

By e-mail and e-mail attachment:

July 16, 2020

President Amy Gutmann  
College Hall  
University of Pennsylvania

Dear President Gutmann,

On Tuesday July 7, 2020, the [New York Times reported](#) a claim that President Donald Trump may have gained admission to the University of Pennsylvania under false pretenses. The claim appears in [a book written by the President's niece](#), Mary Trump. Donald Trump is alleged to have paid someone to take the SAT on his behalf, apparently prior to his admission as an undergraduate student at Fordham University. Then, on the basis of his SAT scores and his academic record at Fordham, he applied for and gained admission as a transfer student to the Wharton School.

We the undersigned standing faculty in the Legal Studies & Business Ethics Department take this allegation seriously. When a student gains admission by fraudulent means it undermines the integrity of our academic standards and the fairness of our admissions process. As exemplified by the [2019 college admissions scandals](#), this sort of cheating is especially problematic in light of [the significant economic, racial, and social inequalities facing college applicants](#). When frauds come to light, they sully the good names of the institutions that grant degrees, and can damage the reputations of the vast number of alumni and students who do not cheat to get ahead.

Concerns about cheating are exacerbated when the alleged perpetrator is a public figure in high office. Failing to investigate an allegation of fraud at such a level broadcasts to prospective students and the world at large that the playing field is not equal, that our degrees can be bought, and that subsequent fame, wealth, and political status will excuse past misconduct.

Fortunately, the University of Pennsylvania has the jurisdiction and responsibility to investigate this claim of admissions fraud and take action if warranted under the University's [Policy on Revocation of Degrees](#) adopted in 2019. Article II of the policy states that "the University may

exercise the right to revoke a previously conferred degree,” including in “a case where it is alleged . . . that the degree has been obtained by fraud or other serious misconduct.” This power is respected by the courts. (See, e.g., *Waliga v. Board of Trustees of Kent State University*, 488 N.E.2d 850 (1986)). Although the ultimate authority to make the decision to revoke a degree rests with Penn’s Board of Trustees, you have the initial responsibility as President to refer any “information that places into question the validity of a degree” to the Dean of the affected School, who is then directed under the policy to appoint an investigative committee of faculty members to review credible information of misconduct (Article IV.A). We respectfully ask that you refer the allegation casting doubt on the legitimacy of Donald Trump’s degree to Dean Erika James of the Wharton School for investigation.

This would not be the first time that Penn has considered and, when the evidence justified it, revoked previously conferred degrees. It did so [as recently as 2018](#) with respect to honorary degrees conferred upon individuals subsequently found to have engaged in sexual misconduct. Peer institutions have acted similarly in response to cheating and fraud in cases with facts similar to the allegations against Trump. In 2010, [Harvard University and its Kennedy School revoked a degree granted in 2000](#) because the recipient, a Russian spy, had lied about his identity during admission. In 2014, [Stanford Business School nullified a degree awarded in 2003](#) because the recipient [gained admission under “false pretenses.”](#) Although cases are rare, there is precedent for stripping fraudulently obtained degrees from those occupying high office as well. In Germany, the University of Dusseldorf revoked the Ph.D. of an [education minister](#) after plagiarism was discovered thirty-three years after the degree had been conferred. In 2014, the Army War College revoked the degree of a [U.S. Senator from Montana](#) after confirming a charge of plagiarism.

Article II of Penn’s [Policy on Revocation of Degrees](#) explicitly lists the following as examples of misconduct: “providing false information on an application for admission” and “cheating on an examination.” The allegation against Donald Trump thus falls squarely within the conception of misconduct articulated by the policy.

It is true that there is no conclusive evidence of the allegation made in Mary Trump's book. We acknowledge that the allegation is made in the context of a family feud involving a very high-profile personality. The [widow of the person described as the friend of Donald Trump who was paid to take the test](#) has contested the charge. At the same time, President Trump has provided substantial evidence that he is not above lying and cheating in other contexts. The [Washington Post documented](#) more than 18,000 lies told by Trump in only a little more than 1,000 days in office. [He settled fraud allegations against students of Trump University](#) reportedly for \$25 million. [He also settled claims that he and his family misused funds](#) of a charitable enterprise for \$2 million. Even with respect to his short time at Wharton, [student reporters at the Daily Pennsylvanian found that Trump's statements about his top-notch academic record were falsified](#) by the public record of his having received no honors at graduation as well as by reports from contemporaneous students. Evidence of a tendency to lie or commit fraud in other contexts is relevant to assessing the likelihood of whether admissions fraud occurred here.

It is true that the truth of an event that occurred more than fifty years ago may be difficult to establish, and much evidence will no doubt be difficult or impossible to discover. The purpose of a formal investigation, however, is to search for any further evidence and evaluate it impartially. Doing so would send the message that the University of Pennsylvania and the Wharton School take every credible allegation of misconduct in admissions seriously, regardless of a person's status or station, and subject any credible allegation to due process rather than trial by media.

For these reasons, we believe that the integrity of our academic standards and our reputation in the wider community depend on applying our own stated policy, and taking steps to investigate the allegation of admissions fraud made against Donald Trump by his niece.

We therefore call for you to refer this matter to Dean James of the Wharton School, and for her then to constitute an investigative committee in line with our Policy on Revocation of Degrees.

Respectfully yours,

Brian Berkey, Assistant Professor of Legal Studies & Business Ethics, The Wharton School\*

Julian Jonker, Assistant Professor of Legal Studies & Business Ethics, The Wharton School\*

William S. Laufer, Julian Aresty Endowed Professor of Legal Studies & Business Ethics, The Wharton School\*

Eric W. Orts, Guardsmark Professor of Legal Studies & Business Ethics, The Wharton School\*

Amy Sepinwall, Associate Professor of Legal Studies & Business Ethics, The Wharton School\*

Kevin Werbach, Professor of Legal Studies & Business Ethics, The Wharton School\*

\* The opinion expressed here is that only of the individual signing faculty members. We urge action to be taken by the University of Pennsylvania and the Wharton School but do not purport to represent the institutional view of the University, the School, or our own Legal Studies & Business Ethics Department.