A Report on The People's Hearing
The Latino Coalition for Excellence in Higher Education
August 12, 2026

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Aquí Estamos y No Nos Vamos



Courtesy of Yulissa Chavez

Executive Summary

Introduction

The Latino Coalition for Excellence in Higher Education held the People's Hearing on Higher Education on August 12, 2026, in Austin to document and respond to growing political interference in Texas colleges and universities, especially at the University of Texas at Austin (UT Austin). As the report notes, the hearing occurred "at an extraordinary moment in Texas higher education, when decisions once entrusted principally to faculty and universities are increasingly being shaped by political authority." More than 100 people attended the hearing, and 26 witnesses submitted written testimonies. Together, their statements raised concerns about the growing threats to academic freedom, shared governance, and civil rights, as well as the dismantling of ethnic, women's, gender, and sexuality studies at colleges and universities across Texas.

Context and Key Developments

Witnesses and supporting documents describe a series of legislative and administrative actions that changed Texas higher education between 2023 and 2026. These actions include:

- **Senate Bill 17 (2023)**, which ended Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) programs across the state.
- **Senate Bill 37 (2025)**, which required changes to the core curriculum and encouraged some universities to remove or limit courses that address race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality.

UT Austin and other universities went beyond what these laws required by dismantling programs such as Mexican American and Latina/o Studies, African and African Diaspora Studies, Women's and Gender Studies, and Race, Indigeneity, and Migration Studies. According to the report, universities such as UT Austin also eliminated majors and courses in many of these fields. As the report states, these actions represent "*a broader transfer of authority over knowledge from faculty to politically appointed governing boards and university leaders*" .

Testimony Highlights

The Latino Coalition invited six expert witnesses to provide testimony about the crisis facing Texas higher education. Drawing on their unique research and professional experience, Rogelio Sáenz, Brian Evans, Angela Valenzuela, Lisa L. Moore, Antonio Ingram, and Jim Estrada described major demographic changes, political efforts to reshape colleges and universities, growing threats to academic freedom, and emerging civil rights concerns. Together, their expert testimony highlighted several key issues affecting students, faculty, and the future of public higher education in Texas.

- The growing gap between Texas's increasingly diverse population and the reduction of academic programs that help students understand and appreciate that diversity.
- Evidence that faculty members are practicing self-censorship, experiencing lower morale, and leaving universities because of legislative pressure and administrative actions.
- The relevance of civil rights cases, including *Gonzalez v. Douglas*, in understanding claims of viewpoint discrimination and the violation of free-speech principles in higher education policies in Texas.
- The high economic and civic costs of ignoring the demographic realities of Texas and the nation, where the Latino population continues to grow rapidly.

The public testimony that followed reinforced the concerns raised by the expert witnesses. For instance, faculty members, students, and community leaders described political interference as "*dangerous for the future of public education*" and part of a broader effort to "*silence free speech, undermine the search for truth, and weaken basic democratic rights*." Their testimonies also provided personal examples of how recent policies have affected teaching, learning, research, and campus life. They revealed common themes and concerns that appeared throughout the hearing, including the following:

- Conservative lawmakers and university administrators are increasingly taking control of curriculum decisions, reducing the role of faculty and weakening universities' ability to meet students' educational needs.
- Ethnic studies, women's studies, gender studies, and sexuality studies have faced more cuts, closures, and restrictions than most other academic fields.
- Administrative changes, or restructuring, have often been made without clear reasons, meaningful input from faculty, students, and community members, or following the university's established shared-governance procedures.
- Civil rights concerns are growing because universities have closed programs and removed courses focused on race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality, raising questions about fairness, equal access, and shared governance in higher education.
- Public trust in higher education is declining because universities have expanded policies that are discriminatory, going beyond what state law requires and further weakening important academic programs.

Policy Recommendations

The report concludes with several policy recommendations aimed at restoring academic integrity, protecting academic freedom, and strengthening democratic governance in Texas higher education. They include

- Give faculty a stronger voice in decisions about what is taught and how universities are run.

- Protect academic freedom and students' right to learn by preventing punishment or retaliation for expressing ideas and viewpoints.
- Make university decisions open and transparent by creating clear review processes, allowing appeals, and requiring public explanations for actions taken under state law.
- Create independent groups to investigate violations of academic freedom, track the effects of policy changes, and hold universities accountable for their actions.
- Investigate claims of discrimination and take action to correct unfair treatment and protect civil rights.
- Restore and strengthen academic programs that have been weakened or eliminated by recent policy changes.
- Review and reconsider state policies that harm higher education and continue to monitor their effects on academic freedom and educational quality.

The Latino Coalition affirms that the witnesses, observers, and organizers who contributed to the success of the People's Hearing acted with sincerity, integrity, and good will. We are also deeply concerned about the students and families who invest their hard-earned money, time, and hopes in higher education. They do so with the expectation that universities will treat youth fairly, provide a high-quality education, and prepare them for successful lives as educated citizens, not merely as workers with marketable skills. By sharing their experiences and concerns, the participants in the People's Hearing helped create an important public record and strengthen the promise of higher education to serve all Texans with fairness, integrity, and respect.

The Report

Introduction

The Latino Coalition for Excellence in Higher Education, a statewide alliance of community organizations in Texas, held the People's Hearing on August 12, 2026, at the Robert E. Johnson Legislative Conference Center in Austin. The hearing was organized with support from the office of State Representative Lulu Flores of Texas House District 51 and the Texas Legislative Progressive Caucus. About twenty-eight faculty members, students, and community leaders provided invited and public testimony before a panel of state representatives that included Lulu Flores, Sheryl Cole, Mary González, Suleman Lalani, and Christina Morales.

The hearing took place at a critical time in Texas higher education. Decisions that were once made mainly by faculty and universities are now increasingly influenced by political leaders who are advancing a conservative policy agenda. More than 100 people attended the event, 26 submitted written testimony, and approximately 200 others watched it through a live stream. This report highlights the voices of those who participated and provides a preliminary analysis of the testimonies. It also includes a background statement and policy recommendations.

The purpose of the People's Hearing was to give the public an opportunity to respond to efforts by conservative state and university leaders to increase political control over higher education in Texas. The organizers were especially committed to creating a clear and reliable public record that can be used to challenge this interference. Because public universities are funded by taxpayers, they should remain accountable to the public they serve.

One major concern was the decision by the University of Texas at Austin (UT Austin) to go beyond legislative requirements by "consolidating," and effectively dismantling four academic departments: African and African Diaspora Studies, American Studies, Mexican American and Latina/o Studies, and Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies. Many participants viewed this action as an effort to reduce the importance of these fields and possibly eliminate them completely. More broadly, the hearing sought to help the public understand these developments, build statewide support for resisting political overreach, and reaffirm that universities must remain free from undue political pressure so they can continue advancing knowledge and serving the public good.

The urgency of these concerns is evident in legal actions already filed against Texas Tech University and Texas A&M University. The lawsuits argue that these institutions violated faculty members' free-speech rights and unfairly targeted ethnic studies, women's studies, gender studies, and sexuality studies. They also claim that university leaders overrode faculty expertise in decisions about academic programs, curriculum, and teaching.

At the same time, universities such as UT Austin have expanded administrative control over academic matters. University leaders have redefined major fields of study with little or no faculty input, pressured faculty members to censor themselves, and eliminated majors in Mexican American and Latina/o Studies, African and African Diaspora Studies, Women's and Gender Studies, and Race, Indigeneity, and Migration Studies. These actions are more than administrative changes. They represent a broader shift of authority over knowledge and learning from faculty members to politically appointed governing boards and university administrators. This shift affects academic programs, the curriculum, and ultimately what students are permitted to learn.

The Latino Coalition, the primary organizer of the People's Hearing, has a long history of supporting community-based efforts for progressive change dating back to the late 1960s. Its officers include Alicia Perez Hodge, Chair; Nora de Hoyos Comstock, Vice Chair; Emilio Zamora, Secretary; and María del Cármen Unda, Communications Director. María Cotera, Martha Cotera, J.R. Gonzalez, Ernesto "Neto" Longoria, Alfredo Santos, and Angela Valenzuela have also served as founders and key leaders of the organization.

The Coalition's close ties to UT Austin, Austin's central role in state politics, and the university's decision to consolidate four academic departments helped make Austin the natural location for the People's Hearing. The event was designed to draw public attention to changes taking place at UT Austin and to their broader impact on higher education across Texas.

Background

Public concern among UT Austin faculty and students had been building well before the consequential decision in February 2026, when President James Davis announced the closure of the four departments in the College of Liberal Arts and their "consolidation" into a newly created Department of Social and Cultural Analysis. In July 2023, the governor signed Senate Bill 17 into law, ordering the closure of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion offices at all state-funded institutions. In June and July of 2025, the Texas Legislature enacted two additional and onerous measures.

Senate Bill 37, approved by the Governor in June 2025, mandated a comprehensive review and restructuring of the state's core curriculum to ensure that courses are "foundational and fundamental" and that they prepare students for civic life and the workforce. UT Austin, along with other public universities such as Texas Tech University, the University of Houston, and Texas A&M University at College Station, have cited SB 37 as the statutory basis for its 2026–2027 core curriculum overhaul. In practice, this restructuring has included the removal of courses with ethnic, women's, gender, and sexuality content, or the expunging of such material if faculty expect their courses to continue appearing in the curriculum.

Over-compliant universities like UT, the University of Houston, Texas A&M University, and Texas Tech University have been quick to remove what they perceive as troubling content, thereby depriving students of a full range of courses—both required and elective—needed to pursue their majors and minors. As noted earlier, UT Austin announced in September 2026 the removal of majors in Mexican American and Latina/o Studies, African and African Diaspora Studies, Women's and Gender Studies, and Race, Indigeneity, and Migration. What is often described as "faculty governance" is, in actuality, a *governance of knowledge*, whereby state policymakers and largely government-appointed university leaders increasingly become the arbiters of what can be taught, which fields survive, and whose histories count.

Faculty appointed to review committees have also deleted or redefined special "flagged" courses that once offered students a comprehensive understanding of the world in which they live. A compounding problem is that some faculty have begun to self-censor, fearing that the syllabi they have been required to submit for review will draw unfriendly scrutiny to their teaching. The extent of this self-censorship is difficult to measure, but its presence is unmistakable, and it continues to add significantly to workplace anxiety and professional insecurity.

The Texas Legislature also passed SB 2972 in June 2025, imposing sweeping restrictions on public demonstrations, largely in support of overreacting universities to the pro-Palestine protests of April 2024. This was a reminder that legislation did not occur in isolation. For instance, between 2021 and 2022, the UT administration created well-funded entities such as the Civitas Institute and the School for Civic Leadership, widely understood by supporters as ideological counterweights to what state leaders perceived as progressive academic programs. Also, from 2024 to 2026, several widely respected deans in Liberal Arts, Education, Geosciences, and the LBJ School of Public Affairs were removed from their posts and replaced with leaders viewed as more acceptable to the prevailing political climate (See a timeline of events: https://texasedequity.blogspot.com/2026/09/the-political-transformation-of-ut.html).

High-level university appointments also suggest political alignments between higher-education leadership and the Republican Party of Texas. Jim Davis, for example—an attorney without academic teaching or research experience—was appointed president of the university by the UT System Board of Regents in August 2025. His tenure as Deputy Attorney General for Civil Litigation under Attorney General Ken Paxton from 2015 to 2018 appears to have been sufficient to secure subsequent senior administrative positions at UT prior to his elevation to the presidency.

In August 2025, UT Austin also recruited William Inboden as Executive Vice President and Provost after his two-year tenure restructuring the University of Florida's Alexander Hamilton Center for Classical and Civic Education as its director. Not to be outdone, the author of SB 37 and former Chair of the Senate Committee on Education, Brandon Creighton, was

appointed Chancellor of Texas Tech University by the Texas Tech University System Board of Regents. Governor Greg Abbott, a Republican, has appointed all members of the boards of regents at both the UT and Texas Tech systems, and those appointees are reportedly members of the Republican Party.

Together, these measures signal a coordinated effort by the Republican Party to reshape the culture and governance of Texas higher education—limiting faculty voice, constraining student expression, and narrowing the democratic spaces that universities have long protected. In response, we must continue to insist that universities pursue—without undue political interference—their two central and interdependent missions: producing meaningful and necessary research and preparing citizens capable of carrying out the responsibilities of self-government in an increasingly diverse and complex society. These expectations are not optional; they are foundational to the role of public universities and essential to the health of democratic life—an ecology of institutions, rights, knowledge, public trust, participation, and democratic self-government.

Testimonies

The six expert witnesses, Rogelio Sáenz, Brian Evans, Angela Valenzuela, Lisa L. Moore, Antonio Ingram, and Jim Estrada, organized the hearing around several connected concerns: Texas's changing population, the political reshaping of higher education, threats to academic freedom and shared governance, growing civil rights and constitutional concerns, and the effects of these developments on students, faculty, and the public.

