



March 4, 2026

Harrison Keller  
Office of the President  
University of North Texas  
1155 Union Circle, #311425  
Denton, Texas 76203-5017

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

Dear President Keller:

FIRE, a nonpartisan nonprofit that defends free speech,<sup>1</sup> is concerned by the University of North Texas’s abrupt removal of artist Victor “Marka27” Quiñonez’s art exhibition criticizing U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). We are further alarmed by reports that UNT allegedly threatened to retaliate against faculty for speaking out against the removal and that UNT may similarly restrict student artwork on campus. The available information suggests UNT removed the exhibition because it disagreed with the political perspectives expressed by the artwork. The First Amendment’s “bedrock principle” of viewpoint neutrality binds UNT as a public university.<sup>2</sup> We therefore urge UNT to publicly reaffirm its commitment not to “discriminate against works of art based on its content or the viewpoint(s) expressed,”<sup>3</sup> and to safeguard the First Amendment rights of its students and faculty.

UNT invited Quiñonez to exhibit *Ni de Aquí, Ni de Allá*—a collection of pieces that address Latin American culture, the complexities of living with a dual national identity, and criticisms of immigration enforcement—at least a year ago.<sup>4</sup> Some pieces in the exhibition specifically

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<sup>1</sup> 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](https://fire.org).

<sup>2</sup> *Snyder v. Phelps*, 562 U.S. 443, 458 (2011) (quoting *Texas v. Johnson*, 491 U.S. 397, 414 (1989)); *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).

<sup>3</sup> *Policy Manual*, Facilities and Real Estate, Art Exhibited on Campus, UNIV. OF N. TEX., <https://policy.unt.edu/sites/policy.unt.edu/files/11.012%20Art%20Exhibited%20on%20Campus.pdf> (last visited Feb. 26, 2026).

<sup>4</sup> Tessa Solomon, *In Leaked Transcript, UNT Dean Cites Politics as the Reason Behind Cancellation of Show with Anti-ICE Art Show*, ARTNEWS (Feb. 24, 2026), <https://www.artnews.com/art-news/news/in-leaked-transcript-unt-dean-cites-politics-as-the-reason-behind-cancellation-of-show-with-anti-ice-art-show->

criticize ICE, including works that reinterpret the agency’s logo by renaming it “U.S. Inhumane and Cruelty Enforcement” and rebranding it with the moniker “I.C.E. Scream.”<sup>5</sup> The exhibition opened in the College of Visual Art and Design (CVAD) Gallery on February 3, with a reception planned for February 19.<sup>6</sup> Although initially scheduled to run through May 3, UNT closed the exhibition just days after it opened, covering up CVAD Gallery windows with brown paper, taking down promotional posts from UNT social media and webpages, and uninstalling Quiñonez’s artwork.<sup>7</sup> On February 11, after students initially alerted the artist that UNT had removed his work, UNT formally notified Quiñonez that it was terminating his agreement and that his work would be returned without any explanation from UNT administrators.<sup>8</sup>

UNT officials informed CVAD faculty and staff of the cancellation around the same time, but warned them not to discuss it publicly under threat of termination, according to the *N.T. Daily*.<sup>9</sup> During meetings with faculty, Dean Karen Hutzel said UNT removed the exhibition due to institutional concerns regarding political repercussions and media scrutiny.<sup>10</sup> Hutzel also reportedly told meeting attendees that the university would “never” use its attorneys to defend professors’ free expression, and that the university’s policies cannot be trusted because they “are violated constantly.”<sup>11</sup> In response to a faculty question, Hutzel even suggested UNT may not allow *student* art to be displayed if it contains political messaging.<sup>12</sup> Students affiliated with

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1234774374/. The following reflects our understanding of the pertinent facts based on public information, though we appreciate you may have additional information and invite you to share it with us.

<sup>5</sup> *Id.*

<sup>6</sup> Nicholas Frank, *UNT Closes & Cancels Victor Quiñonez Solo Exhibition Without Explanation*, GLASSTIRE, (Feb. 12, 2026), <https://glasstire.com/2026/02/12/unt-closes-cancels-victor-quinonez-solo-exhibition-without-explanation/>.

<sup>7</sup> *Id.*

<sup>8</sup> Lucinda Breeding-Gonzales, *Artist whose art was pulled by UNT credits students with alerting him about his exhibit’s removal*, KERA (Feb. 18, 2026), <https://www.keranews.org/arts-culture/2026-02-18/artist-whose-art-was-pulled-by-unt-credits-students-with-alerting-him-about-his-exhibits-removal>.

<sup>9</sup> Mollie Banstetter & Hannah Everett, *Faculty and staff told of art exhibit cancellation ahead of closure, felt threatened with possible termination*, N. TEX. DAILY (Feb. 16, 2026), [https://www.ntdaily.com/news/faculty-and-staff-told-of-art-exhibit-cancellation-ahead-of-closure-threatened-with-possible-termination/article\\_26514500-fe95-43f0-804b-d31cb7d170e4.html](https://www.ntdaily.com/news/faculty-and-staff-told-of-art-exhibit-cancellation-ahead-of-closure-threatened-with-possible-termination/article_26514500-fe95-43f0-804b-d31cb7d170e4.html) (student alleged one of her professors said “I feel like I need to tell the students, even though I’m risking my job right now telling you this, it’s not right what they’re doing”).

