

August 14, 2026

The Honorable Linda McMahon
Secretary of Education
U.S. Department of Education
Washington, DC 20202

A Response to the National Call to Action to University Presidents and Governing Boards

Dear Secretary McMahon,

Thank you for your National Call to Action. I read it with encouragement and a profound sense of familiarity. The questions you raise are questions we have been wrestling with at Unity Environmental University for more than a decade. They did not arrive with a political moment. The economics, the structures, and the public compact of American higher education have been telling us for years that something must change.

I came to this country from West Africa. I was the first in my family to earn a degree past high school. In 1995 an acceptance letter from a small public college in northern Maine changed the direction of my life. I have spent the thirty-one years since then inside American higher education, eleven of them as a president. I am not writing to you as a defender of this sector. Three months ago, I published an essay arguing that higher education inverted its own purpose, that the institution came to exist for the workforce rather than the student, and that the sector built a moral vocabulary sophisticated enough to hide that from itself. I published it under my own name while holding this job. So, when you write that trust has collapsed, I do not experience that as an accusation. I experience it as overdue. I made a version of that argument myself, at more length and with less diplomacy, in [The Lie at the Center of Higher Education](#).

This letter is our statement of principle. We will post it in full and unedited at [unity.edu](#) before the end of 2026, in the manner you asked. What follows is organized around your seven questions, in your order. Every number in this letter is verifiable, and I would rather you check it than believe it.

One. How Students Enter Unity

You asked how we ensure that "admissions criteria are transparent and wholly described to prospective applicants." We have nothing to hide because we have nothing to ration. [Our requirements are published as a checklist](#). Our acceptance rate is high on purpose. We hold the line at the exit, not the entrance. That is the harder place to hold it, and the only place where holding it means anything.

You also asked how we ensure decisions rest on merit, achievement, and our educational purpose. Eligibility is determined by documented academic history measured against a published standard. There is no discretionary committee review in which an unstated preference could operate because there is no discretionary review at all. We do not weigh legacy status, donor relationships, or demonstrated interest. We do not consider race, color, national origin, sex, or any other protected characteristic, and our practice is consistent with the Supreme Court's decision in *Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard*. Merit at Unity means a student has

demonstrated the academic preparation to succeed in the program they chose. Our educational purpose is to enroll students who can do the work and then to require that they actually do it.

Transparency extends past acceptance. Applicants can have an unofficial transcript evaluated before paying to send official records, so they know how their credits will apply before they commit financially. Bachelor's degree applicants may transfer up to 90 credits earned at a C- or better from any accredited institution. Graduates of our eleven partner two-year colleges across Maine and New Hampshire receive guaranteed block transfer of a full associate degree and enter with junior-year standing already earned. Unity is a founding partner in the [Maine Transfer Guarantee](#). Before registering, admitted students receive a funding estimate for federal aid, so they can weigh it alongside their transfer evaluation before deciding.

Two. Free Expression and Campus Discourse

I would rather show you 2016 than tell you about 2026. In November after that election, with the country as divided as I had seen it, I wrote to our team that an academic institution has a responsibility to provide a welcoming space for expressions of intellectual, political, identity, and philosophical difference. Then I made an offer to every employee. Take a student you don't normally talk to out for a coffee or a meal, bring me the receipt, and I will cover it. I sat down with a Trump supporter who wanted to be sure this campus was listening to its conservative students. I sat down with Hillary and Bernie voters worried about where environmental policy and land agency hiring were headed. Both conversations happened. Both mattered. The Associated Press wrote about it at the time. The full account has been published on our own site for nine years, in [After All, Unity](#).

What I told students then is what I would tell you now. Unity is a diverse, free-speech campus. Work in the classroom is based solely on evidence, facts, and science. Outside the classroom, we avoid arguments not grounded in fact or built only to provoke. Freedom of expression does not include the right to prevent others from learning, teaching, speaking, or participating in the academic life of the University.

Most of our students now learn online, and a standard that lived only on a residential campus would not reach them. It reaches them. The same expectations govern discussion boards, live sessions, and group work that govern a seminar room. Disagreement is expected. Evidence is required. Conduct that stops another student from participating is handled through the same student conduct process whether it happens in a classroom in Maine or in a course thread at midnight three time zones away.

