would weaken his case or reflect poorly on his ideological point of view."

Grenell, for instance, [lied to the American people](#) just two weeks ago, by denying that tear gas had been used to disperse Black Lives Matter protesters in front of the White House.

How can we trust Richard Grenell as a colleague? Our students may have written #BlackLivesMatter on the CMU fence, but it will not be true here until our actions in hiring match our words.

We implore the administration to more deeply consider the harm that this appointment does to the integrity of higher education, to that of our campus community, and to that of the institution itself. By approving Grenell's appointment, the university not only abdicated its responsibility to ensure academic integrity, harming our reputation in the process. It also normalized the postures and politics--xenophobic, sexist, ethnonationalist--associated with this appointee.

Concerns about Harm to CMU's Integrity

We contend that the appointment of Richard Grenell undermines the integrity of our efforts to support a diverse and inclusive university community. In a series of recent [essays](#) and [petitions](#), a range of CMU affiliates have called on the administration to address [well-documented](#) patterns of institutional racism against Black persons, Indigenous persons, and persons of color and to make more meaningful investments in social justice. Appointing Richard Grenell amounts to a dismissal of these concerns and further entrenches the institutional problems in question.

Students and alumni stated in their [open letter to CMU administration](#) that “the appointment of Grenell flies in the face of the messaging which the university has sent out in the last several weeks in response to nationwide protests against systemic racism in our society. In the past week, our Provost and Dean of Students have affirmed our school’s commitment to diversity and inclusion, and to creating an environment where all students, particularly those from historically underrepresented backgrounds, can feel safe. To give a platform to someone with a history of ties to extremist, xenophobic groups completely ignores the sentiments expressed recently by university leadership—and to give a platform to someone with a penchant for spreading misinformation is an abdication of our responsibility as a university to uphold the quality and integrity of our academics.”

The undersigned CMU faculty and staff share and echo the concerns raised by CMU students and alumni.

Concerns about CMU Standards and Procedures

Insofar as the appointment of Richard Grenell harms CMU’s integrity, it also raises serious questions about CMU’s standards and procedures. This appointment reflects very poorly on CMU, all the more so because it occurred without input from faculty, staff, and students. CMU administration claims that its hands were tied by principles of academic freedom. In fact, however, the administration has in the past created ad-hoc processes for vetting the legitimacy of controversial guest speakers (and even assigned police to escort them around campus). The difference is that, in this case, administrators fear the objectors less than they fear the guest and the host. Grenell’s appointment was allowed not because of laws or institutional norms, but because of power. Not only has CMU lent its credibility to a person who is sexist, a willing associate of racists, and engaged in spreading misinformation, CMU has in effect demonstrated that it lacks effective procedures for ensuring the quality and competence of its personnel. Instead, it seems, we allow those with power to misuse and diminish the university’s credibility.

In light of the above concerns from CMU students, alumni, faculty, and staff, we call on the CMU administration to:

1. Respond in a more meaningful way to the urgent questions raised by students in their [open letter](#), particularly those regarding academic integrity and institutional governance, and reconsider the student [petition](#) calling for rescission of the appointment;
2. Undertake an independent, transparent accounting of the financial, procedural, and ethical deliberations that facilitated this appointment; and
3. Establish policies and oversight mechanisms to avoid harmful appointments of this nature in the future, such as those outlined by [IPS students](#).

We believe that this matter has tremendous stakes not just for CMU as an institution and community, but for larger principles of responsibility, democracy, and civil rights. At a time when millions are marching for racial justice in the US and around the world, university leadership must act to defend rather than diminish the freedom and integrity of our community.

Respectfully,

To sign, click here [link removed]. Your signature will then be authenticated and pasted below.

[last updated 10:40 6/20/20]

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