



March 5, 2026

James Hurley
Office of the President
Tarleton State University
1333 West Washington Street
Stephenville, Texas 76401

Sent via U.S. Mail and Electronic Mail (president@tarleton.edu)

Dear President Hurley:

FIRE, a nonpartisan nonprofit that defends free speech,¹ is concerned by Tarleton State University's treatment of Professor Aaron George, whose upper-level history course was censored by administrators. Specifically, operating under guidance issued by the Texas A&M University system, the Tarleton administration singled out two readings for removal in order for the class to be taught. We are further concerned for the academic freedom rights of faculty across the state of Texas following widespread reports of administrative interference in pedagogy concerning race and gender. We urge your institution to refrain from censoring faculty teaching materials.

Before the beginning of the spring 2026 semester, George submitted the syllabus for his upper-level history course, *Research in American Political History From 1929 to the Present*, for review.² On January 7, George received a message from his department head informing him that Tarleton's provost had deemed two readings impermissible: Carl Wittman's article "A Gay Manifesto," and Kevin Kruse's book *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservativism*.³ "Our options for proceeding are for you to change those readings and related content in class," the head wrote.⁴ "Or, if you are not comfortable doing that, we will need to cancel the class and find another one for you to teach."⁵ George resubmitted his syllabus with the readings removed.

¹ For more than 25 years, FIRE has defended freedom of expression and other individual rights on America's university campuses. You can learn more about our mission and activities at fire.org.

² Dr. Aaron George, History 4311 – Research in American Political History, 1929 to the Present (on file with author).

³ Email from department head to Dr. Aaron George, professor (Jan. 7, 2026, 10:43 AM) (on file with author).

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ *Id.*

On January 13, George received notice from the Dean of the College of Liberal and Fine Arts that a student had filed a complaint about another one of his courses, United States History II.⁶ Without explaining the complaint's allegations, George was informed that he needed to make changes to his syllabus, "or risk having the course cancelled."⁷ In a subsequent phone conversation with his department head, George learned that the student objected to the following phrase in the course syllabus: "In particular, this course focuses on the way the 14th Amendment changed the relationship between Americans and their government, and the ways the role of the government expanded to protect the rights of groups such as African Americans, LGBT Americans, and women."⁸ George altered that sentence to remove the term "LGBT Americans," after which the syllabus was approved.⁹

On January 15, George's department head emailed the entire History department to update them on the Tarleton administration's interpretation of the Texas A&M system's requirements.¹⁰ Tarleton's administration now holds that, "regardless of *advocacy*," the following topics may not be addressed in any core curriculum course: "race ideology," "gender ideology," "sexual orientation," and "gender identity."¹¹ The topics may only be discussed "in an upper-level course with written approval from the president."¹²

As a public institution bound by the First Amendment,¹³ Tarleton is legally obligated to protect faculty expression. This includes expression in the classroom, where faculty enjoy pedagogical autonomy to determine how best to approach material related to the topic of their course. That pedagogical autonomy is protected by academic freedom, which finds its roots in the First Amendment. In warning against "laws that cast a pall of orthodoxy over the classroom," the Supreme Court called academic freedom "a special concern to the First Amendment" and a principle "of transcendent value to all of us and not merely to the teachers concerned."¹⁴ The

⁶ Email from the Dean of the College of Liberal and Fine Arts to George (Jan. 13, 2026, 5:26 PM) (on file with author).

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ Dr. Aaron George, History 1302 United States History II, HIST 1302-160, (on file with author).

⁹ Email from department head to George (Jan. 14, 2026, 8:04 AM) (on file with author).

¹⁰ Email from the department head to History, Geography, and GIS faculty (Jan. 15, 2026, 5:17 PM) (on file with author).

¹¹ *Id.* (emphasis in original). Additionally, FIRE is concerned that by sweeping into its ambit the broad topics of "sexual orientation" and "gender identity," Tarleton is over complying with the Texas A&M system's guidance.

¹² *Id.*

¹³ *Healy v. James*, 408 U.S. 169, 180 (1972) ("[T]he precedents of this Court leave no room for the view that, because of the acknowledged need for order, First Amendment protections should apply with less force on college campuses than in the community at large. Quite to the contrary, 'the vigilant protection of constitutional freedoms is nowhere more vital than in the community of American schools.'") (internal citation omitted).

¹⁴ *Keyishian v. Bd. of Regents*, 385 U.S. 589, 603 (1967).

Court added elsewhere that “[t]o impose any strait jacket upon the intellectual leaders in our colleges and universities would imperil the future of our Nation.”¹⁵

A strait jacket is exactly what the leaders of Texas public university systems have imposed on faculty members. The American Association of University Professors (AAUP) defines freedom in teaching to include the faculty’s right to determine how to teach their courses. This right includes “the freedom to select the materials, determine the approach to the subject, make the assignments, and assess student academic performance ... without having their decisions subject to the veto of a department chair, dean, or other administrative officer.”¹⁶ Indeed, the case that led to the Supreme Court’s endorsement of academic freedom as a “special concern”¹⁷ of the First Amendment found that a professor could not be forced to testify about the contents of his classroom lecture at the behest of state government officials.¹⁸

Under any understanding of academic freedom, faculty must have substantial breathing room to use a wide range of pedagogical techniques and materials to teach their students. Academic freedom explicitly includes “full freedom in research and in the publication of the results,” and “freedom in the classroom in discussing their subject.”¹⁹ Nor is academic freedom the sole concern; prohibiting faculty from discussing specific pedagogically relevant ideas or materials in the classroom also constitutes unlawful viewpoint discrimination, an “egregious” form of censorship.²⁰ Here, requiring that George remove the readings from his course is a clear violation of his pedagogical rights to determine how best to approach the topics of his class.

More broadly, we are gravely concerned that the broad prohibition on discussing “race ideology,” “gender ideology,” “sexual orientation,” and “gender identity” is unnecessarily deterring faculty who teach lower-level courses from discussing broad concepts that could relate to a variety of historical topics. Even with the harmful impacts of the Texas A&M system guidance in mind, we are further concerned that Tarleton is unnecessarily over-complying with these requirements by prohibiting *any* discussion of these topics in the classroom.

We request a substantive response to this letter no later than March 19, 2026, confirming that Tarleton will rescind its broad prohibition on those listed topics in the classroom, and refrain from ordering George or any other faculty member to make further changes to their class materials.

Sincerely,



¹⁵ *Sweezy v. New Hampshire*, 354 U.S. 234, 250 (1957).

¹⁶ *Statement on the Freedom to Teach*, AAUP (Nov. 7, 2013), https://www.aaup.org/file/2013-Freedom_to_Teach.pdf.

¹⁷ *Sweezy*, 354 U.S. at 234.

¹⁸ *Keyishian*, 385 U.S. at 589.

¹⁹ *1940 Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure*, AM. ASS’N OF UNIV. PROFESSORS, 14, <https://www.aaup.org/sites/default/files/1940%20Statement.pdf>.

²⁰ *Rosenberger v. Rector & Visitors of Univ. of Va.*, 515 U.S. 819, 829 (1995).

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Cc: Dr. Barry Lambert, Interim Provost and Executive Vice President for Academic Affairs
Dr. Credence Baker, Vice President for University Strategy and Chief of Staff
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