Sáenz, a professor of sociology and demography at UT San Antonio, opened the hearing by placing the current crisis in demographic context. Texas colleges and universities are serving a rapidly changing population, especially a growing Latino youth population that is becoming increasingly important to the state's educational, civic, and economic future. His testimony highlighted a basic contradiction. At the very moment Texas higher education should be expanding its ability to understand and serve a more diverse population, the state is narrowing fields of study focused on race, ethnicity, gender, culture, and inequality. The contradiction is hard to ignore: How can Texas universities prepare students for an increasingly diverse society while reducing support for the very fields that help them understand that society?

Evans, the Texas state director of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) and a professor of electrical engineering at UT Austin, focused on academic freedom, faculty governance, and changing working conditions for faculty. He argued that recent legislation, along with university policies that often go beyond what the laws require, has weakened faculty authority over curriculum and teaching. These changes have affected ethnic studies, women's studies, gender studies, and sexuality studies more than other academic fields. They have also contributed to an increasingly uncertain professional environment in which faculty report self-censorship, declining morale, and a growing desire to leave Texas. His

testimony connected the defense of these academic programs to the larger struggle to preserve academic freedom, and the independence universities need to fulfill their public mission.

Valenzuela, a UT Austin professor and witness in the historic *Gonzalez v. Douglas* (2017) case, discussed the relevance of that lawsuit to current restrictions on teaching about race and gender in Texas higher education. In the Arizona case, a federal judge found that racial bias motivated the dismantling of a Mexican American Studies program in a public school district. Valenzuela argued that the case offers an important legal and historical framework for understanding current developments in Texas, particularly when evidence may point to discriminatory intent or viewpoint discrimination by legislators or university officials. She placed these developments within a broader civil rights context, emphasizing that academic freedom helps communities study inequality, document discrimination, and build the evidence needed to support civil rights claims.

Moore, a UT Austin professor and, until August 16, 2026, chair of the Department of Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, urged legislators attending the hearing to investigate what she described as discriminatory practices at UT Austin before the next legislative session. Her testimony focused on the chilling effects of SB 17, SB 37, and university implementation decisions on teaching, research, and faculty governance. She also pointed to a striking contradiction. Programs with strong records of scholarship, teaching, and public service, qualities normally associated with academic success, instead became targets of increased scrutiny and restructuring. Her testimony raised important questions about the changing standards used to judge, protect, or weaken academic programs.

Ingram, Senior Counsel at the NAACP Legal Defense Fund and lead attorney in litigation involving Chancellor Brandon Creighton and the Texas Tech University System Board of Regents, addressed the civil rights and constitutional implications of these developments. Drawing on the legal record and consultations related to the case, he described emerging patterns of discrimination affecting Black and Brown communities. He stressed the importance of carefully documenting institutional decisions, how those decisions are carried out, and their consequences. His testimony reinforced a central theme of the hearing: civil rights enforcement depends on evidence. Without a public record showing how policies are created, implemented, and experienced, affected communities face greater difficulty proving discrimination and securing meaningful remedies.

Estrada, a businessman whose work has focused extensively on the U.S. Latino market, approached the issue from the perspective of demographic and economic change. Building on Sáenz's demographic analysis, he argued that long-standing racial and cultural biases toward Mexican-origin and other Latino populations continue to distort public and institutional understanding of their economic and civic importance. His testimony highlighted the practical consequences of ignoring demographic evidence. Institutions and policymakers risk making decisions based on stereotypes and assumptions rather than on the realities of Latino communities' growing social, economic, and political influence. His remarks reinforced the broader argument of the hearing that sound public policy must be based on evidence rather than ideology or racial bias.

The public testimonies that follow, presented in the order they were received, reflect a wide range of experiences and perspectives. The witnesses, including university professors, students, and community members from Austin and Central Texas, spoke with clarity, conviction, and a deep sense of responsibility. Their personal stories and shared concerns made clear that the current interference in the internal affairs of Texas higher education institutions is both serious and dangerous to the future of public education. They argued that the ongoing attacks on ethnic studies and women's studies programs are part of a broader effort to dismiss careful academic scholarship, silence debate, weaken the search for truth, and undermine fundamental democratic rights.

The witnesses also insisted that students and faculty must remain free to make informed and thoughtful decisions about what they study, research, and teach without undue interference from powerful political actors or outside groups. When outside forces ignore established policies and procedures in an effort to control educational institutions, they do more than disrupt learning. They threaten university independence, limit open discussion and collaboration, and weaken the critical thinking skills that help keep communities strong, informed, and free.

Most witnesses focused their remarks on legislative and administrative actions designed to weaken or eliminate ethnic studies, women's studies, gender studies, and sexuality studies. They concentrated particular attention on UT Austin because it is the state's flagship public university and a nationally recognized leader in research, teaching, and public service. When a central institution of this importance becomes a target and its administrators continue efforts to restrict academic freedom and reshape major areas of study, the consequences extend throughout the higher education system. Witnesses also discussed the use of administrative and political pressure at other institutions, including the University of North Texas, Texas State University, and UT San Antonio, showing that the problem is statewide and reflects broader national trends.

The witnesses also called attention to what they saw as a serious breach of legal responsibility and public trust by members of the Texas Legislature and the Governor's office. They argued that policies promoted between 2024 and 2026, along with the cooperation of some university administrators, portrayed Texas universities as centers of left-wing extremism. These accusations have focused especially on ethnic studies and women's studies programs, revealing what many witnesses viewed as racial and gender bias in the selective targeting of these fields. Yet they argued that this narrative contradicts the actions of legislators and university officials themselves.

By bypassing shared-governance procedures and disregarding the principles of open academic inquiry, they have politicized university administration. While claiming to promote fairness, neutrality, and accountability, they have often acted through unilateral decision-making, suppressed dissenting voices, and restructured academic programs without proper review. As a result, the witnesses contended, the very principles used to justify these interventions have too often been undermined by the actions taken in their name.

Policy Recommendations

https://latinocoalitionhighered.org/

Based on the testimony presented at the People's Hearing and the documentary record summarized in this report, the Latino Coalition offers the following policy recommendations:

- **Give faculty a stronger voice in decisions about what is taught and how universities are run**. Texas public colleges and universities should return faculty to a leading role in decisions about curriculum, academic programs, degree requirements, course content, and teaching standards. Any plans to combine, eliminate, reorganize, or change departments, majors, minors, certificates, or courses should follow established faculty governance procedures, academic review processes, and meaningful consultation with those most affected.
- **Protect academic freedom and students' right to learn by preventing punishment or retaliation for expressing ideas and viewpoints.** Texas colleges and universities should adopt and enforce strong protections for academic freedom, open inquiry, and the free exchange of ideas. Faculty should not face retaliation, discrimination, or negative employment consequences because of their teaching, research, scholarship, or participation in university governance. Students should continue to have access to a broad curriculum that reflects the histories, cultures, and experiences of Texas's diverse communities, and those already enrolled in affected programs should be allowed to complete their studies.
- **Make university decisions open and transparent by creating clear review processes, allowing appeals, and requiring public explanations for actions taken under state law.** Universities should clearly explain the standards, procedures, timelines, and decisionmakers involved in reviewing academic programs and courses. Faculty should receive written explanations when decisions affect them and should have meaningful opportunities to appeal. When universities act in response to state law, they should clearly distinguish between what the law requires and what institutional leaders choose to do beyond those requirements.
- **Create independent groups to investigate violations of academic freedom, track the effects of policy changes, and hold universities accountable for their actions.** Texas higher education institutions should establish independent review processes to examine complaints involving academic freedom, retaliation, viewpoint discrimination, violations of shared governance, and political interference. These groups should include strong faculty representation and protection for those who file complaints. Universities should also maintain public records and issue regular reports on program closures, curriculum changes, faculty departures, complaints, and other significant effects of legislative and administrative decisions.
- **Investigate claims of discrimination and take action to correct unfair treatment and protect civil rights.** Public universities should thoroughly investigate allegations of discrimination, viewpoint discrimination, and violations of faculty and student rights. Institutions should preserve relevant records, cooperate with lawful investigations, correct confirmed violations, and adopt safeguards to prevent similar problems in the future.
- **Restore and strengthen academic programs that have been weakened or eliminated by recent policy changes.** Texas colleges and universities should review recent changes affecting Ethnic Studies, Women's and Gender Studies, and related

interdisciplinary programs. When programs have been reduced, eliminated, or reorganized without adequate academic review, faculty participation, public justification, or compliance with established procedures, institutions should consider restoring departments, degree programs, courses, governance structures, and pathways that support student success.

- **Review Harmful State Policies and Strengthen Legislative Oversight.** The Texas Legislature should hold regular public hearings on academic freedom, curriculum, civil rights, and higher education governance. These hearings would help ensure greater public accountability, provide opportunities for public input, and support informed decision-making about the future of higher education in Texas.

Conclusion

The People's Hearing showed that many Texans are deeply concerned about the direction of higher education in the state. Faculty, students, community leaders, civil-rights advocates, and policy experts described a growing loss of academic freedom, shared governance, and public trust. Their testimonies raised important questions about who should decide what is taught at public universities and how those decisions should be made.

The testimony also made clear that the issues facing higher education extend beyond a few academic programs or campuses. At stake is the ability of universities to serve the public, prepare students for a diverse society, and pursue knowledge without political interference. When faculty voices are weakened and areas of study are restricted, students lose opportunities to learn, and universities are less able to fulfill their mission.

The recommendations in this report offer practical steps for restoring accountability, transparency, academic freedom, and public confidence in Texas higher education. By protecting the rights of students and faculty, strengthening shared governance, and ensuring fair and open decision-making, Texas can build a higher-education system that serves all its people and remains true to the democratic values on which public education depends.

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Expert Testimonies

The Changing Demography of School Enrollment in Texas

Rogelio Sáenz, Professor
Department of Sociology and Demography, UT San Antonio

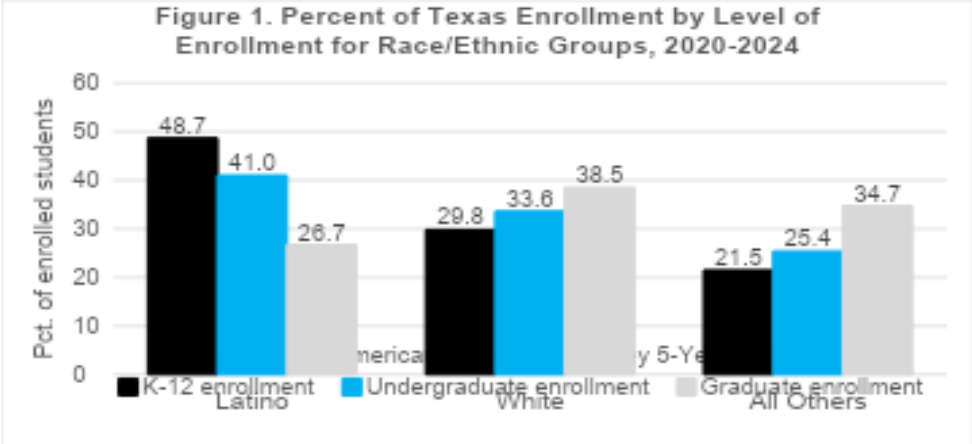
The Context

I, along with many dedicated colleagues, have worked diligently to ensure that our students excel academically, complete their degrees, and become productive contributors to the state and to the broader society. Yet over the last few years, we have witnessed the systematic dismantling of the pillars of support that once encouraged student success among Latino, Black, and, more broadly, students of color. Staff and institutional settings that made students feel welcome, affirmed, and supported have been eliminated. Students can no longer study and learn about the communities, cultures, and histories from which they originate. In essence, much of what faculty, students, staff, and alumni have long valued in the education and preparation of our students has been erased or diminished.

Erasure and erosion have unfolded amid a significant demographic shift in Texas, where Latinos now represent the largest racial and ethnic group and people of color collectively outnumber whites. Federal and state strategies now seek to reverse this demographic transformation and block the emergence of potential political power among Latinos, African Americans, and other communities of color—through mass deportations, the termination of Temporary Protected Status, efforts to end the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program, challenges to birthright citizenship, and restrictions on immigration. Furthermore, the elimination of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion initiatives and current attempts to dismantle Head Start will make it more difficult for Latino, Black, and other students of color to overcome or mitigate the effects of unequal educational funding.

The Demographic Landscape

I now turn to an overview of the changing demographic landscape of Texas, based on my analysis of data from the 2024 American Community Survey. Figure 1 shows that Latino students represent the largest racial and ethnic group in K–12 education (48.7%) and in undergraduate enrollment (41%). Yet these students are being shortchanged by the elimination of race and ethnic studies programs that have long incorporated their life experiences, cultures, and histories into their academic training and contributed directly to their educational success. When students cannot see themselves in the curriculum, the message is unmistakable, they do not matter. This erasure undermines not only their sense of belonging but also the broader mission of higher education to cultivate informed, confident, and culturally grounded graduates.



