

IDEAS

ALL THE THINGS YOU'RE NOT ALLOWED TO SAY IN TEXAS

The state now controls what professors can teach.

By Adam Serwer

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Sara spurgeon, an English professor at Texas Tech University in Lubbock, has been teaching literature for 20 years. But May 2025 was the first time she was forced to submit her course materials through a portal to be evaluated by an artificial-intelligence program. It flags anything that might violate new rules laid out by the university chancellor, including a prohibition on the “advocacy/promotion of race or sex-based prejudice,” and a requirement—now Texas state law—that “only two sexes, male and female, are recognized.”

At Texas Tech, medical students no longer learn about racial disparities in medical care. Faculty at the university’s medical center in Lubbock were advised to “refrain from treating transgender patients, for any medical condition, if a medical student was present,” according to a lawsuit filed by the American Association of University Professors. (When asked for comment, a spokesperson said that the university’s “written guidance is publicly available and expressly protects instruction necessary for licensure and patient care.”) According to the same lawsuit, the censorship bot—officially known as the Course Content Review Process—ordered a Tech philosophy professor to remove Plato’s *Republic* from a syllabus because “it references Plato’s beliefs concerning gender roles and homosexuality.”

Professors in the Texas A&M system have had to strip their syllabi too. According to an ACLU lawsuit, last January, Aaron George, a professor at Tarleton State University, was told by administrators to remove *A Gay Manifesto*, a Stonewall-era LGBTQ-rights pamphlet, and *White Flight*, a history of urban segregation, from his American-political-history course. After a student complained that a different class the professor taught violated university policy, George was informed by administrators that it would be canceled if he did not make “necessary” (but unspecified) changes. He cut a reference in the course description to the significance of the Fourteenth Amendment for LGBTQ rights, and the class was allowed to proceed.

The University of Texas at Austin, the flagship school of the UT system, announced last month that it was eliminating majors in Africana studies, Mexican American and Latino studies, women’s and gender studies, and race and migration studies. More than 100 courses have been flagged for removal from the core curriculum, primarily ones relating to slavery, race, gender, sexuality, and the environment. Consolidating majors isn’t necessarily nefarious, nor is rethinking a core curriculum (a central group of courses from which students must take a certain number to graduate). But these changes are happening, Lauren Gutterman, an American studies professor at UT, told me, “entirely because of the political context.”

The changes to Texas public-university systems are being presented as a necessary corrective to left-wing orthodoxy on campus. Over the past decade, many Americans have come to believe that academia is too ideological and too intolerant of conservative views and arguments. Censoriousness is not an exclusively left-wing phenomenon, but it is real. And some conservative speakers on college campuses met with protests that, while themselves a form of speech, occasionally deteriorated into violence.

“Our nation is witnessing a merciless campaign to wipe out our history, defame our heroes, erase our values, and indoctrinate our children,” President Trump declared in 2019. “One of their political weapons is ‘Cancel Culture’—driving people from their jobs, shaming dissenters, and demanding total submission from anyone who disagrees. This is the very definition of totalitarianism, and it is completely alien to our culture and our values.”

Perhaps it’s less alien than Trump supposed. In the name of fighting propaganda and indoctrination, Texan politicians have established strict state controls on what can be taught, researched, and even discussed in the classroom. However bad left-wing censoriousness is or was, the Republican response in Texas has been to ensure that what is taught in the state’s universities is itself propaganda and indoctrination. Ellen Schrecker, a historian of McCarthyism at Yeshiva University, told me that this campaign goes beyond even the repression of the McCarthy era, when censorship led to firings and purges but the government did not interfere directly with what students were taught. After all, American politicians understood that there was a Cold War to win, and that it could not be won if the universities themselves were destroyed. By outlawing or banning forms of speech and inquiry, and by eliminating faculty independence, today’s Republicans are doing much more damage.