On your second point, we do not treat disruption as expression. Obstruction of classes, research, lectures, or campus operations is a conduct violation and is adjudicated as one, with the same process and the same consequences for any student regardless of the cause being advanced. Threats, harassment, trespass, property damage, and violence are matters for law enforcement, and we refer them.

You are right about one thing. A culture we never wrote down as policy is a culture we cannot ask anyone to take on faith. We are publishing a formal statement of free expression and political pluralism alongside this response and linking that 2016 record to it, so the commitment and the evidence sit in the same place.

Three. Intellectual Pluralism and the Purpose of Inquiry

Unity has been a place where hunters and huggers sit in the same room for sixty years. Our students argue about land use, predator management, energy siting, and forestry across a political range far wider than this sector's reputation would suggest. We do not settle those arguments by decree. We take no institutional position on contested political questions. What we insist on is method. Bring evidence. State your assumptions. Be willing to be wrong in public. That is not a truce between political camps. That is what science education is.

Faculty hiring and evaluation are grounded in academic qualifications, disciplinary expertise, teaching effectiveness, professional contribution, and the ability to advance the University's educational mission. Intellectual vitality comes from rigorous scholarship and genuine inquiry, not from an ideological test of any kind. We do not ask candidates for statements of belief, and we do not screen for them.

You also asked how the research enterprise serves the American people who fund it. Ours is small and it is applied, and I describe our position plainly in section six. What we do is aimed at questions land managers, agencies, farmers, foresters, and towns are facing now. Faculty and student work is published, taught, and carried into the field by graduates who go to work in those same agencies. Inquiry at Unity is meant to be used rather than archived. That is the standard we hold it to.

I also want to say something that will be uncomfortable for both of us. The mechanism most responsible for enforcing sameness in this sector is not any political faction. It is peer review of institutions by institutions. The provost who evaluates your standards is protecting an identical handbook at home. The commissions that set the standards are drawn overwhelmingly from the accredited institutions themselves, with the outside voice capped by federal rule at a minority that can never outvote the peers. The result is that the unfamiliar gets treated as the unproven and the familiar gets treated as the standard. Institutions doing genuinely different work get flagged for being different, not for being worse. I have sat on both sides of that visit. If the Department is serious about intellectual pluralism, that structure deserves more of your attention than any curriculum does.

Four. Affordability, Pricing Truth, Completion, and Repayment

We priced the degree truthfully. Our tuition is \$470 per credit for online and \$375 per credit for in-person, [guaranteed unchanged through 2030](#). No mandatory meal plan. No mandatory housing. Course materials free or under \$100. We have not raised tuition in almost ten years, and we do not intend to. According to NACUBO's 2025 Tuition Discounting Study, the average private nonprofit now discounts roughly 57 percent of gross tuition revenue for first-time undergraduates, a list price nobody pays, funded increasingly out of reserves that are running out. That is not financial aid. That is a pricing fiction the sector cannot afford and will not abandon. We chose a published price close to the real price and built a budgeting model disciplined enough to keep tuition flat by scale. We publish a net price calculator covering every program we offer, online and in-person alike, so a genuine cost estimate is available before a student applies rather than after they enroll.

The results are measurable. The proportion of our students who are Pell-eligible has grown from 43 percent in 2012 to 72 percent in fiscal year 2024-25, and the share with zero expected family contribution has more than tripled over the same period, from 21 percent to 66 percent. Over the past three years, degree-seeking students with a zero expected family contribution enrolled have had tuition and required fees covered in full by federal and institutional aid, with minimal out-of-pocket tuition cost. Course materials are free or under \$100. Housing and meals are optional at Unity and are not included in that figure. We also introduced 90-credit Applied Bachelor of Science degrees, to our knowledge the first in Maine, another route to a bachelor's credential for working adults for whom the traditional 120-credit model is not the best option.