Moreover, as Figure 2 shows, there are 103 counties—slightly more than two-fifths of all counties in the state—where Latino students constitute the largest group of K–12 students. These counties span the southern, western, and Panhandle regions of Texas, as well as the metropolitan areas of Austin, Houston, and Dallas–Fort Worth. Their geographic breadth underscores a simple truth: Latino students are central to the present and future demographic growth in Texas, and any erosion of the programs that sustain their educational success carries profound consequences for the entire state.

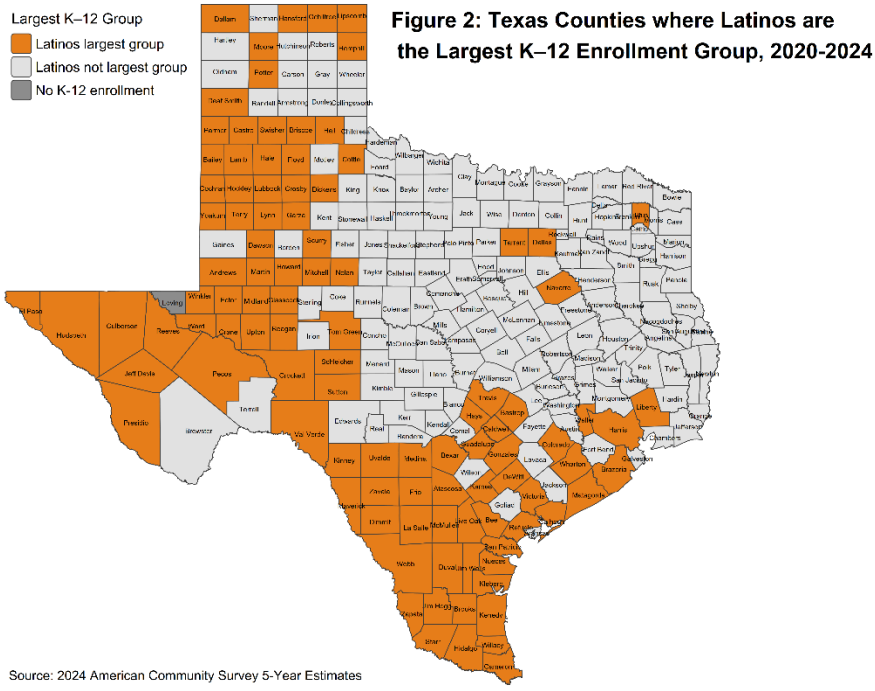
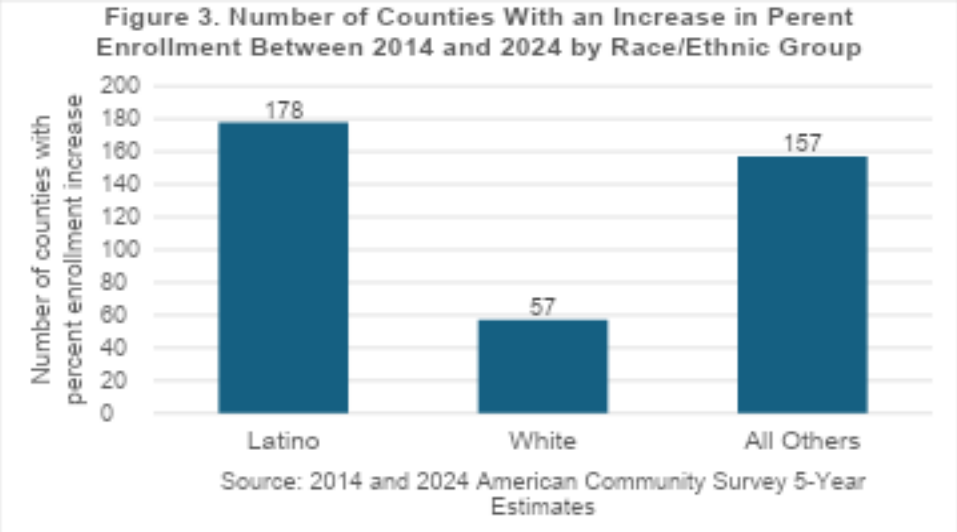


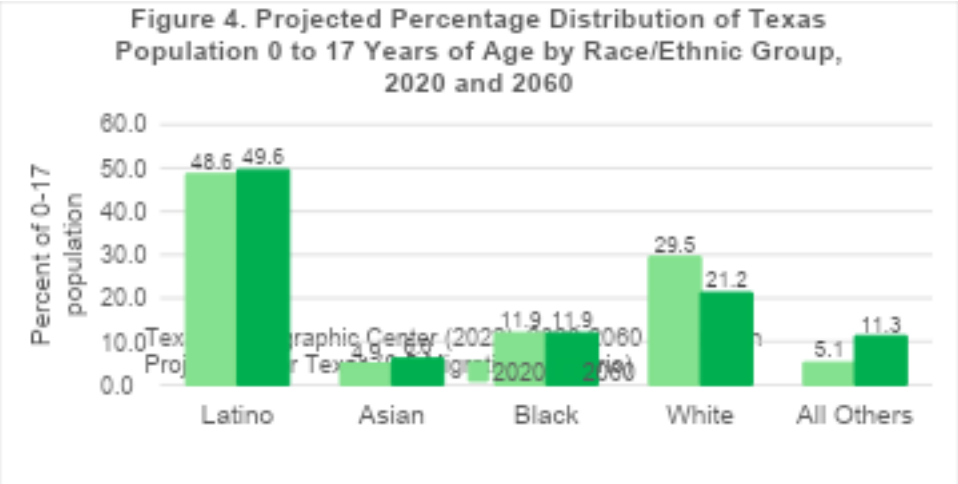
Figure 2: Texas Counties where Latinos are the Largest K–12 Enrollment Group, 2020-2024

Also, with an aging population and persistently low fertility rates, the white population has experienced substantial declines in its representation at the K–12 level across the state. Indeed, only 57 counties—less than one in four—saw increases in the percentage of white students between 2014 and 2024 (Figure 3). In contrast, 178 counties (seven in ten) experienced increases in the percentage of Latino students, and 157 counties (a bit more than three in five) saw growth in the percentage of non-white students from all other racial and ethnic groups. Taken together, these trends point unmistakably to the expanding presence of Latino students and, more broadly, non-white students across larger regions of Texas in the coming decades.



The Future

Population projections for Texans ages 0 to 17 show a declining share of white youth and rising numbers of students of color. Figure 4 indicates that the white youth population is expected to fall from 29.5 percent in 2020 to 21.2 percent in 2060. Over the same period, Latino children will remain the largest racial and ethnic group, with increasing shares of Asian children and those from other non-white racial and ethnic groups. These trends underscore a central reality: the future of Texas depends on the educational success of Latino, Asian, Black, Indigenous, and other non-white youth whose growing presence will shape the state's social, economic, and civic life for decades to come.



Conclusion

We owe it to our Latino, Black, and, more broadly, all students of color to restore an educational curriculum and set of programs in which they are visible, valued, and vital. We must reverse the erasure and erosion that has become increasingly prominent over the last few years. Students of color are the future of Texas. They will constitute a disproportionate share of our future college student population, our workforce, our consumers, and our taxpayers—central to the social and economic well-being of the state in the decades ahead.

Threats to Diversity and Academic Freedom in Higher Education
Brian Evans, Professor
Engineering at UT Austin
Past President, Texas AUUP

Concerns

I am testifying today out of deep concern over the growing censorship of curriculum, research, and healthcare across our public colleges, universities, and health institutions. I urge higher-education administrators—and the upcoming Legislative session—to address these issues constructively and transparently. Our 1.4 million students, along with hundreds of thousands of faculty members and staff, depend on meaningful action. My remarks focus on public universities, though similar challenges are unfolding across our community colleges as well.

Aspirations

In the age of AI, employers increasingly value what machines cannot replicate: creative thinking, empathy, collaboration, and adaptability. Many of today's students will enter careers that do not yet exist, making the freedom to learn more essential than ever. Free inquiry,

expression, exploration, and dissent are the engines of learning and innovation—and they depend on faculty and staff having the autonomy to teach, mentor, advise, and conduct research without institutional censorship.

Censorship in Teaching and Learning

I am not aware of any state or federal laws that ban specific course topics at Texas public colleges and universities. Neither SB 17 (2023) nor SB 37 (2025) that impose such restrictions. Yet public universities are nevertheless censoring course topics, assigned readings, and classroom discussions. This pattern of self-censorship undermines academic freedom, the liberty professors need to teach so that students have the freedom to learn; it also compromises the ability of faculty and staff to teach, mentor, and conduct research without fear of institutional retaliation.

At least five Texas public university systems have restricted the teaching of topics related to race, gender, gender identity, and sexual orientation. Administrators are using automated review systems to flag thousands of course syllabi, requiring instructors to remove content or risk course cancellation. At Texas A&M, this process resulted in banning Plato's *Symposium* in a philosophy course. Policies in the Texas Tech University System led to prohibiting Plato's *Republic*, withholding race-related information from first-year law students studying Dred Scott v. Sandford, and blocking medical education on treating racial and sexual minorities at health-science campuses. Texas Tech also censored content in biology courses. As a result, many instructors now self-censor to avoid having their courses flagged, creating an environment where academic freedom is constrained not by law, but by institutional policy and fear of reprisal.

Consider a student who wants to discuss a topic that is banned—or might soon be banned—by their institution. What are instructors supposed to do?

- Moderate the discussion—and risk their job.
- Leave the classroom—and forfeit the students' analyses and abandon their responsibility to maintain a safe learning environment.
- Censor the discussion—and deny students the opportunity to think critically about the world they live in.

None of these options protects the freedom to learn and teach.

Universities are also limiting students' freedom to learn by eliminating degrees, courses, and entire departments related to race, ethnicity, gender, gender identity, and climate change. They are also removing choices for core curriculum courses required for every major and even discontinuing low-cost minors and certificates.

Faculty Recruiting & Retention

Faculty recruiting and retention occur in a national marketplace. Faculty expects institutions to uphold the widely adopted AAUP principles of academic freedom and the

protections they provide through shared governance, due process, and tenure. In 2023, SB 18 weakened tenure and due-process safeguards, making it harder for Texas universities to attract and retain top scholars. Shared governance, a collaborative, trust-based model of institutional leadership, calls on faculty and administrators to jointly participate in managing a university's operations. The practice of shared governance in American higher education has roots stretching back nearly two centuries.

An August 2024 survey found too few applicants for Texas faculty positions, and more than a quarter of faculty interviewed for jobs in other states. Key reasons for leaving included concerns about academic freedom, shared governance, tenure, and salary. About two-thirds (61.0%) would not recommend Texas for a faculty position to their colleagues out of state. More than a quarter (26.3%) plan to interview elsewhere this coming year, and more than a quarter (28.3%) also said they have interviewed elsewhere since 2022. The top destinations for faculty seeking to leave were, first, California, second, New York, and third, Colorado.

Faculty respondents reported significant hiring impacts stemming from tenure policy changes and political attacks on higher education: 56.4% saw fewer applicants, 54.0% observed candidate hesitancy in interviews, 50.5% noted lower applicant quality, and 28.4% experienced all three effects. More than 45% knew faculty who declined job offers at their campus, while fewer than 20% reported no hiring impact at all. Among faculty seeking to leave Texas, their greatest concern was the state's political climate, particularly with respect to academic freedom, DEI, and tenure in higher education as well as reproductive/abortion access and LGBTQ+ rights statewide.

In 2025, SB 37 limited shared governance by expanding administrative control over curriculum and Faculty Senates. In the past three years, 130 AAUP members left Texas for out-of-state faculty positions because of institutional censorship or state laws affecting their ability to do their jobs. This summer, Professor Lisa Limeri resigned her tenured position at Texas Tech due to censorship of her biology courses.

The cumulative effect is a loss of talented faculty and their innovation, a threat to Texas's competitiveness and national reputation, and, critically, an incomplete education for students entering a competitive job market.

Conclusion

Texas students deserve a place where they can learn freely, and faculty deserve workplaces where they can teach and research without fear. When universities censor ideas, weaken tenure, and limit shared governance, they lose talented people and limit students' opportunities. The future of higher education in Texas requires safeguarding academic freedom; and we need leaders to restore trust, support open learning, and keep our colleges strong and viable for generations to come.

Gonzalez v. Douglas and the Future of Academic Freedom in Texas

Angela Valenzuela, Professor
Education, UT Austin

Thank you for the opportunity to speak today. My name is Angela Valenzuela. I am Professor of Educational Leadership and Policy at the UT at Austin, Director of the Texas Center for Education Policy, and a member of the National Academy of Education. I speak today, however, in my personal capacity—as an educator, a scholar of public schooling and higher education, and someone who has spent decades studying the barriers facing minoritized youth. I also speak as someone who testified in the case now known as *Gonzalez v. Douglas*, which addressed the dismantling of Mexican American Studies in the Tucson Unified School District and remains directly relevant to the censorship we are witnessing today, including the dismantling of Ethnic and Gender Studies at UT Austin.