Texas passed the first of its education gag laws in 2021 to limit the teaching of “critical race theory” in K–12 classrooms. Texas also tried to ban books dealing with racism or LGBTQ themes from public and school libraries; lawmakers characterized the latter as “pornography.” In 2023, the legislature banned “diversity, equity, and inclusion” in higher education, leading to the closure of DEI offices at state-funded institutions. Last year, Texas passed Senate Bill 37 to sharply curtail shared governance—the process by which faculty, administrators, and boards collaborate in running universities; this left political appointees and administrators with unchecked power over hiring and curricula. Governor Greg Abbott had bragged about signing a free-speech law in

2019. Following pro-Palestinian protests on Texas campuses in 2023, he signed a new law banning “expressive activities” from 10 p.m. to 8 a.m., and allowing schools to forbid student protests in some public areas.

The seven Texas public-university systems serve more than 700,000 students—several times the enrollment of all Ivy League institutions combined. There are many ways to destroy a university. Texas Tech, Texas A&M, and the University of Texas have each taken a different approach to enforcing the new state laws, with varying degrees of heavy-handedness. But the result will be the same: substandard education, substandard research, and graduates who are less prepared for their future as workers, thinkers, and citizens, and more prepared to obey without question.

Texas tech’s approach to censorship is notable for being both onerous and clumsy, in part because it relies so heavily on artificial intelligence.

Curriculum review traditionally involved faculty, administrators, department chairs, and deans who offered expert input without subjecting teaching decisions to the whims of trustees or politicians who might have political or economic interests in avoiding certain subjects. The process still involves layers of review from administrators and university leaders, but the faculty’s role has been replaced in part by the censorship bot, which scans course materials considered potentially controversial. Asked about the role of AI, a spokesperson for the university said that “the Course Content Review process will continue to be faculty-led, just as it was designed to be from the beginning.”

Texas Tech’s new chancellor, Brandon Creighton, is a former Texas legislator and the author of Senate Bill 37, the law that limited shared governance. Creighton said he intended for the bill to “eliminate woke indoctrination in core courses” and give “Texans the power to report biased or inappropriate instruction.” The original text contained explicit “identity politics” restrictions that were stripped from the final version,

possibly because they might not have passed legal muster. The policy he has implemented at Texas Tech, however, resembles the original version. Creighton has said he believes that it will be a “national model.”

Creighton issued two memos outlining the restrictions, including one threatening faculty members that a failure to report any course content “implicated” by the policy would result in “disciplinary action.” Another announced a phaseout of all degree programs related to what the memo referred to as SOGI (“Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity”). It also formalizes a ban on “instruction that advocates for concepts of inherent racial or sexual superiority, inherent bias, or collective guilt.” In the future, the memo states, no degree “will be permitted to center on SOGI topics.”

Such a ban on entire fields of study, inquiry, and discourse, Creighton said—preposterously—would foster “diversity of viewpoint.”

For many years, Sara Spurgeon has taught a literature class focused on social justice and the environment. She has often assigned Ta-Nehisi Coates’s Pulitzer Prize–winning memoir *Between the World and Me*, but this time, the book was flagged by the bot as promoting “the belief that meritocracy is a construct of oppression designed to exploit Black bodies,” and it therefore “directly violates the system’s Prohibition of Prejudiced Advocacy.” (The word *meritocracy* does not appear in the book.) Creighton has insisted that “studying Black history, discussing the realities of racism, and treating every student with respect are not prohibited.” Spurgeon told me that works by science fiction and fantasy authors were also flagged.

In other professors’ syllabi, the bot flagged the Pulitzer Prize–winning play *Angels in America* by Tony Kushner, essays by the Mexican American MacArthur genius grant recipient Sandra Cisneros, and materials related to a class about the Holocaust (that professor was told to drop material regarding Nazi persecution of LGBTQ people).