<sup>10</sup> Lucinda Breeding-Gonzales, *UNT dean’s fears of political repercussions led to removal of art exhibit, leaked transcripts show*, DENTON RECORD-CHRONICLE (Feb. 20, 2026), <https://www.keranews.org/arts-culture/2026-02-20/unt-deans-fears-of-political-repercussions-led-to-removal-of-art-exhibit-leaked-transcripts-show> (“Some of the pieces included what’s deemed as anti-ICE messaging ... And so ... that topic itself has entered a different space, and so it was that aspect of it that the university leadership became very concerned about ... the political and public response [and] scrutiny across the spectrum.”)

<sup>11</sup> *Id.*

<sup>12</sup> *Id.* (“One CVAD staff member asked what will happen when students plan to include political expression in solo or group shows. ‘Another good question, and it’s one that I’ll be navigating as well [in] some meetings this week,’ [Hutzel] said. ‘I, too, am questioning and concerned with what work we show and if there is a change to that.’”).

CVAD now “question whether presenting challenging ideas in their artwork”—or even talking openly about “recent censorship events”—could “expose them to retaliation.”<sup>13</sup>

UNT’s removal of Quiñonez’s art based on the anti-ICE views it communicates raises serious concerns for free expression on campus and violates UNT’s own policies. By canceling this already-opened exhibition amidst daily ICE-related news headlines, UNT chills student and faculty speech by sending the message that anti-ICE protest has no place on its campus. Moreover, UNT’s abrupt removal of a politically charged exhibition—an action the art school’s own dean admitted was politically motivated—violates the university’s stated commitment to viewpoint neutrality in artwork selection: “The University does not discriminate against works of art based on its content or the viewpoint(s) expressed.”<sup>14</sup> It also violates the art school’s fundamental mission to foster artistic expression.<sup>15</sup> Art students don’t need to be shielded from political artwork; they need the freedom to look, to respond, and to imagine.

FIRE is also concerned by reports that faculty who have publicly voiced opposition to the exhibition’s removal have been threatened with disciplinary action. “The public interest in having free and unhindered debate on matters of public importance” is “the core value of the Free Speech Clause of the First Amendment.”<sup>16</sup> Criticism of the decision to remove Quiñonez’s exhibition falls squarely within UNT faculty’s First Amendment right to speak as private citizens on matters of public concern.<sup>17</sup> As an initial matter, faculty speech related to the shuttering of Quiñonez’s exhibition unquestionably regards a matter of public concern,<sup>18</sup> as evidenced by the volume of public attention on this case.<sup>19</sup> Even if UNT’s decision had gone unnoticed by the press and public, both immigration enforcement and campus free speech are unquestionably matters of intense public debate. Courts would likely view UNT faculty members as speaking as private citizens on this issue, since determining UNT policy on art exhibition is not, in most cases, part of their job duties.<sup>20</sup> In such cases, UNT may not investigate or threaten retaliation for faculty’s protected speech critical of the exhibition’s

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<sup>13</sup> Caitlan Clark, *UNT students write an open letter to college president in wake of anti-ICE art removal*, D MAGAZINE (Feb. 16, 2026), <https://www.dmagazine.com/micropost/after-anti-ice-art-was-removed-from-campus-unt-graduate-students-write-an/>.

<sup>14</sup> *Policy Manual*, *supra* note 3.

<sup>15</sup> *About CVAD*, UNIV. OF N. TEXAS, <https://cvad.unt.edu/about/index.html> (“The CVAD Galleries at UNT comprise three galleries that support the educational mission of the College of Visual Arts and Design and the university, enrich the aesthetic environment, and serve as a cultural resource for the public.”)

<sup>16</sup> *Pickering v. Bd. of Ed.*, 391 U.S. 563, 573 (1968); *see also, e.g., Snyder*, 562 U.S. at 451–52 (“Speech on matters of public concern is at the heart of the First Amendment’s protection.”) (cleaned up); *Connick v. Myers*, 461 U.S. 138, 145 (1983).

<sup>17</sup> *Connick*, 461 U.S. at 140.

<sup>18</sup> *Snyder*, 562 U.S. at 453 (speech on a matter of public concern is speech that “can be fairly considered as relating to any matter of political, social, or other concern to the community”).

<sup>19</sup> *See* Agua\_cate3748, “Closed exhibition at CVAD due to censorship??,” Reddit (Feb. 11, 2026), [https://www.reddit.com/r/unt/comments/1r2hudy/closed\\_exhibition\\_at\\_cvad\\_due\\_to\\_censorship](https://www.reddit.com/r/unt/comments/1r2hudy/closed_exhibition_at_cvad_due_to_censorship); *see, also* Michaela Towfighi, *Texas University Closes Exhibition With Anti-ICE Artwork*, N.Y. TIMES (Feb. 13, 2026), <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/02/13/arts/design/university-north-texas-victor-quinonez-ice.html>.