My testimony focuses on the prohibitions on the teaching of race and gender found in Senate Bill 37, and on the related restrictions embedded, in different form, in the Trump Administration's Compact for Higher Education. I will first frame the moment we are living through; then turn to *Gonzalez v. Douglas* and the constitutional principles it established; and finally apply those principles to Texas's current legislative architecture and to the consolidation of Ethnic and Gender Studies programs at UT Austin. I will argue that *Gonzalez* has direct bearing on the constitutionality of SB 37 and similar laws, particularly where there is evidence of discriminatory intent or viewpoint-based censorship.

The Moment We Are Living Through

We are living through a coordinated backlash against DEI, Ethnic Studies, Women's and Gender Studies, Sexuality Studies, and public education itself. This moment is not about "protecting students" or "ending indoctrination," as its proponents claim. It is about enforcing ignorance and preserving racial and gender hierarchies—about controlling the narrative and limiting community self-awareness and empowerment.

That erasure extends beyond policy. It reaches into our shared cultural memory, shaping what is preserved, what is honored, and what is pushed into oblivion. The attacks on Ethnic Studies, the banning of books, and the silencing of educators who speak the truth all reflect a calculated project to reorder memory itself. The intent is not simply to stifle dissent but to render entire histories incomprehensible to generations yet to come. Ignorance, in this context, is not an accident; it is manufactured, fortified, and deployed to preserve the existing order—not least the incumbencies of those in power, as the recent fight over mid-decade redistricting makes clear.

The *Gonzalez v. Douglas* Precedent

I had the honor of testifying in what began as Arce v. Douglas and is now known as *Gonzalez v. Douglas*. Teachers and students sued the Arizona Superintendent of Public

Instruction and members of the Arizona State Board of Education after officials eliminated the successful Mexican American Studies program in Tucson under Arizona Revised Statute § 15-112, a law that prohibited courses that "promote resentment," "advocate ethnic solidarity," or "are designed primarily for pupils of a particular ethnic group." Teachers and students argued that the state had targeted their curriculum precisely because it foregrounded Mexican American perspectives, histories, and intellectual traditions, and that the effort was driven by racial animus and a political agenda of organized forgetting (Cabrera et al., 2014).

The federal court agreed on both constitutional claims. On the First Amendment claim, the court held that state officials had acted with an impermissible purpose to restrict students' access to ideas they disfavored—unconstitutional viewpoint discrimination. On the Fourteenth Amendment claim, the court found that the elimination of the program was motivated by racial animus toward Mexican Americans (*Gonzalez v. Douglas*, 2017).

Gonzalez establishes two questions I believe Texas should be asking right now. The First Amendment question is about ideas: what ideas are being suppressed or disfavored? The Fourteenth Amendment question is about people: who is being singled out, and why? The court ruled, in effect, that teachers have a right to teach—and students a right to learn—a curriculum that reflects their experiences and intellectual traditions. And it established a crucial principle: the mere passage of a law restricting teaching and research does not guarantee its constitutional survival. Where a state suppresses particular perspectives or academic fields, especially those tied to the histories and identities of marginalized communities, it invites serious First Amendment scrutiny and is unlikely to prevail.

Texas's Legislative Architecture and the Echoes of Arizona

We now see unmistakable echoes of ARS § 15-112 in Texas—not adopted in a single statute but assembled in pieces across several.

Senate Bill 3, Texas's anti–Critical Race Theory law, restricts the teaching of race and history in K–12 schools and uses language nearly identical to Arizona's: it bans teaching concepts that might cause students to "feel discomfort, guilt, or psychological distress" because of race or sex—an interpretation so broad it suppresses discussion of racism, structural inequity, and collective historical experience (Intercultural Development Research Association, 2021). Senate Bill 17 prohibits DEI offices and identity-based programming in public universities, mirroring Arizona's prohibition on courses "designed primarily for pupils of a particular ethnic group." Senate Bill 18 curtails tenure rights and protections. Senate Bill 37 eviscerates faculty governance across the higher education system, replacing longstanding traditions of faculty oversight with politically appointed boards and administrators beholden to partisan interests, and restricts what can be taught in college classrooms about race, gender, and social identity—precisely the kind of restriction struck down in *Gonzalez*.

Together, these laws form an interlocking architecture of repression. The through-line from ARS § 15-112 to Texas policy is unmistakable: constrain what can be taught, surveil the curriculum for "divisive concepts," eliminate identity-affirming programs, silence collective narratives, and enforce an atomized, decontextualized vision of the individual student. That is exactly the logic Arizona used, and it is exactly the logic Texas has now replicated.

Applying the Precedent to UT Austin

I want to be precise: UT Austin is not Tucson, and consolidation, by itself, does not establish a constitutional violation. But *Gonzalez* teaches us not to end our inquiry simply because an action is described in neutral administrative language.

At UT Austin, Mexican American and Latina/o Studies, African and African Diaspora Studies, Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, and American Studies are losing their independent departmental status and being consolidated into a new Department of Social and Cultural Analysis. These are not failed academic programs. They are established fields with degree programs, graduate education, research agendas, scholarly publications, distinguished faculty, and significant intellectual histories—and this consolidation follows directly from the laws described above. Applying *Gonzalez's* two questions here: What ideas are being suppressed by folding these fields into a single, undifferentiated department? And who is being singled out by a restructuring that falls specifically on programs built around race, gender, and ethnicity? Those are the questions a court would ask, and they are the questions this Committee should ask as well.

The Cost of Erasure

The effects are concrete. UT Austin alone has suffered at least $47 million in cuts to research due to federal funding rollbacks, cuts that have damaged work across race, gender, immigration, public health, and mental health. Projects such as Dr. Danielle Clealand's research on Black Cuban immigrant histories are being erased (Valenzuela, 2025). This is epistemic violence, plain and simple: a purge of inconvenient truths. And yet, even amid this organized forgetting—what I have elsewhere called "subtractive schooling" and the "politics of erasure"—we still have the U.S. Constitution.

History offers a sobering warning about where the political regulation of knowledge can lead. In 1933, after the Nazis came to power in Germany, the Institute for Social Research—the intellectual home of what became known as the Frankfurt School—was closed by authorities; its scholars were driven into exile, and its work was condemned because it challenged authoritarianism, nationalism, antisemitism, capitalism, and prevailing structures of power. The comparison should not be overstated: Texas today is not Nazi Germany. But the lesson still holds. Universities become vulnerable when political authorities move beyond governing institutions and begin determining which forms of scholarship are ideologically acceptable,

which intellectual traditions are suspect, and which scholars or fields deserve institutional protection. Academic freedom is not merely a professional privilege; it is a democratic safeguard against the concentration of political—indeed authoritarian—power over knowledge itself.

Conclusion

Senate Bill 37, like Arizona's ARS § 15-112, is vulnerable to a First Amendment challenge because it targets specific viewpoints and identities for suppression. *Gonzalez v. Douglas* makes clear that such laws do not withstand constitutional scrutiny simply because they are enacted; they must survive it once a court examines their purpose and effect. I urge this Committee to apply the same two questions Gonzalez directs us to ask of Texas's current laws and of UT Austin's restructuring: what ideas are being suppressed, and who is being singled out.

Someday, Ethnic Studies courses will simply be called "a good education." Thank you for your time.

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Defending Academic Freedom in Texas Public Universities
Lisa L. Moore, Professor
English and Social and Cultural Analysis, UT Austin

Questions for the Representatives to Ask

https://latinocoalitionhighered.org/

Can students at UT still major in Women's, Gender and Sexuality Studies (WGSS), African and African Diaspora Studies, Mexican American and Latino Studies, and other areas? Can they still take courses in these areas of study?

Did the university close the gender, ethnic, and area studies departments close because of low enrollments?

Will closing WGSS save UT money? Will it reduce administrative inefficiency or bureaucracy?

Why should taxpayers support research, teaching, and learning in ethnic and gender studies? Isn't it too controversial or too niche for the public to fund?

Testimony

My name is Lisa Moore, and I am speaking today as a private citizen. I have been a faculty member at UT Austin since 1991 and most recently served as Chair of the Department of Women's, Gender and Sexuality Studies. Like several colleagues, I lost that position when the department was closed this summer along with six other departments.

I want to thank Representative Lulu Flores and the organizers of this hearing for creating a public space to discuss the future of higher education in Texas. Representative Flores has supported women's and gender studies at UT for many years and witnessed the long effort required to build a strong academic program in this area.

I am here to discuss the chilling effect on academic freedom and the growing climate of censorship on Texas public university campuses. These developments follow the passage of Senate Bill 17 in 2023 and Senate Bill 37 in 2025. SB 17 eliminated diversity, equity, and inclusion offices across public universities and led to the loss of dozens of positions at UT Austin. SB 37 imposed major changes to university governance, including the weakening of long-standing structures of faculty oversight. Together, these measures have altered the conditions under which universities teach, conduct research, and govern themselves.

One lesson from the closure of Women's, Gender and Sexuality Studies and related departments is that academic programs may be most vulnerable when they appear most secure. Over several decades we built a major, graduate program, and eventually a department. We trained students, produced internationally recognized research, and contributed to the intellectual life of the university. Yet that success did not protect us. In fact, our visibility and influence may have made us a target.

Fields such as gender and ethnic studies are often relatively small, but they have had a profound impact on universities and public life. Many practices that now seem routine emerged from decades of work by scholars in these fields: more inclusive teaching methods, accessibility initiatives, family and health accommodations, and broader efforts to make higher education available to people who were once excluded from it. These changes have benefited students, faculty, and staff across the university.

The attacks on these fields are often justified in different ways. Sometimes critics invoke budget concerns. At other times they claim to be promoting viewpoint diversity, enrollment

efficiency, or workforce preparation. Yet the targets remain remarkably consistent. Programs that examine race, gender, sexuality, inequality, and power continue to face heightened scrutiny regardless of their enrollments, productivity, or contributions.

Although Texas law does not explicitly prohibit teaching about race, gender, or sexuality, the political climate has nonetheless produced widespread self-censorship. Faculty members increasingly feel uncertain about what they can teach and how they can teach it.

A recent conversation with an engineering department chair illustrates the problem. One of his most accomplished faculty members studies technology and health care outcomes. She felt that she could not teach her subject responsibly without addressing how race and gender shape access to health care and patterns of illness. Yet she was afraid to do so. She worried about public attacks, online harassment, and professional retaliation. My colleague told me, with real frustration, "I can't protect her."

This concern is becoming common. Faculty members are reconsidering courses they were hired to teach because they fear being targeted for discussing topics central to their disciplines. Colleagues have withdrawn courses on public health, politics, and related subjects because race and gender are essential components of those fields. The result is not open dialogue and debate. It is silence.

Most professors are not activists or politicians. We spend our time conducting research, mentoring students, and sharing knowledge. Academic freedom exists because scholarships require intellectual independence. When scholars begin avoiding legitimate subjects out of fear, the quality of teaching and research inevitably suffer.

The threat extends beyond any single department or university. Texas and Florida have attracted national attention, but similar efforts are emerging across the country. These developments should concern anyone who values public education, regardless of political affiliation. Universities function best when ideas can be tested through evidence, debate, and expertise rather than through political pressure.

The closure of Women's, Gender and Sexuality Studies at UT Austin is therefore not simply a local administrative decision. It is part of a broader struggle over who gets to produce knowledge, what questions may be asked, and whether universities can remain places of open inquiry.

I want to close with a simple request. Please oppose further legislation that restricts academic freedom, weakens faculty governance, or narrows what can be taught at public universities. And ultimately, I urge you to work toward repealing SB 17 and SB 37.

The future of higher education in Texas depends on our willingness to defend the conditions that make teaching, learning, and research possible.

The Continuing Practice of Censorship in Texas Higher Education
Antonio Ingram, Senior Counsel
NAACP Legal Defense Fund

I want to thank Representative Lulu Flores and the organizers of this hearing for creating a public space to address the threats to diversity and academic freedom in Texas higher education. I represent the NAACP Legal Defense Fund (LDF). Founded in 1940 under the leadership of Thurgood Marshall, the LDF has always pursued a transformative mission: to achieve racial justice, equality, and an inclusive society.

Most Americans are familiar with our historic litigation in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), although we had already litigated and won *Sweatt v. Painter* in 1950. In *Sweatt v. Painter*, we represented a Black law student in Austin, Texas, challenging the exclusionary practices of the University of Texas School of Law.

The UT School of Law had rejected our client solely because he was Black. As a result of our litigation, we succeeded in integrating the law school here in Austin. Over the decades, LDF has continued to represent students of color in Texas to ensure they receive high-quality and equitable educational opportunities.

Through my advocacy, I have visited more than twenty-five public colleges and universities across the state. I have met with professors teaching Chicano studies at UT Austin and have spoken with medical school faculty at Texas Tech Health El Paso who are training future physicians to confront racial disparities in health care. I have also met with faculty and students studying Black political theory at the University of Houston.

I have witnessed firsthand the effects of the concerted effort in the Texas Legislature restrict discussions about race, racism, and systemic inequality. I am currently leading a lawsuit against Chancellor Brandon Creighton (formerly the chair of the Texas Senate Committee on Education and the author of SB 37) and the Texas Tech Board of Regents. The leadership of the Texas Tech University System has censored literature about Chicano communities and banned course materials by respected Black scholars such as Bell Hooks and Ta-Nehisi Coates.