Putting aside the ideological slant of the new rules, the bot, like many large language models, seems to “hallucinate,” or make mistakes. The AAUP lawsuit lists texts banned for their “sex-based ecofeminist framework” and “gendered ecofeminist frameworks.” These phrases might sound persuasively like academese, but the academics behind the lawsuit had never heard of them; these concepts “do not exist,” the complaint says. Matthew Pehl, a history professor at Tech, told me that he knew several people who’d received reports from the system that were “plainly written by an AI that had hallucinated content or confused content from one class to another.”

Alan Barenberg, a history professor who specializes in the Soviet Union, was told to remove readings by the Princeton historian Joan Scott and the French philosopher Michel Foucault from his Ph.D.-level historiography class, after they were flagged by the AI—whose assessments he described to me as “completely inaccurate.” It also seemed to have mixed his course up with a different one. The texts were part of a unit of the class related to how treatment of gender in historical research has changed over time. “These things have been taught in classes for a long time,” Barenberg told me. The material is controversial, he said, only “in the eyes of a few people who aren’t even actually on campus.”

“The fact that the system AI doesn’t work, that it makes inaccurate pronouncements—that’s a feature, not a bug. They don’t care if it’s accurate or not. They just want to be able to say, *Look, we’re making sure that your children are not being exposed to these horrible ideas from these radical professors*,” Barenberg said. “A key part of how authoritarian systems often work is that, through the vagueness and sending up signals and vibes, they’re essentially saying, *You know what not to do*, but being deliberately vague about it.”

Although the AI is now reviewing only some courses, the university could extend the process to more. For now, professors are the ones

responsible for volunteering whether their own materials may be considered controversial. Many, unsure of what might trigger the bot, told me that they had private conversations with administrators who told them to simply self-censor and remove materials from their courses in advance, so as not to draw the wrath of leadership or lawmakers.

Pehl, the history professor, told me that he did just that, and decided not to use the book *Scraping By*, about labor in Revolutionary-era Baltimore, because he had been planning on teaching it early in the year, which didn't allow time for it to be reviewed first. The book differentiates between the experiences of workers based on whether they were enslaved or free, men or women.

William Wenthe, a poetry professor, didn't mark his course as potentially controversial, though he told me that he was worried: He teaches T. S. Eliot's *The Wasteland*, which includes a male character from Greek mythology who becomes a woman. Could a Texan politician object to that? Censorship infantilizes students, he said: "They're old enough to vote. They're all old enough to fight and die for this country. And you're treating them like babies."

Texas Tech's censorship policy does not just affect the humanities. According to the AAUP lawsuit, medical students at the campus in El Paso are no longer permitted to learn about racial disparities in medical care or how to treat underserved populations—both major challenges in the overwhelmingly Hispanic Texas border region. At the Lubbock campus, a professor of health sciences at the medical school was told that he could not teach about transgender or intersex patients.

Some professors are leaving. Breanna Harris told me she quit her job as a biology professor at the Lubbock campus in part because she says administrators informed her that she could not use the American Medical Association's definitions of *sex* and *gender*, which, by distinguishing between the two, run afoul of Texas law. Harris's course

materials, she said, ask questions such as “How do organisms become ‘male’ or ‘female?’” and “What does that process look like biologically during development?”

Lisa Limeri, a biology professor at Texas Tech who had just been awarded tenure this year, resigned for the same reason. “We are not allowed to teach topics that are relevant to things like the MCAT and being practicing medical professionals,” she told me. “We are not allowed to teach them scientifically, accurately.”

A spokesperson for the university pushed back on the claim that medical students were not being taught what they would need to do their jobs: “We have tremendous confidence in our faculty and their commitment to preparing students to provide excellent care. It is important to distinguish between what our policy actually requires and restrictions that are not found anywhere in our written guidance.”

According to an internal survey, more than half of Tech’s faculty are looking for work elsewhere. In a private meeting with faculty, a recording of which was shared with me, a provost acknowledged that “on average, we have 20 percent to 25 percent fewer people applying for jobs here.” When professors challenged him on why he was not fighting against censorship, the provost said he couldn’t stop it: “It’s going to happen. And so you can try to help slow or mitigate it,” he said. “Or you can bring in people who will help it happen faster. That’s the option at the moment.”

