

Report on Research Compliance Volume 16, Number 9. September 01, 2019

At MIT, Review of Potential Foreign Affiliations Includes Human Rights, Risks of Not Engaging

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Emphasizing that “simple rules don’t work,” the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) has instituted a new review process to vet possible collaborations with foreign researchers or entities that considers, among other issues, whether a project might contribute to “repression” outside the United States.

In particular, this new review focuses on contacts with China, Saudi Arabia and Russia, according to Maria Zuber, MIT vice president for research, but the list can change. Like other institutions, MIT is struggling to understand the threats posed by some foreign affiliations without much concrete or new information and with a determination to preserve the beneficial aspects of internationally supported research.

Zuber’s remarks at a recent National Science Board (NSB) meeting make her one of the few academic representatives to publicly share specific steps their institutions have been taking to respond to warnings issued by NIH and others about foreign interference in U.S. research. She also broadly implored Congress and the federal government to provide “targeted” guidance to institutions and to expand flagging efforts to support research and careers in science, technology, engineering and math (STEM).

MIT, she said, takes “seriously the concern that foreign governments may be targeting U.S. research to gain advantage over U.S. interests. As a consequence, we’ve enhanced our due diligence process before agreeing to collaborations on sponsored research.”

But she quickly added that, “At the same time, MIT believes that the U.S. has benefited and continues to benefit immeasurably from its open research system, which enables U.S. scientists to share findings and attract top students and researchers from around the world. The U.S. also gains when our researchers can take advantage of other nations’ expertise.”

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