When we examine the censorship sweeping across higher education in Texas, it is necessary to identify the targets. We must make clear who is being censored. What we see in Texas is an unmistakable attack on Black and brown communities. Curriculum that chronicles our struggles and that proposes solutions to our obstacles is under direct assault.

I am reminded of our case, *Sweatt v. Painter*. Although public universities in Texas can no longer legally exclude Black and brown students from classrooms in explicit ways, discrimination against these students and faculty has not disappeared. It has merely mutated.

Now it looks like Senate Bill 17 leading to the closure of the Monarch program at UT Austin—a program designed to provide resources to undocumented students who were disproportionately Latino. Now it looks like the University of Houston removing more than one

hundred courses from its core curriculum, including courses such as *Black Liberation Theology*. While Texas politicians cannot legally exclude Black and brown students from higher education, there is a clear attempt to shut down the spaces dedicated to supporting their retention. While they cannot reestablish racial segregation, they seek to exile curriculum that reflects our stories.

We cannot ignore the elephant in the room. This is not only about the First Amendment. It is not only about unprecedented government encroachment on Texas public colleges and universities. It is about whose voices are being targeted, whose spaces are being shut down, and whose stories are being erased from classrooms.

The evidence speaks for itself. It is Black and brown students. It is Black and brown professors who are teaching accurate and inclusive coursework. We have an uphill battle, but we must work to eradicate these new permutations of racial discrimination. Not only do Black and brown students belong in the classroom, but our stories, our ideas and our souls also deserve a seat in the halls of the academy.

The Latino Economy: A Pillar of America's Prosperity
Jim Estrada
Advocate for Educational Equity, Estrada Communications Group

In the latter decades of the twentieth century, Corporate Social Responsibility **(**CSR) theory focused on four major areas of responsibility: Economic (profitability), Legal (compliance with laws), Ethical (do what is right, fair, and just), and Philanthropic (investment in the well-being of surrounding communities). The focus of our family business, the Estrada Communications Group (ECG), was founded on core principles practiced by the McDonald's Corporation and Anheuser Busch Companies, with which our agency principals became well-versed. We focused on three areas: 1) Stakeholder Recognition (value everyone—Investors, Consumers, Vendors, and Employees), 2) Triple Bottom Line (measure success by People, Planet, and Profit), and 3) Risk Reduction: (Prevent lawsuits, reputational damage, and environmental damage).

ECG provided services to Anheuser Busch Companies, AT&T, CA Hispanic Chambers of Commerce, CA State University System, Catholic Diocese of Austin, Congressional Hispanic Caucus Institute, Hispanic Association on Corporate Responsibility, Lopez Foods, Inc., McDonald's Corporation, National Council of La Raza (now UNIDOS), Pizza Hut Corp., U.S. Hispanic Chambers of Commerce, University of Texas-Austin/NPR's Latino USA and KUT's Universo, Walmart Corp., and Wells Fargo. Our pioneering expertise also resulted in ECG's selection as the lead agency to plan and staff the simultaneous launch and introduction of the Texas Lottery in 15 local markets throughout Texas.

Latinos today represent nearly 70 million (20%) of the USA's total population. In 2024, Hispanic and Latino Americans contributed $4.4 trillion to the U.S. economy. According to the

latest data from the Latino Donor Collaborative and California Lutheran University, if the U.S. Latino economy were an independent nation, it would rank as the fourth-largest Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in the world, outperforming major economies like Japan, Germany, and India.

Key Economic Indicators

GDP Growth & Share: U.S. Latinos accounted for 28.2% of all U.S. economic growth. This segment of the economic engine has expanded more than twice as fast as the non-Latino U.S. economy.

Consumer Power: Latino consumption and purchasing power reached $3 trillion, larger than the entire GDP of Italy or Canada.

Labor Force Participation: The Latino workforce grew by 5.5%, pushing the total to 35.1 million active workers. Latinos maintain a labor participation rate of 69%, significantly higher than the 62% average of non-Latinos.

Entrepreneurship: The rate of net new business creation among Latinos is expanding nearly seven times faster than non-Latino businesses. There are currently over 5 million Latino-owned businesses operating across the United States.

Yet politicians, news media, and even business influencers focus on criminalizing members of the estimated ten percent of Spanish-speaking immigrants who are either undocumented or in the process of becoming naturalized U.S. residents. Along with many legal citizens, they are being arrested, jailed, deported, and even killed without the legal court proceedings guaranteed under the U.S. Constitution.

You may wonder why we should be concerned with the plight of the Spanish-speaking legal and undocumented immigrants. Foreign-born workers' annual U.S. spending power is estimated to be $390 billion, after taxes! Their housing market contributions are estimated to be in the tens of billions, including paying over $167 billion in rents and associated fees. Additionally, they are also major contributors to their local business economies, spending net incomes immediately on everyday goods, services, and other local commerce. They represent 9.7 million unauthorized workers active in labor-intensive industries like construction, hospitality, and agriculture, sustaining their purchasing capacity. In addition to their retail spending, these households contribute nearly $90 billion in federal, state, and local sales, property, and income taxes.

According to the Cato Institute's economic research, immigrants contribute more to taxes and economic growth than they cost in public benefits. Major findings from organizations like the Congressional Budget Office and other independent studies indicate that their financial and labor benefits outweigh the cost of public services they use.

Not all U.S. Hispanics/Latinos are immigrants—and that's a good thing! In 2024, U.S. Hispanic and Latino Americans contributed $4.4 trillion to the U.S. economy. According to the

latest data from the Latino Donor Collaborative and California Lutheran University, if the U.S. Latino economy were an independent nation, it would rank as the fourth-largest Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in the world, outperforming major economies like Japan, Germany, and India.

The top contributing sectors contributed to major changes as follows:

Finance & Real Estate

This sector served as the single largest industry block for the Hispanic/Latino demographic, generating $766 billion in individual economic activity.

Household Formation

Hispanic/Latino families are the foundational demographic driver of the domestic housing Sector, accounting for 92.6% of all net new U.S. household formations.

Education Boom:

Higher-level contributions are accelerating as the number of U.S. Latinos holding a bachelor's degree or higher grew 144.5% over the last decade and a half, expanding 3.2 times faster than the non-Latino population.

The principles of Corporate Social Responsibility are not only sound capitalism; they are also the foundation for building and sustaining what continues to attract so many immigrants to the United States—still one of the strongest examples of a functional and productive democracy. Whether some choose to support or ignore the reality of the nation's cultural evolution, we, as Hispanic, Latino, mestizo, or Indigenous people, will continue contributing to our families and communities, asking only for access to the full benefits and civil rights afforded to all law-abiding legal residents of this great nation.

Public Testimonies

Consolidation at the University of Texas is Plain Wrong and Actionable
Emilio Zamora, Professor Emeritus
History, UT Austin

The recent so-called "consolidation" of four academic departments at the University of Texas at Austin is misleading and dishonest, because it does not merely restructure—it dismantles the departments as we have long known them, erasing their identities under the convenient guise of administrative efficiency. It forces them into a single unit so large and so varied that no institution committed to excellence could hope to manage it well—unless

university administrators are creating the conditions to streamline and weaken the new department later.

Restructuring restricts the participation of each of the ethnic, women's, gender, and sexuality studies programs in the intellectual life of the university, placing them at the margins of scholarly engagement—where their voices can be readily dismissed, their contributions overshadowed, and their expertise devalued.

Restructuring discredits the longstanding, rigorous, and nationally recognized work these fields have produced, work that has shaped essential knowledge, transformed teaching, strengthened community and professional service, and built institutions that reinforce the university's standing. Their contributions have been repeatedly affirmed through formal, multi-level reviews at universities across the country, including the University of Texas.

Restructuring is wrong when it collapses distinct academic fields, each with its own methodologies, histories, and intellectual traditions, into an oversize structure that diminishes their autonomy and undermines their ability to serve undergraduate and graduate students well. At a time when statewide political pressures seek to restrict teaching on race, gender, and sexuality, this appears less like an academic reorganization and more like an ideologically motivated initiative.

Restructuring disproportionately targets the departments all-the-while knowing that the discriminatory act infringes upon the academic freedom of racially and culturally distinct groups that are explicitly protected by university policy and national standards. Faculty and students in these disciplines have already warned that the new structure could limit their ability to teach and learn the material essential to their fields. Such violations could well trigger external investigations by the Texas Legislature and civil-rights organizations concerned with discriminatory governance practices.

Restructuring appears politically motivated and actionable because the review process appears to be incomplete in that it disregards established vetting policies and procedures—the very safeguards meant to ensure fairness, transparency, and academic integrity. It diminishes protected-class scholarship, undermining fields whose contributions have long expanded the university's intellectual horizons. It violates core norms of academic integrity, including freedom of expression, disciplinary autonomy, and the diversity of viewpoints that a university is obligated to protect. And it reverses decades of progress in building nationally recognized programs that have added to the university's reputation and contributed to a more inclusive and productive scholarly community.

Restructuring signals that specific bodies of knowledge—particularly those rooted in race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality—are expendable. It undermines the principle that universities must cultivate a broad and inclusive intellectual community, not narrow it. And it

sets a dangerous precedent: that politically convenient restructuring can override rigorous evaluation, shared governance, and the rights of scholars whose work challenges, enriches, and advances the public mission of higher education.

Restructuring betrays public trust, because it fails to account for its actions—even when the Latino Coalition for Excellence in Higher Education, a community organization of good standing, twice requests a meeting with the president of the University of Texas, only to be met with silence. The public trust has been especially damaged in the communities whose histories, identities, and intellectual traditions represented by ethnic, women's, gender, and sexuality studies programs. These communities now see an institution willing to dismantle the work of their professors and students without transparency, without shared governance, and without regard for the constituencies most affected.

The harm extends to those who value the rule of law, procedural fairness, sound administrative principles, and institutional integrity, regardless of their ideological preferences. When an institution disregards its own vetting policies, bypasses established procedures, and undermines academic freedom, it erodes confidence not only in its leadership but also in its commitment to the public mission of higher education.

The forthcoming mid-term election signals a potential shift in legislative balance and has encouraged cautious optimism that a measure of reasonableness may influence state–university relations. The hope is that the political climate may be opening a narrow window for renewed dialogue and more principled governance.

We must make a good-faith effort to enter into constructive dialogue, to recalibrate policies, and to rebuild trust before our conversations harden into acrimonious and unfixable debate. Institutions do not heal by accident; they recover through deliberate engagement, transparent process, and willingness to confront the consequences of past decisions.

At this moment, the university faces a clear choice: it can continue down a path that discourages and alienates; or it can recognize the urgency of restoring transparency, accountability, and respect for the diverse intellectual traditions that define a truly great university. One path leads to deeper division. The other leads to honest dialogue, principled governance, and a recommitment to sound intellectual leadership. This moment demands courage and the willingness to act before the opportunity for repair slips away.

Protecting the Freedom to Learn at UT
Liz Rocha-Seelig, Doctoral Student
Language and Literacy Studies, UT Austin
Assistant Professor, Integrative Reading and Writing, Austin Community College

I am deeply saddened and angered by the elimination of Mexican American and Latina/o Studies and African and African Diaspora Studies as departments at UT. I am part of this culture, and one of the reasons I chose to attend UT was its reputation as a vibrant learning community shaped by the diversity of its people and academic opportunities.

As an educator of sixteen years and a doctoral student at UT, I believe our responsibility is to broaden and elevate valued histories, knowledge, and experiences—not shrink the spaces that sustain them. These departments represent decades of scholarship, advocacy, and work by students, faculty, and communities who fought to have their histories and experiences recognized within the university.

Eliminating or consolidating these departments does not strengthen UT; it diminishes the breadth of scholarship and learning that has long defined the university. When institutions allow outside pressures to dictate what can be studied, taught, or discussed, they risk losing exceptional professors and students who will choose campuses where their communities are valued.

I also worry about what this continued erasure means beyond UT. Our students will leave this university and this state to teach, research, lead, and work alongside people from many different backgrounds. The ongoing erasure in Texas raises real concerns about whether they were given the chance to engage fully with the perspectives needed to understand the world around them. We should be expanding opportunities for learning, not narrowing them.

Hope is not a strategy. But I am hopeful because I see my peers refusing to be silent. I see students, faculty, and community members speaking up, organizing, asking difficult questions, and standing beside one another. My hope is not in waiting for something to change. It is in the people around me who are taking action to protect the kind of education and university they believe in. That is the UT I want to be part of.

For the Love of Students
Sonia Hernández, Professor
History, Texas A&M University College Station

I submit this testimony to the Latino Coalition for Excellence in Higher Education as a Texas resident, taxpayer, and mother of a public-school student. While I have been an educator for over twenty years and currently a professor of history at Texas A&M University, I am only speaking for myself as a citizen.