Texas Tech is an R1 research university, which means that it receives a large amount of federal funding to produce significant amounts of research. But the censorship policy leaves entire fields of scientific inquiry banned, even for Ph.D. students.

“America has risen to global prominence in science and scientific research because of the strength of our system,” Limeri said. “If these kinds of censorship policies were implemented everywhere, we would have a generation of students who are not learning to think critically, are not learning to think for themselves, and are not learning full and accurate scientific information.” Administrators told faculty in that private meeting not to discuss the censorship policy with students, because it might generate “a lot of fear and a lot of anger and anxiety.”

The Texas A&M system, which serves about 175,000 students, doesn’t have an AI censor. But it does have both a strict, arbitrary, and confusing censorship policy *and* elected leaders joining online mobs against professors.

Melissa McCoul, a senior lecturer in the English department at Texas A&M’s College Station campus, has taught her course on children’s literature 11 times since arriving at the university in 2017. And she would have continued to do so, if Governor Abbott hadn’t demanded she be fired.

In July 2025, Brian Harrison, a Republican state representative, reposted a slide from McCoul’s class that had been highlighted by another X user. The slide argued that queerness can be discussed in “age-appropriate” terms and that homosexuality was not an “x-rated” concept. Harrison declared that “Texans are being taxed out of their homes to fund liberal indoctrination.” McCoul immediately found herself at the mercy of a social-media mob.

A little more than two weeks later, a student interrupted McCoul’s class to say that her teachings were “against the law.” After a brief exchange, McCoul asked the student to leave. In September (by which time McCoul was teaching a different class), Harrison posted a video of the summer confrontation and described the student as “OBJECTING TO TRANSGENDER INDOCTRINATION.” Harrison also posted a letter

he had sent to Abbott reminding him that “during your State of the State Address, you stated that ‘any educator who tells students that boys can be girls should be fired on the spot.’”

Mark Welsh, then the president of A&M, replied to Harrison’s post with a statement that the class had been canceled and that “key leaders” had been removed for allowing McCoul to teach “course content that was not consistent with the course’s published description.” Abbott joined the mob, replying, “Good. Now, fire the professor who acted contrary to Texas law.” Promptly, the university did.

McCoul claims that the course never deviated from the catalog description and has sued the university for ignoring its own due-process procedures; the lawsuit is ongoing. According to her complaint, two faculty panels reviewing the incident found no good cause for her firing. Welsh has since resigned.

In a motion to dismiss McCoul’s suit, filed in April, A&M states that McCoul was an untenured senior lecturer and that “Texas A&M University is entitled to state sovereign immunity as an ‘arm of the state.’” The motion also argues that “the termination was lawful and was certainly no violation of the lecturer’s academic freedom or the First Amendment.” The university alleges that McCoul “used the class as an opportunity to indoctrinate her students into transgender and LGBTQ ideology,” and that “by kicking out a student” who expressed a contrary opinion and “threatening” to kick out others, McCoul “interfered with those students’ academic freedom.” The filing also makes sure to point out that “she began the class by introducing herself as an autistic lesbian.”

In December, A&M adopted a policy stating that “no system academic course will advocate race or gender ideology, or topics related to sexual orientation or gender identity.” The next month, the women’s and gender studies programs were eliminated.

The policy defines *gender ideology* as the idea “that self-assessed gender identity should replace the biological category of sex,” whereas *race ideology* “attempts to shame a particular race or ethnicity, accuse them of being oppressors in a racial hierarchy or conspiracy, ascribe to them less value as contributors to society and public discourse because of their race or ethnicity, or assign them intrinsic guilt based on the actions of their presumed ancestors.” If a professor acknowledges the existence of trans people, they could be violating the first policy; if they describe race-based chattel slavery in the antebellum United States, they could be violating the second. Their livelihood might depend on how much time the governor of Texas is spending on social media that day.