<sup>20</sup> *Lane v. Franks*, 573 U.S. 228, 240 (2014) (the “critical question” in determining whether an employee speaks as a private citizen is “whether the speech at issue is itself ordinarily within the scope of an employee’s duties, not whether it merely concerns those duties.”)

removal. Faculty are not required to remain silent about the policies and practices of their own educational institutions.

Those faculty whose job duties include making decisions or policies regarding art exhibition are also protected from university retaliation when they express criticism of the Quiñonez cancellation to their students as part of their professional duties. That’s because the First Amendment and academic freedom protect faculty speech related to teaching or scholarship.<sup>21</sup>

By suddenly canceling an already-open exhibition amidst daily ICE-related news headlines, UNT sends a clear, speech-chilling message to its faculty and students: UNT will act against provocative political expression when political headwinds make art censorship convenient.<sup>22</sup> UNT’s shuttering of the Quiñonez exhibition, coupled with its recent history of pulling controversial artwork from display and threats of retaliation against those who speak about the matter,<sup>23</sup> have created a pervasive culture of fear on campus in which students and faculty are afraid to express themselves in their artwork. As the Supreme Court warned decades ago, scholarship “cannot flourish in an atmosphere of suspicion and distrust.”<sup>24</sup> Professors and students alike “must always remain free to inquire, to study and to evaluate, to gain new maturity and understanding; otherwise, our civilization will stagnate and die.”<sup>25</sup>

It is not the role of a public institution of learning “to prescribe what shall be orthodox in politics, nationalism, religion, or other matters of opinion.”<sup>26</sup> Politically motivated censorship only encourages pre-emptive self-censorship, disempowering students from engaging on the issues of the day. UNT must live up to its educational mission to “empower[] students to thrive in a rapidly changing world.”<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> *Heim v. Daniel*, 81 F.4th 212 (2d Cir. 2023); *Porter v. Bd. of Trustees of N.C. State Univ.*, 72 F.4th 573 (4th Cir. 2023); *Meriwether v. Hartop*, 992 F.3d 492 (6th Cir. 2021); *Buchanan v. Alexander*, 919 F.3d 847 (5th Cir. 2019); *Demers v. Austin*, 746 F.3d 402 (9th Cir. 2014).

<sup>22</sup> Breeding-Gonzales, *supra* note 10 (“For UNT, the stakes are high in that, if you’re paying attention to the news, you may have seen what’s happened at, for instance, Texas A&M, and UT in Austin, and the leadership shifts that have happened there,” [Hutzel] said. “And the new presidential leaders that have come into those institutions, and the programs that are now coming out of them are being canceled by those institutions. ... UNT is very vulnerable to a similar situation”).

<sup>23</sup> Lucinda Breeding-Gonzalez, *UNT cancels prominent street artist’s exhibit on campus featuring ICE-related work*, DENTON RECORD-CHRONICLE (Feb. 17, 2026), <https://www.keranews.org/education/2026-02-12/unt-cancels-prominent-street-artists-exhibit-on-campus-featuring-ice-related-work> (“The removal of the exhibit comes nearly one year after Republican state lawmakers demanded the college remove a student exhibit. Critics and some Jewish students said the show, in which two student artists, who were Muslim women, explored the war in Gaza and the fate of Palestinians. University officials didn’t remove the entire show, but at least one artwork was removed from the gallery.”)

<sup>24</sup> *Sweezy v. New Hampshire*, 354 U.S. 234, 250 (1957).

<sup>25</sup> *Id.*

<sup>26</sup> *Bd. Of Educ., Island Trees Union Free Sch. Dist. No. 26 v. Pico*, 457 U.S. 853, 872 (1982) (a school board may not exercise its discretion over which books to include in school libraries in an overly partisan or political manner, the Supreme Court noted schools cannot seek the removal of books “to prescribe what shall be orthodox in politics, nationalism, religion, or other matters of opinion”) (internal quotations and citation omitted).

<sup>27</sup> *About UNT*, UNIV. OF N. TEX., <https://www.unt.edu/about-unt.html>.

UNT owes the public an explanation of the decision-making process that led it to cancel the Quiñonez exhibition and should issue an unambiguous statement reaffirming its commitment to free speech, academic freedom, and artistic expression—particularly given its own promise *not* to discriminate against art based on viewpoint.

Given the urgent nature of this matter, we request a substantive response to this letter no later than the close of business on March 11, 2026, confirming that UNT will recommit to artistic freedom in its gallery spaces for students and other artists and refrain from taking adverse employment action based on faculty exercises of academic freedom.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "William Harris". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a prominent horizontal stroke across the top.

William Harris  
Strategic Campaigns Specialist, Campus Rights Advocacy

Cc: Karen Hutzal, Dean of the College of Visual Arts and Design  
Alan Stucky, System Vice Chancellor and General Counsel