At mass several Sundays ago at my church in College Station, Texas, the officiating priest spoke of sharing wealth with others. Citing St. Thomas Aquinas, among others, the homily urged members to care for others in need, to view our resources and even our knowledge as a blessing to benefit others. For many of us in higher education, this has been at the core of

our careers— teaching hundreds and thousands of undergraduate and graduate students, reading their essays and exams, leading discussions from large surveys of upwards of four hundred students to small, writing-intensive classes. We have shared our research in relatively unrestrained settings to instill intellectual curiosity in students, push them to think critically about any one topic, help them emerge as capable leaders of the next generation, and encourage them to share their wealth in the form of knowledge with others.

Students of all walks of life have crossed my path, and while not all were accepting of the topics in my classes, in the end, it was the sum of their educational experience that transformed them into complex, well-rounded citizens. My twenty-five years as an educator have not always been smooth sailing. I had a student once who took issue with my discussion of the importance of military history. He was against war and felt strongly about war's damaging effects on society as a whole and was quick to condemn any country whose history showed it to be the initiator of such conflict. Yet, it was academic freedom that allowed me to engage in research on the intersections of war and women and provided a platform to share my findings with him and the entire class, illustrating their larger significance.

I spoke about Mexican American families during World War II who sent multiple siblings abroad (think *Saving Private Ryan*, 1998), often sending two daughters to a WAAC unit while three brothers served in the regular army. There were numerous families who went through this same experience, which was both transformative and traumatic due to the unfortunate loss of multiple family members at once. I articulated the importance of military participation to the formation of identity and belonging for hundreds of Mexican Americans. For many, it was a formative period in shaping their identity as "American" citizens.

On another occasion, a student questioned why religion had to be included in my discussion about migration to Texas at the turn of the 20th century; the student was agnostic. I shared the long history of *Las Guadalupanas*, a Catholic grassroots organization led by women in communities who organized prayer, vigils, and a wide variety of activities sponsored by local churches, involving all members of the family, including young children. This religious engagement shaped the identity of so many in Texas. Teaching about religious engagement from a variety of religious traditions in a state that at one time was described as "…the home of the emigrant from everywhere," is part of that rich tradition of academic freedom (Unknown author, *Texas: The Home of the Emigrant from Everywhere*, 1876, DeGolyer Library, Southern Methodist University).

Academic freedom allowed me to add depth to the discussion, showing how people found ways to come together in mutually beneficial ways, pooling their resources, including knowledge about employment opportunities, home remedies for illnesses, access to bilingual books (involving multiple languages), community chests for burial assistance, and so much more—I use this as an example of how people from Texas made the best of any situation for survival. Thus, academic freedom allowed me to explain "Texas toughness" and resilience with historical examples.

Doing exceptional, cutting-edge research, particularly at an R1 institution like mine, requires an environment free from restraint or limitations on learning within the bounds of respectful dialogue. We have the privilege of sharing research with students in the classroom, and at the end of their academic journey, upon graduation, they take their experiences out into the world. They won't become carbon copies of us, and that is the last thing an educator wishes for, but they can become well-rounded citizens ready to take on the world's challenges.

This is the foundation of the American educational experience; if we are to compete with other educational systems and other countries, our students need exposure to research that is new, distinct, and challenging research that makes us shift in our chairs and compels us to question our own assumptions and biases. Academic freedom allows us to do this for our students. Even if they question the importance of military history, the importance of religious beliefs, and much more, we still do it because we love our students. Semester after semester, I still look forward to observing how my students get excited about research discoveries just as much as I did when I took my first college courses.

Academic freedom is not an abstract principle—it is an expression of love and care for our students. When those in power disrupt the very structures that allow us to teach responsibly in higher education, they create barriers to learning. Censoring any part of the curriculum under the guise of academic responsibility, reviewing courses without the involvement of faculty experts, or crafting policies driven by political agendas rather than peer-reviewed scholarly work undermines academic freedom. These actions chip away at the core of our teaching mission. At its most basic level, anti–academic freedom and censorship policies run counter to the long tradition of educators caring for their students. It's simple: anyone who supports such policies is not caring for our students.

I hope to continue caring for our students through teaching, as it is not only part of the mission of any educator, but also represents the very love we have for the next generation. I just hope those who lead our state, as well as those who lead our university systems, love our students just as much.

The Cost of Silencing Texas Educators
John Mckiernan-Gonzalez, Professor
History, Texas State University
Director, Center for the Study of the Southwest

I am here as a taxpayer, not a faculty member and not an administrator. And, for the first time, *me da cosa estar aqui*, worried about whether speaking to my elected representative may cost me my job.

These are my taxpayer credentials: I am the author of *Fevered Measures,* the first book examining the role the border and border communities played as policy laboratories for federal public health agencies between 1848-1942. I am also the co-editor of *Capturing Labor: A*

History of Unfree Work in the Southwest. As a published taxpayer, I trade in context and narrative. So, let me begin with context.

Texas has population of roughly 32 million people. Five million of these are students in public schools, which translates into about 400,000 graduates, all of which deserve a first-class public university education.

Context 2: about 125 years ago, the Texas Legislature established Southwest Texas State University as a normal school to educate teachers for communities across the state. About 30 years ago, President Denise Trauth kicked off a forced march to Research 1 (R1) status for the university. This was both enhanced rewards for peer-reviewed publication AND increased recruitment of students across Texas. The number of 'white students' has been consistent since then, but most of the enrollment growth of Texas State from 24,000 to 50,000 students has been from Latino households, mostly in Austin, San Antonio, Houston and Dallas and rural Texas, be it the eagle shale or West Texas. As our ex-provost Dr. Gene Bourgeois used to say, "the most Texas of Texas Public Universities."

We (Texas State University) are a majority women, majority-minority, (tuition dependent) Hispanic Serving Institution with a national reputation for being incredibly veteran friendly, queer friendly and academically and intellectually progressive. GO BOBCATS.

And, right as the university would arrive – now with enhanced land grant status – Dr. Denise M. Trauth tragically retired as president of the university because of a cancer diagnosis.

The road to R1 for Texas State university was enabled by Texas State faculty and a broad Latino commitment to enter higher education.

But, Texas State also has its own Latino excellence narrative that overlaps with the overthrow of Jim Crow in this state. In the 1920s, Graduate Elena Zamora O'Shea published the first environmental humanities themed novel *El Mesquite*. In the 1930s, Lyndon B. Johnson, whose first teaching job was at Uvalde, went on to become senator, senate majority leader, vice president, president. and San Marcos and Fredericksburg gad-about, all with support from poll-taxed Mexican American communities. In the 1950s, migrant farm worker and veteran Tomas Rivera cashed in his GI Bill after WWII and then went on to write *Y no se lo trago la tierra.* And, in the 80s, Jaime Chahin did the Chicano Dean thing long before it was a thing and before it became not a thing in this state.

Context 3: the department of history and the college of liberal arts have been great custodians of the public trust and public funds given to us. Since I have been tenured almost every person promoted to associate has won national and international book awards for their work. Recently, my senior colleague Jimmy McWilliams became a Pulitzer Prize finalist for *The Life and Poetry of James Sanford.*

Context 4: SB37 has stained the glorious future of enhanced research and salary funds for faculty and the possibility of smaller class sizes for students and faculty.

Within a day of its implementation, the university disbanded the Hispanic Policy Network, the Alliance Network and the Black Faculty and Staff Association. Student support staff were dismissed for saying that the university would continue to support its minority students. And then, as our university community started to wrestle with the possibility of enhanced research funds, administrators disbanded the faculty senate and dismissed Tom Alter, a historian of radical labor movements, for speaking before a group of self-identified radical labor activists. Idris Robinsor, a philosophy professor had his contract non-renewed for giving an off campus talk on philosophy and foreign policy, where a fight broke out afterwards.

Saeed Moshfeghyeganeh, a professor in the physics department faced non-renewal, and it is unclear if it is because they expressed public support for immigrants, LGBTQIA+ students or Palestinian students. Others – in my department – have discouraged from a teaching by the highest levels of the university, not their peers in the department. And, a faculty member who led in the creation of the Latino Studies Minor in 2017, was dismissed from her position as Director of the Center for Gender and Ethnic Studies for supporting a student who asked whether there would be support for Latino students after SB 37. So, what have we been doing as taxpayers since receiving enhanced research funds? Well, we talk about Tom's case, we talk about the philosophy department, and we talk about who is next, and why.

And, as a taxpayer, why should I care? We do not talk about our research interests. We don't talk about research projects. We do not express interest about or responsibilities for being faculty in a first-gen, progressive, first class with a substantial, rural, urban, and Latino community. We perform what Russell Vought, the conservative ideologue, has wanted to create: "terrorized state employees," not researchers, scholars, and community members. And that outcome, *queridos y queridas*, is a waste of more than a century of public investment as well as my taxpayer dollars and yours.

Policy proposals

- Enhanced formal consultation between the Progressive Legislative Caucus and faculty and staff representative bodies across the state.
- A return to a state institution that understands the principles of academic freedom, freedom of assembly and free speech.
- A conversation about how our university leaders can do their best to defend and expand the resources associated with what HSI and minority-serving designations means in

Texas, a diverse, female majority, HSI, minority – majority, deeply diverse, wealthy and unequal state.

Texas Students Deserve the Full Story
Jacob Zaragoza, Undergraduate Student
Education, UT Austin

Schools are a collaboration between public citizens and government. Families across the state depend on them not only to prepare their children for the workforce but also to help them participate meaningfully in the society we share. Public educational institutions are responsible for providing all students with an equal and fair opportunity to learn. However, dismantling ethnic studies departments and censoring academic concepts creates disparities in the learning process that shape—and limit—students' educational experiences.

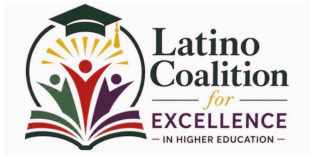
These actions devalue the quality of education Texas students receive and do a disservice to families, who are major stakeholders in the educational ecosystem. They erase the histories of historically marginalized communities and recast their knowledge as ideological brainwash. Taken together, these actions signal that the histories of more than half the state's population are not fundamental to the learning process, and, as a result, students are denied a truly holistic and high-quality education.

In closing, Texas is home to a rich and vibrant history shaped by the cultures and contributions of many communities that continue to grow and evolve across the state. Students deserve not only to learn about these histories but also to be active collaborators in shaping them within their classrooms.

Defending Academic Freedom in Texas Higher Education
Alejandra Elenes, Professor and Director
Department of Race, Ethnicity, Gender and Sexuality Studies, UT San Antonio

My name is Alejandra Elenes, and I am testifying today as a private citizen; I am not representing any organization. I am here because I am deeply concerned about the future of public higher education in Texas. Over the past thirty years as a faculty member in Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies and Ethnic Studies, I have had the privilege of teaching students who have gone on to become exceptional leaders in their communities—including a former state senator, college professors, educators, nonprofit CEOs, librarians, and archivists, among many others.

The implementation of legislation aimed at dismantling Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, tenure, and faculty governance in Texas is stripping faculty of their rights over curricular decisions and limiting students' access to knowledge. Rules prohibiting the teaching of



"controversial" subjects—without defining what that means—function as direct attacks on academic freedom.

The closure of Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at Texas A&M University; the cancellation of courses addressing gender and race throughout the state; UT Austin's consolidation of African and African Diaspora Studies, Women's and Gender Studies, American Studies, and Mexican American and Latina/o Studies into a single Social and Cultural Analysis unit; and UT San Antonio's merger of the Department of Race, Ethnicity, Gender, and Sexuality Studies with the Department of Bicultural–Bilingual Studies all reflect a political climate increasingly shaped by anti-democratic policies that undermine academic freedom. These unilateral, top-down actions constitute political interference that threatens students' access to a meaningful education. The free exchange of ideas is the foundation of a democratic society.

Women's Gender and Sexuality and Ethnic Studies departments were born out of grassroots efforts by students, faculty and staff who recognized gaps in critical knowledge about women and our communities. Knowledge is necessary for a society based on social justice principles. A free society respects the free exchange of ideas. A critical educated population is necessary to advance society's knowledge and democratic processes. In a free society, the state does not dictate what one can learn and think. Women's, Gender and Sexuality and Ethnic Studies have been part of the creation of knowledge that has opened opportunities for students to critically engage with the world for over 50 years. It is my hope that we restore academic freedom in institutions of higher education in Texas to ensure a prosperous future.

I thank The Latino Coalition for Excellence in Higher Education, the Texas Legislative Progressive Caucus and State Representative Lulu Flores for organizing this People's Hearing on Threats to Diversity and Academic Freedom in Higher Education. I am honored to add my voice in seeking better alternatives to educate Texans and support higher education in Texas.

Political Interference and the Future of Texas Higher Education
Lauren Gutterman, Associate Professor and Former Chair
Departments of American Studies and Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, UT Austin

My name is Lauren Gutterman, and I am writing in my capacity as a private citizen. I am also a faculty member at UT Austin, where I have worked since 2015. I am currently an Associate Professor in the Departments of American Studies and Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, which will be eliminated and consolidated into the Department of Social and Cultural Analysis on August 16. On that date, I will also lose my position as Chair of the Department of American Studies, a role I have held since fall 2024.