Leonard Bright, a tenured professor at A&M’s Bush School of Government and Public Service, is one of several other professors suing the university for its censorship policy. This year, his graduate-level course on ethics and public policy was canceled. His lawsuit says that he informed the administration that “at no point does the course require students to adopt, affirm, or reject particular beliefs regarding these topics. Students are evaluated solely on analytical rigor, use of evidence, and professional engagement.” Still, he told me, the university wouldn’t approve the class unless he provided “a detailed day-by-day description of when sexual orientation is going to come up.” And he couldn’t do that, because “this is a discussion course.”

The policy raises other uncomfortable questions for Prairie View A&M, a historically Black college in the A&M system that was first established by the Reconstruction-era legislature as a segregated institution. There’s no way to even explain its existence without touching on matters that could be caricatured as “race ideology.”

The difference between “advocating” and “teaching” is not clearly defined, but the way the censorship policy is being implemented makes the situation pretty clear: If you’re using material that state lawmakers agree with, that’s teaching; if you’re talking about something they object

to, that's advocacy, and you have to stop. As detailed in a complaint against Texas A&M filed by the ACLU, an English professor, Vanita Reddy, was told that the censorship policy "will not be applied to heteronormative orientation and identity," but exclusively to "LGBTQ gender identity or sexual orientation."

George, the history professor who was told to remove several texts perceived as liberal, was allowed to teach the conservative anti-feminist activist Phyllis Schlafly's "What's Wrong With Equal Rights for Women?"

Professors at UT Austin aren't seeing their classes summarily canceled or scrubbed for forbidden terms by a censorship AI. They haven't been told to list the dates that gender might come up. The governor hasn't demanded the heads of any of its professors. "Gender and race ideology" have not been banned. While Texas Tech and Texas A&M received an "F" from the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression, a free-speech watchdog, UT Austin earned a "D-".

What UT has done is issue a statement on "academic integrity" urging professors to "fairly present differing views and scholarly evidence on reasonably disputed matters and unsettled issues" and "to eschew topics and controversies that are not germane to the course."

No one is really sure what that means—and that may be the point. "Nobody yet has been disciplined under this policy," Julie Minich, an English professor who focuses on Latino literature, told me. "But also, nobody wants to be the first one to be disciplined under the policy." The university did not respond to repeated requests by phone and email to speak about this story or to a list of questions.

Peter Onyisi, a physics professor, has for years used the greenhouse effect as an example of a real-world, practical effect of quantum mechanics to students. Although he does not plan to stop, he worries

that administrators could argue that climate change is not “germane” to his course. But that’s not how teaching works, Onyisi pointed out: “You can’t really say, *Oh, physics is in a nice little box, and it doesn’t talk to anything else.*” Academic freedom is under assault in the UT system, he said, just in more “subtle” ways than elsewhere.

Jim Davis, the president of UT, has justified the cuts to the core curriculum by arguing that too many courses were “narrow.” One of Davis’s favorite examples is a class on the history of college football, although, as one professor pointed out to me, the origins of the sport offer a fascinating view into the post–Civil War economy and culture of the South, not to mention a billion-dollar industry that is a big deal at, well, UT. That’s the thing about academic inquiry: Many seemingly “narrow” questions open up much bigger ones.

Davis’s example, however, may be misleading. Given that most of the courses being targeted involve the study of gender or race, “narrow” seems to refer mainly to the study of people, subjects, or works that some conservatives consider unimportant.

These sweeping changes couldn’t have happened “if shared governance was still in existence,” Lauren Gutterman, the American-studies professor, told me. “S.B. 37 has changed things dramatically in just a very short period of time.”