You raised attrition and loan default, and I am not going to skip past them. Our term-to-term retention averages are between 75-84 percent, and our completion rate is between 50-60 percent, measured across all degree-seeking students rather than only the first-time full-time cohort. That distinction matters. Our students average 29 years old, many transfer in with credit already earned, and many move between part-time and full-time study as work and family require. The federal first-time full-time graduation rate describes a small fraction of who we actually serve, and I would rather hand you the fuller number than the flattering one. Our most recent three-year cohort default rate is 0 percent, matching the current national rate of 0 percent, as shared in the Federal Student Aid 2025 report of Official Cohort Default Rates. That figure should be read honestly: the federal loan payment pause that ran from March 2020 through September 2023 fell inside the tracking window for these cohorts, so a rate of zero was mechanically likely for nearly every institution in the country, not just the ones managing debt well. The more informative comparison is the last cohort largely unaffected by the pause. In fiscal year 2019, Unity's rate was 2.6 percent, essentially in line with the national rate that year, itself already partly depressed by six months of pause overlap. Median federal loan debt at completion is \$25,000, and 73 percent of our graduates borrow. Program-level median earnings and median debt for every credential we award are published on the federal College Scorecard, and we point families there rather than to a page we wrote ourselves.

We grew from roughly 540 students in 2012 to more than 10,500 today, serving learners in every state, while the vast majority of the small private sector contracted. Roughly a third of our students are the first in their families to attend college. Many are rural, working, raising children, or all three. Last year we placed [in the top one percent of American institutions on the Social Mobility Index](#) and first in Maine for the third consecutive year, a measure that rewards enrolling lower-income students, keeping tuition low, and graduating them into work that pays. Eighty-nine percent of our [Class of 2026 graduates](#) are employed or continuing their education within six months of completion. That figure comes from our first-destination survey, conducted on the NACE First-Destination standard, with a knowledge rate of 68 percent, and we publish the methodology next to the result so it can be judged rather than trusted. It is built on sustained investment in [career services](#). We did not get there by becoming more selective. We got there by becoming more useful.

Five. Rigor and Excellence in the Age of Artificial Intelligence

I will be blunt because I think the sector has this backwards. When AI arrived, higher education's first question was how to stop it. Detection software. Honor code revisions. Faculty workshops on catching cheaters. Ask whose interest that served. A student graduating into this

labor market needs to learn to work alongside this technology, learn what it cannot do, and become excellent at precisely that. The reflex to police instead of teach was self-protection wearing the vocabulary of integrity. We took the other road. We built AI into how we teach and support students, and we redesigned assessment around what a student can demonstrate rather than what a student can produce unsupervised. Rigor did not go down. The definition of it has changed, and we are changing with it.

Unity was among the first universities in the nation to deploy Salesforce Agentforce, and [our approach to scalable digital transformation has since been the subject of an EDUCAUSE case study](#). But technology is a means, not an educational outcome. Una, our own AI ecosystem, is designed to guide a student's thinking rather than complete their work. Its use in coursework is governed by explicit assignment-level rules, required, permitted, or prohibited, and enforced through the Honor Code. Because AI is authorized in most courses, the most common AI-related Honor Code violation we see is fabrication, meaning invented citations, misattributed sources, and works cited that correspond to nothing real. Those have always been Honor Code violations regardless of how they are produced, and we hold students to that standard. The same standard applies to our instructors. Instructors may not submit student work to AI tools for evaluation or feedback, because judgment about a student's work is a faculty responsibility that cannot be delegated to a machine. Because technology changes quickly, that policy is reviewed quarterly rather than treated as settled.

We treat academic quality, including patterns like grade inflation, as a data problem rather than a rhetorical one. Academic quality oversight is centralized rather than left to individual departments, so we review grade distributions against demonstrated learning outcomes across the institution and intervene where the two diverge. Every program undergoes an ongoing three-year assessment cycle in which student achievement is measured annually, benchmarked against industry standards, and reviewed by two external evaluators, one academically qualified and one professionally qualified, chosen to test whether a curriculum still reflects the field it claims to prepare students for. A program is not approved once and left alone. It is checked against evidence on a fixed schedule, indefinitely.

Our most recent comprehensive evaluation by the New England Commission of Higher Education resulted in continued accreditation, with commendations in the quality of our self-study, the strength and effectiveness of our board of trustees, our success recruiting and retaining qualified faculty across each Sustainable Education Business Unit, our enrollment-driven revenue growth, our mission-appropriate measures of student success, and our mission-centered approach to assessing student learning. The visiting team went further, observing that our commitment to flexible pathways, affordable tuition, and innovative hybrid delivery was "mission centric to Unity." We do not ask the public to take our rigor on faith. We point to the record of those charged with verifying it.