Over the past academic year, I have had a firsthand view of the chilling of speech and violations of academic freedom that are happening at UT Austin. In the fall of 2025, I was asked to serve on a committee on academic structure in the College of Liberal Arts. The committee was tasked with addressing so-called "fragmentation" within the College, with the goal of creating a

smaller number of administrative units. My colleagues and I took our assignment seriously, and we proposed several potential alternative administrative structures. None of these proposals were taken seriously.

Rather, over time, it became clear that the goal of the committee was to provide a pretense of faculty involvement in the politically motivated, pre-determined shuttering of seven departments within the College of Liberal Arts which were to be combined into two new units. Following the instruction of the president and provost, the departments of African and African Diaspora Studies, American Studies, Mexican American and Latina/o Studies, and Women's, Gender and Sexuality Studies were to be closed and combined into a new Department of Social and Cultural Analysis.

The departments of French and Italian Studies, Germanic Studies, and Slavic and Eurasian Studies, were to be closed and combined in a new Department of European and Eurasian Studies. At no point was our committee provided with a clear explanation about why these departments, rather than other departments in the college with an equivalent—or in some cases even smaller—number of undergraduate majors, had to be closed.

The elimination of the American Studies Department along with the six other departments has had a clear detrimental impact on faculty and students and has contributed to a chilling of research and teaching around issues of race, gender, and sexuality. As has been widely reported, one of my colleagues in American Studies who researches the role of technology in policing the US/Mexico border was denied tenure at the president and provost's level, despite strong support from my department, the college, and eight external reviewers. This decision was made only days after the closure of our department was announced in February.

Since then, the Department of American Studies has lost donors; course enrollments are down; former students have contacted me in sadness and anger fearing that the degrees they earned are now meaningless as they were conferred by a department that no longer exists. Current graduate students have expressed concern that they will lose funding opportunities within the Institution or face other punishments if their research focuses on issues of racial, gender, or sexual inequality. And instructors in my unit are censoring lessons on gender and sexuality for fear of losing their jobs.

Students cannot learn and faculty cannot teach freely under these conditions. For the sake of current and future Texas students, I urge you to resist the political interference in higher education in Texas, and to reverse SB 17 and SB 37 which have enabled the attacks on racial, ethnic, women's, gender, and sexuality studies we are now experiencing.

Understanding One Another

Paloma Alaniz, Business Entrepreneur and Army Veteran
Degrees from University of North Texas and Texas A&M

I am a United States Army veteran who served in Afghanistan, an emergency management professional, a mother, and a Texan. I submit this testimony because I am concerned about what we lose when our universities diminish the intentional study of culture, identity, and the histories of the people who make up our state and our country. The immediate debate may be about departments, programs, curricula, and organizational structures. But beneath those questions is a much larger one: What is education for?

Certainly, education should prepare students to work, innovate, and contribute to our economy. But education should also prepare human beings to live among other human beings. It allows us to encounter histories we have never heard, cultures we have never experienced, and perspectives we may never have considered. Sometimes education helps us understand someone else. Sometimes it helps us understand ourselves.

I learned the value of that kind of understanding in an unlikely place. I learned it in war. I served in Afghanistan in 2003 in a combined, joint, multinational military environment. I served alongside military members from nations around the world and learned from the Afghan allies whose country we were in. And within our own American military was remarkable diversity—a reflection of races, cultures, religions, and family histories from across our country and, in many ways, across the world.

We learned about one another because we had to. We shared pieces of home, encountered unfamiliar customs, laughed together, and discovered differences worth appreciating. Ultimately, we trusted one another with our lives. Beneath our different languages, religions, nationalities, and uniforms was something remarkably simple: we wanted to accomplish our mission and come home alive to the people we loved.

And when someone did not make it home, we cried the same tears for friends who shed the same color blood. War has a brutal way of stripping away everything that is superficial. Our differences did not disappear; they simply became smaller than the humanity we shared. We did not find unity by becoming the same. We found it by recognizing one another.

That lesson followed me home. Years later, at the Federal Emergency Management Agency, I had the privilege of helping develop a strategic plan for diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility for our national workforce. To me, that work reflected something experience had already taught me: people do not have to become the same to belong to the same team.

Today, diversity, equity, and inclusion have become politically charged. I understand that reasonable people can disagree about policies, question whether programs were effective, or believe some efforts were implemented poorly. Those conversations are legitimate. But

disagreement over policy should not become fear of a principle. And disagreement over terminology should not cause us to abandon something fundamentally human: the desire to know and be known.

Every human being asks some version of the same question: *Do I belong here? Does my story matter? Will you try to understand me?* Those are not questions of the political left or political right. They are human questions. And they belong in education. Because our children should never have to go to war to learn what I learned there. They should be able to learn it in a classroom.

They should encounter people they may never meet through history, literature, culture, and scholarship. They should study cultures they do not yet understand and wrestle with difficult questions about race, religion, gender, identity, and history in places designed for inquiry. Education does not require students to agree with every perspective they study. Understanding is not endorsement. Knowledge is not indoctrination. Education asks something more basic of us: *Learn before you judge.* That principle has meaning here in Texas.

I am Mexican American. My family's roots in this land go back generations. My history is not adjacent to Texas history. It is Texas history. But Texas has never belonged to only one story. We proudly teach generations of schoolchildren about the Six Flags of Texas—six governments that have claimed sovereignty over this land. That familiar symbol tells us something important about ourselves: Texas was shaped by different nations, different peoples, different cultures, and different chapters of history.

Texas's story is larger than those six flags. Indigenous peoples lived here long before any of them were raised. Enslaved Black people and their descendants shaped the state. Generations of Tejanos built communities that endure today. Immigrants arrived from Europe and, later, from across the world. People migrated from every region of the United States and made Texas their home. Texas is not diminished by the complexity of its history; Texas is the complexity of its history. We do not teach the Six Flags because every chapter beneath those flags was just, or because everyone experienced those chapters in the same way. We teach them because understanding where we have been helps us understand who we are. The same principle should guide our universities.

I want my daughter to know the Mexican American history that helped shape her family and her state. I want her to experience the powerful realization: *I come from somewhere. My family contributed something. My story matters.* But I do not want her education to stop at the boundaries of her own identity. I want her to study Black history, Indigenous history, Jewish history, Asian American history, women's history, LGBTQ history, immigrant history, and histories entirely different from her own. I want her, eventually, to encounter another person's story and realize: *Their story matters too.* That is not division. That is empathy. We do not create

unity by knowing less about one another. Understanding another person's history does not diminish our own. Acknowledging another person's pain does not require denying ours. Celebrating another culture does not threaten ours. Loving who we are does not require fearing who someone else is.

That is why I am concerned when the intentional study of culture and identity begins to be treated as inherently divisive. Universities will reorganize. Programs will change. Legislatures will establish priorities. Those entrusted with our public institutions have both the authority and responsibility to scrutinize them. But authority carries another responsibility: to consider not only what we are changing, but what we may lose in the process.

I am not asking anyone to defend an acronym. I am not asking anyone to endorse every policy that has ever carried the language of diversity or inclusion. I am asking something more fundamental: Defend our willingness to know one another. Before we diminish the places where that learning occurs, I ask those entrusted with these decisions to look beyond the politics of this moment and consider: What kind of human beings do we want education to produce? Do we want young people to retreat from what they do not understand—or become curious about it? Do we want to produce suspicion—or understanding? Do we want our children merely to tolerate one another—or do we want them to recognize humanity in one another?

Texas is not limited to the story of one group. We should be confident enough in who we are to teach all of who we are. And for generations from now, I hope our children can look back and say that when we were given a choice between retreating from one another and understanding one another, we chose understanding. Not because we agreed on everything. Not because our differences disappeared. But because we understood that those differences never made any human life less worthy of being known. Thank you for the opportunity to provide this testimony.

A Call to Protect Public Education
Nora de Hoyos Comstock
Past Trustee, Austin Community College, Founder of Comadres Para Las Américas

Thank you, Representative Flores and members of the Progressive Legislative Caucus. My name is Nora de Hoyos Comstock, and I speak today as a proud UT alumna and a national and community leader of twenty-six year

I am here to express my utter disbelief at how my alma mater has acted with impunity—bowing to legislative edicts without the involvement or consent of the faculty, staff, and students who form its core. Complying with state law does not require abandoning democratic processes, individual rights, or institutional decency.

For over two decades, I have worked to preserve and celebrate our Latine culture and social capital. The scholars, researchers, and artists who build the knowledge base of our contributions to this nation are now being callously fired or forced out. This repressive behavior at UT Austin and across Texas is undemocratic. We are not asking for special treatment—we are asking for fairness and the enforcement of long-standing university rules.

Whether leadership acknowledges it or not, demography is destiny. Texas cannot build a thriving future if it relies on importing talent while dismantling the educational pathways of its own residents.

Right now, the Latine community in Texas generates more than $500 billion in economic output—the second-largest Latino economy in the nation—and contributes tens of billions in state taxes. Censoring history and dismantling ethnic studies undermine the very workforce Texas depends on for its economic future.

Higher education must be prepared to serve all students if our state is to prosper. I urge the Progressive Legislative Caucus to hold university leadership accountable, demand transparency, and protect the integrity of Texas public education.

How UT's Leadership Disciplines Student Voices
Daniel Ramirez, Undergraduate Student
Computer Science, UT Austin

My name is Daniel Ramirez, and I was once an undergraduate student at UT. I am here today to speak to the nature of the administration at our university. Specifically, the leadership of President Jim Davis and Provost William Inboden. I speak from personal experience.

I come from the Rio Grande Valley, a Chicano born and raised, so when rumors spread that the Mexican American and Latino Studies Department might be shuttered, I immediately joined efforts to understand how we could prevent such a decision. The field of study has been integral to my life—and to the lives of countless Texans—and eliminating it would be a serious mistake.

Around this time, President Trump sent UT his federal compact on "Excellence in Higher Education." I felt that this agreement effectively handed our university over to the federal government in a way that runs completely counter to academic freedom. Yet the chair of the Board of Regents responded favorably to the compact, a reaction that only deepened my concern.

All told, I was perplexed by the decisions coming from our university and system leadership. I remained confused—until I began looking more closely into who these individuals were. President Jim Davis comes directly from the attorney general's office; he has no teaching

experience whatsoever. Of all the qualified leaders available, how is it that we ended up with Jim Davis? And then there is Provost William Inboden. He served on President Bush Jr.'s National Security Council during the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars and later founded and ran a national security think tank at the university. This raises important questions about how—and why—such individuals were selected to lead an institution like the University of Texas.

You don't become a major figure in the attorney general's office, serve on the National Security Council, or run a large national-security think tank by being a non-partisan saint. You reach those positions by being an intense partisan—by serving as a tool of right-wing political institutions. These roles are as politically charged as one can hold without being an elected official.

Most telling of all is Inboden's former position at the University of Florida. He was hired there in June 2023 to lead UF's Hamilton Center—a project that strikes a familiar chord. It is an institution that endlessly extols the "Western intellectual tradition" and, in the words of Governor Ron DeSantis, who heavily championed its creation, seeks to combat "the tactics of liberal elites who suppress free thought in the name of identity politics and indoctrination." These statements reveal the explicit ideological mission behind the enterprise.

Most telling of all is Inboden's former position at the University of Florida. He was hired in June 2023 to lead University of Florida's Hamilton Center, a project that came to strike a familiar chord at the University of Texas. The institution tirelessly extols the "Western intellectual tradition" and, in the words of Florida Governor Ron DeSantis who heavily championed its creation, seeks to combat "the tactics of liberal elites who suppress free thought in the name of identity politics and indoctrination." These statements lay bare the explicit ideological mission driving the enterprise.

Inboden's position was clear. From his interviews on the subject and the history of the institution he was leading, he was a political pawn, through and through. Things became clear when looking at work put out by think tanks like the Manhattan Institute, housing the likes of Chris Rufo – a leading figure in the dismantling of the New School. The Trumpian Compact for Higher Education has been building for at least a decade, and we are seeing it take shape in state governments that they control. With that context, it becomes clear how this is relevant to UT President Davis—and especially Provost Inboden. Both were supported the broader project, having worked within the very institutions driving this ideological push.

All that said, this was something I discovered in Fall of 2025, as the Compact came to campus and consolidation was rumored. I want to spend the rest of my time talking about the experiences myself and other student activists have had with this administration.

All that said, this was what I was uncovering in the fall of 2025, as the Compact was being considered by UT and rumors of consolidation began to circulate. I want to spend the rest

of my time discussing my experiences—and those of fellow student activists—with this administration.

In October 2025, the Compact arrived. We were stunned that our university's Board of Regents would consider collaborating with the federal government for overt political reasons. Student leaders, faculty, and staff reached out repeatedly—relentlessly—to the upper administration simply to understand what they were thinking. The ask was straightforward: transparency.

It is important to note that the university had already dismantled the Faculty Council, and pseudo-democratic bodies like Student Government Association were discouraged from issuing politically charged statements. In effect, there was no meaningful avenue for campus input on an agreement between the federal government and our university, an institution funded by students who pay thousands in tuition and sustained by academics who devote their lives to it.