A university task force has proposed that the new core include a “Great Questions of Human Life” requirement based on texts from preapproved “great thinkers.” A preliminary list of 50 names was sent out to faculty. The list includes three Black writers (W. E. B. Du Bois, Frederick Douglass, and Toni Morrison), six women (in addition to Morrison: Mary Shelley, Simone de Beauvoir, Mary Ann Evans, Jane Austen, and Mary Wollstonecraft), and no Hispanic or Latin American authors. The only Asian author on the list is Confucius. (UT has said it “intends” to expand the list). A “Masterworks of Literature”

requirement would pull most of its readings from the same list, and divide them into the categories “American,” “British,” and “World.” The proposed “Principles of American Politics” requirement warns that the courses should “focus on issues that involve the whole country, not just one region or group.” And under its “Western Civilization” requirement, the task force observes that “Western Civilization has interacted in complex ways with other civilizations”—middle-school writing that raises the question of what counts as *Western civilization*, a term that the report acknowledges it cannot define.

“They’re saying that they need to be broad classes that satisfy the core requirements, not narrow classes,” Minich told me. But the effect is the opposite. “Rather than having a core curriculum that reflects the diversity of the campus in the public flagship of the second-most diverse state in the country, they’re moving toward a curriculum that is much more heavily focused on the European intellectual tradition. And they are calling that ‘breadth’ and saying that courses that fall outside that intellectual tradition are ‘narrow.’”

Classes that get stripped of their core designation may end up scrapped altogether, because students have limited time. Declining enrollment in non-core classes can then be an excuse to dispose of them entirely.

“At the time I came here, UT was the No. 1 place to do what I do—studying Latino literature. We have this long, rich history of Latino studies,” Minich said. “I see this as a first step toward eliminating an area of study that has been historically extremely important at this university.”

In July, Iván Chaar López, an expert in the history of the U.S. southern border, was denied tenure, as *Inside Higher Ed* reported, despite the College of Liberal Arts tenure committee voting overwhelmingly in his favor. Chaar López told me that, in a meeting with administrators that February, he was told that the president’s tenure committee “had a negative view” of his work. He is challenging the decision, and is one of

several faculty members or administrators who believe that they were fired, laid off, or denied tenure because their politics were seen as left-wing or because their expertise is among the subjects the administration has turned against.

“It is almost as if we are meant to teach whatever fits into a political pamphlet. But that’s not what free inquiry and free speech and academic freedom are about,” Chaar López told me. Students are getting “an education that is all about obeying.”

Angela Valenzuela, a professor in the department of educational leadership and policy, said that you should not be able to “graduate from UT Austin and not know anything about anything south of the Rio Grande River and call yourself an educated person.” She added, “This is not an argument about whether or not ‘Western civilization’ should be taught. It’s an argument of whether that’s what should be exclusively taught.”

UT’s quiet restructuring of the university may prove to be more effective and sustainable than the tactics at Texas Tech and Texas A&M; UT’s censorship attempts, notably, have yet to face a legal challenge. Nonetheless, professors fear that the changes will leave students without the cognitive tools or contextual information to question matters that some conservatives would prefer not be questioned.

Meanwhile, resources have been directed instead toward UT Austin’s new School of Civic Leadership, which claims to promote “freedom of thought and speech.”

Jen sheldon, an English professor at Texas Tech, told me that her daughter had gone to college in Minnesota. “When she had her first class,” Shelton said, “she called me to say, ‘You won’t believe all the things people are allowed to say up here.’”

Some conservative activists have gone beyond attacking teachers. Brian Harrison, who led the campaign against the A&M professor, railed in September against the existence of an archive of LGBTQ-history primary-source documents at the University of North Texas. The webpage describing the archive was taken down; one begins to wonder whether the state will demand the destruction of the documents themselves next.

In a 2026 AAUP survey, 70 percent of Texas faculty would not recommend taking a faculty position in the state, and about 30 percent said they had experienced censorship of courses by administrators. Texas “is on the leading edge” in the field of censorship in higher education, Jonathan Friedman, who directs PEN America’s work on free expression in the United States, told me. But Texas is hardly alone. According to PEN, Alabama, Florida, Indiana, and Utah have all adopted laws that seek to limit what professors are allowed to teach and what students are allowed to study. “Notions like academic freedom and free speech on campus are all just going out the window,” Friedman said. More Republican-leaning states will likely follow.