Six. Research Security and Institutional Independence

I will not inflate our position. Unity is a teaching institution with an endowment of approximately \$18 million as of our audited financial statements for fiscal year 2024-25, no significant federally sponsored research portfolio, no classified work, and no export-controlled technology. Our exposure is low and our controls are proportionate to it. I would rather tell you that plainly than manufacture a compliance narrative to fill a section.

What we do have is written down. Our gift acceptance and partnership review policy screens proposed gifts, contracts, and agreements for conditions that could compromise academic independence. No gift or agreement may grant a donor or partner control or influence over curriculum, faculty appointments, research direction, personnel assignments, or student selection, and any proposed condition of that kind is grounds for declining the gift. Foreign gifts and contracts are tracked against the Section 117 reporting threshold and reported to the Department as required. Research priorities remain under University governance and comply with applicable law and accreditation requirements.

Seven. National Service, Security, and Workforce

Unity was founded in Maine in 1965, in part as a response to local economic decline. From the beginning, our history has connected education, workforce preparation, and economic opportunity. Training people to manage land, water, and natural resources well is a form of economic and national service, no less than preparing engineers or physicians.

You asked how our campus and faculty advance American security interests. We do it through people, which is the shortage that matters. Food security, water security, wildfire response, forest health, and domestic resource capacity are national security functions, and the agencies that carry them out are chronically short of trained personnel. Our graduates have spent six decades filling those posts across federal, state, and tribal service. They work at the National Park Service, the USDA Forest Service, the U.S. Air Force Academy, the Department of Defense, and state fish and wildlife agencies across the country, as well as private firms such as Stantec, SWCA Environmental Consultants, Esri, L.L.Bean, and PwC. We build degrees for that pipeline on purpose, and we build them for the workforce that actually exists, including 90-credit applied pathways that get working adults to a credential faster without diluting it.

We serve adult learners, working professionals, place-bound students, career changers, and military-connected learners. Unity has earned Military Friendly® School designation, a rating evaluated against retention, graduation, job placement, loan repayment, and loan default rates measured specifically for student veterans. Our military-affiliated enrollment grew 17 percent this past year alone, to 1,554 students, many of whom have their education fully covered by military benefits. We consider that growth a measure of trust earned, not simply enrollment gained. American leadership has never required intellectual isolation. Unity can serve American prosperity and resilience while engaging responsibly with students, scholars, employers, and partners around the world.

The Part You Did Not Ask For

Change in this sector is possible. I know it is because we did it. But I want to be candid with you about the price since you have asked everyone else to be candid with the American people. The institutions that actually reform get punished for it, not by regulators, but by the sector itself. You are ignored until the model works and attacked the moment it does. I have watched presidents driven out for moving at all. I have watched boards lose their nerve in year three of a five-year transformation. I have written about all of it under my own name, as my own view rather than the University's, in [The Presidential Graveyard](#) in 2025, in [The Innovator's Burden in Leadership](#), and in [Traditional Academic Governance is Dying](#). I have taken a decade of it personally. I would do it again. I will not pretend it was free.

So, if this call to action is to produce more than a season of well-written statements, the institutions that took the risk need something other than a letter. They need a system that does not treat difference as deficiency. They need federal policy that measures what students actually get rather than what institutions traditionally look like. They need the Department to notice the schools that already did the work, instead of waiting for the ones that haven't, to write about it beautifully.

Our Commitment

Declarations such as this one matter only if institutions are willing to be measured against them. Unity welcomes that accountability. This letter is our statement, and we will post it in full and unedited at unity.edu before the end of this year, prominently, as you have asked. We will post it with the material that stands behind it, including our free expression and political pluralism statement, the Commission's most recent action letter, the methodology behind our outcomes reporting, and a source for every figure above. We will continue to evaluate our programs, outcomes, affordability, operations, and workforce alignment, and we will continue to change when evidence tells us change is necessary.

I have spent my career arguing that the door to a degree was meant to lead somewhere. I still believe that. I am glad the conversation has finally arrived.

Respectfully,

Dr. Melik Peter Khoury
President and CEO
On behalf of Unity Environmental University