Over the past decade, some conservatives have invoked principles of academic freedom and free speech in order to subvert both. These conservatives mocked “snowflakes” and “trigger warnings,” and then passed legislation making it illegal to hurt white students’ feelings by discussing historical or contemporary events. They invoked academic freedom and then began erasing fields of study they found politically inconvenient. They railed against “indoctrination,” and then argued that the state is entitled to control everything said in the classroom.

One might argue that progressive influence on campus had gone too far and states needed to reestablish free-speech norms eroded during the zenith of the first anti-Trump backlash. Conservative ideas do have an important place in higher education—a well-rounded education is impossible otherwise. But there is a distinction between left-wing

ensoriousness and actual state censorship. Todd Wolfson, the president of AAUP, told me that he would be “the first to admit” that he witnessed people and ideas being “shut down from discussion” on campus. But, he said, “there’s no comparison in the ability and attempt to dictate ideas. Just none. One was informal, and the other is now formal and legal.” He continued, “I think it’s a fantasy to say that what happened then has any relationship to the extremism that we’re seeing right now.”

The right-wing assault on higher education may be rooted in college-educated voters’ shift to the left. If one blames that shift on left-wing professors, then purging them from academia could change the way educated people vote. But educational polarization is a global phenomenon, and evidence shows that college does not alter students’ political beliefs as much as people assume. Attacking universities is more likely to simply degrade the quality of education than it is to help Republicans at the polls. Besides, in Texas, many students arrive as conservatives and stay that way. Many students have protested the new censorship policies, while others have enforced them, as demonstrated by the undergraduates turning their professors in for violations.

University leaders have occasionally attempted to disguise their campaigns as an effort to better prepare Texas students for the workforce. Texas Tech Chancellor Brandon Creighton said that there was “quite a bit of garbage in curriculum all over university campuses all across America,” and that Tech would “remain the tip of the spear on producing the highest degree of value.” But the value of even the hardest STEM degree will be degraded if courses in those fields are censored for being politically inconvenient. And regardless, the quality of an education is not determined by the wealth you subsequently accumulate.

So what can be done? Legal precedent seems to be on the side of people challenging the censorship policies, at least at Tech and A&M. The Supreme Court has held that academic freedom is a “special concern” that is “of transcendent value to all of us.” Florida, during litigation over

the Stop WOKE Act, a similar ban on “divisive concepts,” tried to argue that the First Amendment didn’t apply to professors at state schools, because they were government employees. The Eleventh Circuit Court of Appeals rejected that argument, concluding that “if the history of that Amendment tells us anything, it is that the government cannot forbid what it perceives as heresy.” The current right-wing majority on the Supreme Court, however, has shown itself willing to ignore the plain text of the Constitution where the latest culture-war fixation is concerned.

“You have to go back to the loyalty oath cases of the Cold War period to see relatively analogous situations where the government was trying to silence academics with viewpoints that they didn’t like,” Emerson Sykes, an attorney with the ACLU, told me. “But even in those cases, we did not see the sort of brazen attempt to ban particular ideas or ideologies and scrub them from the public record or from public education.”

Sykes cautioned me that although academic freedom interacts with the First Amendment, they are not synonymous. The Eleventh Circuit ruling found that state governments can “make ordinary curriculum decisions (like which majors or courses to offer), or otherwise ensure competent academic instruction.” For that reason, UT Austin’s structural changes are likely more resistant to legal challenge. Those who wish to oppose them may have to find other means, such as labor organizing or politics. That will be a monumental task—especially as universities are relying more and more on tenuously employed adjunct professors.

In the meantime, the Trump administration has been meddling in higher education at the federal level—using grants to pressure universities into changing whom they admit and what they teach and research, and going after foreign students for their politics. The degradation of free speech doesn’t stop in Texas. And it won’t stay on campus either.