I became aware of a single instance in which the provost agreed to meet with a student. Afterward, she told me that he spent half an hour introducing himself, then proceeded to dodge every question she raised about the Compact and the rumors of consolidation.

Emails went unanswered. Even higher-level faculty struggled to obtain any information about how Davis and Inboden were approaching President Trump's Compact and the prospect of consolidation. A completely opaque cloud hung over decisions that would have enormous consequences for the university community.

After weeks of silence, student activists concluded that the only way to open a dialogue was to ask—directly, publicly, and in person. We planned a visit to the Provost's Office, a public space open to every member of the university community. So, on November 7, 2025, I joined roughly ten students in walking to that office to request a meeting—or at the very least to schedule one—to address the Compact, the possibility of consolidation, and the many other questions the administration had left entirely unanswered.

While calmly—but firmly—asserting our right as students who pay to attend this university, and our right to have a voice in the direction of this public institution, we were met not with dialogue but with the arrival of a dozen police officers and the Dean of Students telling us we had to leave immediately. Despite the shocking response, we left—thinking that although we didn't get what we came for, a simple meeting, the encounter revealed something far more telling. It revealed the university's attitude toward student concerns: a posture of willful **ignorance**, delivered with institutional force.

However, in one respect, the administration did not ignore us. A couple of weeks later, seven students—including myself—who had gone to the Provost's Office received conduct charges from the university. We were accused of being "disruptive" and of engaging in

"unauthorized entry." What followed was a series of opaque conduct meetings and hearings that ultimately resulted in six students receiving deferred suspension, a kind of probation, and me being suspended for the fall semester. I was fired from my TA position, barred from taking classes, and prohibited from stepping foot on campus ground.

To be clear, I was suspended for entering a public office and asking for a meeting, my presence lasting about twelve minutes all told. The silver lining is this: we got a definitive answer about something. The answer we got is that the administration hates their students. They'd rather see them kicked out of the university before entertaining any of their silly concerns.

Student activists that I work alongside continue to ask for meetings with Davis and Inboden. When we delivered letters in Spring of this year asking for a meeting, the Vice President of Student Affairs acknowledged that higher administrative officials had heard our requests and made it clear that there was nothing that we could do to get a meeting.

This is my story and the story of so many others who try to speak up at this university. The strategy that Inboden and Davis take of staying silent, avoiding questions, and stamping down dissent is effective. However, they fundamentally misunderstand that they are dealing with people who refuse to be subjects of history, as movable pieces on the chessboard of partisan politics. We will be agents of history. We will fight for our place at the table. They will not stop students from fighting for their right to a decent education.

The Human Cost of Political Interference in Texas Higher Education
Graci Hargrave, Doctoral Student
Philosophy, Texas State University

Coming to Texas State University (TXST) as an out-of-state graduate student has been, to put it mildly, a continuously disappointing experience. I chose to pursue my master's degree in philosophy at TXST for two main reasons: Dr. Idris Robinson and the funding I was offered. Although it was not my most generous financial package, TXST had Dr. Robinson—an invaluable mentor whose presence I could not overlook. In his absence, I have faced substantial challenges throughout my academic journey, challenges no student should ever be expected to navigate. The remainder of my statement details that experience.

As a first-generation student, I struggled with the rigorous application process for graduate programs across the country. After receiving my acceptance to TXST, I was put in contact with Dr. Idris Robinson, and I quickly came to appreciate the extraordinary quality of his mentorship. Despite having welcomed his first child only a few months before our initial conversation, Dr. Robinson took it upon himself to guide me through additional graduate

applications, even sharing his personal phone number so he could answer any questions that might arise. He explained that he offered this support because I was a first-generation student, fully aware of how difficult this transition can be without guidance.

Beyond this, Dr. Robinson took a serious and generous interest in my scholarly work, offering to serve as my thesis advisor before I had even accepted admission to TXST. For those unfamiliar, a master's thesis is a foundational piece of writing: it develops the research and academic skills essential for becoming a distinguished, published scholar in one's field. Throughout this process, Dr. Robinson consistently demonstrated a level of dedication to my success—both academically and personally—that surpassed anything I encountered at other graduate programs nationwide.

Choosing a university was difficult for me, but it ultimately boiled down to my mother's advice: "Pick the program that you feel will actually care about you, as a student and as a person." Thus, my decision was clear, as I felt Dr. Robinson embodied the sentiment my mother shared.

Before beginning my first semester at Texas State University, Dr. Robinson informed me that he had been fired from the university because of an academic presentation he delivered at a pro-Palestinian conference in North Carolina. At the very moment he was receiving death threats, caring for his infant son, and being publicly doxxed online, the university decided it was appropriate to terminate his employment contract.

I was devastated. My closest support system was now eight hours away, and Dr. Robinson was the only person guiding me through the transition into graduate school. Not a single other faculty member in my department offered assistance or mentorship. I feared that the professional climate I was stepping into would mirror the treatment Dr. Robinson received from the university.

The absence of Dr. Robinson has caused me profound professional and personal harm. It forced me to restart all progress on my thesis, set me back academically, and ultimately led to my first-ever failure in a higher-education course. The university has significantly undermined my future career prospects because of the permanent "F" on my transcript—a consequence directly tied to the personal struggles that followed his departure. My well-being deteriorated rapidly as I found myself in a high-pressure environment with no meaningful support from anyone in my department or the university at large.

There were moments when I considered dropping out of the program entirely or at least transferring to a university outside of Texas. I felt overwhelmed, under-supported, and hopeless. It seemed impossible to imagine securing the career I had spent countless hours working toward. All the sacrifices I had made in pursuit of my academic goals felt crushed under the weight of the current restrictions shaping higher education in Texas.

When I sought support from my departmental faculty, they repeatedly dismissed my concerns. Their response was shaped by the constant pressure they face from university administration to censor their curriculum. The administration's fear-based tactics—targeting departmental autonomy and academic freedom—have eroded faculty willingness to fulfill even basic mentorship responsibilities for graduate students.

This fear has seeped into the graduate student body as well. Many of us students live with a nagging concern that we could lose our assistantships or face expulsion if we remain true to our research interests. The actions taken and policies implemented by the university administration have discouraged many of us from continuing our studies at all.

These threats and actions against academic freedom are crippling the student body. Our well-being is deteriorating in tandem with the termination of our most dedicated faculty members. We are not receiving the support necessary to succeed in our academic programs, and our performance is undermined by the restrictions imposed on higher education in Texas. Universities—especially public universities—exist for the betterment of their students, yet we are experiencing overwhelming harm as current political policies infiltrate and distort our educational systems.

The suffering I have described was needless. Their political agenda sought to dismantle diversity and academic freedom in higher education, is failing the students at public universities across Texas. I deeply regret my decision to attend Texas State University and have discouraged students from attending universities in Texas. A university's central mission should be the betterment of its students, not the divisive political priorities of the moment.

Thank you for considering my testimony. I hope that other students are not left helpless and demoralized by the current political landscape in Texas. My deepest sympathies go to my peers who are struggling under these conditions, and to the faculty—and their families—who have endured unjustifiable material and professional harm because of this agenda.

A Lesson in Teaching
Noah De Lissovoy, Associate Professor
Education, UT Austin

The consolidation of UT's Departments of African and African Diaspora Studies, Mexican American and Latino Studies, Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, and American Studies; restrictions on so-called "controversial" content in curriculum as specified in the recent Board of Regents policy; and the broader ideological sidelining of inquiry into issues of inequity and injustice all constitute political attacks on marginalized communities and academic freedom. At the same time, it is important to see that these measures are also attacks on the process of teaching itself.

True teaching is based on respect, care, and love for all students. Caring for students means caring for who they are as people, which includes their backgrounds, experiences, and communities. There is no abstract or detached caring. Eliminating the departments that are interested in and dedicated to communities of color, and the devaluing of difference and diversity, is not only morally wrong; it violates essential principles of sound teaching.

In addition, good teaching starts from curiosity, creativity, and even daring, since only in this open spirit does curriculum become genuinely engaging. But when we are discouraged from discussing certain so called "controversial" topics (which is usually code for issues of power and identity), the spirit of inquiry is short-circuited, and instruction falls flat. In fact, difficult topics are those that *most* need our attention as teachers and learners, since they require the rigorous reflection and investigation that good teaching is meant to support.

Teaching is also based on relationships between teachers and students, and among students themselves. It is through dialogue, and in community that we create with each other, that the deepest learning is possible. But when teachers are worried that students may report them for providing challenging curricula, and when students are afraid to express their perspectives in class or in protests on campus, genuine relationships and authentic community are not possible.

In the current attacks on disciplines and curriculum that look beyond whiteness, as well as on instruction that invites students to explore relations of power and inequity, the university is turning against itself and its core pedagogical meaning and commitments. In this context, as some of us rise to defend these disciplines, to defend communities under attack, and to defend academic freedom, we also rise to defend teaching itself, and the possibilities that it can create for all students. As committed and caring faculty and educators, we can do no less.

The Disappearance of Latina/o and Mexican American Studies at UNT

Mariela Nuñez-Janes, Associate Professor
Anthropology, University of North Texas

The Latina/o and Mexican American Studies (LMAS) major and certificate were among the eighty-five academic programs restructured at the University of North Texas (UNT) Denton in Spring 2026. The president and the Dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences (CLASS) informed faculty and students of this development with an email during the final days of Spring Break. The restructuring decision disproportionally affected CLASS, with forty-three program closures, twelve of which were identity-based academic programs. As with the imposed closure of the Multicultural Center and the Pride Alliance in 2023, the disappearance of LMAS bypassed established university vetting processes, including those that require deliberation with faculty and students.

I am using the term *disappearance* deliberately to highlight the connections between the tactics and impacts of what is taking place on the UNT Denton campus and the violence currently experienced by immigrants and their supporters outside university walls. The connection is not coincidental; it reflects a historical pattern, particularly in Latin America,

where state actors persecute individuals and groups without any acknowledgment of government involvement.

Students at UNT are scared, particularly Latinx, immigrant, and queer students. They are scared because they must navigate everyday chaos and surveillance outside and inside the UNT campus. This requires ordinary acts of heroism. Students are so afraid that they stop talking in class or don't ask for help for fear of retaliation. They are afraid to be themselves and feel that asking questions about their identity or celebrating their culture is going to somehow get them in trouble.

The university justified closing LMAS by claiming it was a cost-saving measure to help UNT overcome a $45 million deficit. However, the university has not shared accounting information detailing the claimed savings. Also, students were assured that their majors and certificates would be honored, yet the university has not explained how they will be able to complete their requirements. Instead, the university continues its academic reorganization, cutting courses under the presumption of low enrollment and targeting classes through a review of syllabi to flag "violations of any law."

While UNT has not replied to a letter sent by the UNT chapter of AAUP-AFT asking for accountability, UNT shared a loud and clear message that Latinx experiences are not welcome. University officials ordered that the dismantling of the art exhibit "*Ni De Aquí Ni De Allá*" by Victor Quiñonez, "Marka27." Its disappearance without an explanation is censorship. Had students not noticed the artwork's removal, the artist himself would not have known. The university never informed him.

Like other Ethnic Studies programs, LMAS was a labor of love. It required minimal investment from the university. All the courses offered and the faculty involved in the major and certificate were part of existing departments. The majority of LMAS' exceedingly small budget supported a graduate student assistant to help with logistical tasks for the program. Faculty participation received little to no credit. For this reason, tenured faculty like me assumed the interdisciplinary leadership of LMAS and created an intellectual home for tenured-track and junior faculty and a home away from home for students.

When the LMAS major was launched, undergraduates and graduate students from various majors like computer engineering, marketing, psychology, social work, international studies, and anthropology among others created a video "*Yo Soy LMAS/I am LMAS*." One of the students reflected on the significance of LMAS,

> For too long our history and our culture have gone unrecognized. Many students at the University of North Texas through a program like LMAS will be a way for us to access a lot of that history and a lot of that culture that we feel has been denied to us throughout our education. We feel that a program like LMAS can be something that allows us to access a part of who we are as individuals and who we are collectively.

The university reaped the benefits of this labor of love by relying on LMAS to secure and maintain its status and funding as a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI), to recruit students, especially from the Metroplex, where the population is largely Latinx, and to attract faculty. LMAS was actually a good example of the academic model UNT is now promoting through its

recent academic reorganization: it cost very little, it was interdisciplinary and required coordination and dialogue across various departments and units, and it was deeply connected to the community, offering students internship opportunities with industry partners and community groups.

What happened to LMAS at UNT is not unique, but that does not make it any less troubling. Although the administration cited the budget deficit as the reason for closing LMAS and other programs, testimony from UNT Chancellor before the Texas Senate Higher Education Committee hearing on July 30, 2026, made clear that the academic reorganization underway at UNT is a response to SB37. Nothing in that law mandates the closure of entire programs.

What may be unique at UNT is the combination of overcompliance and anticipatory compliance that has driven the administration to erase programs like LMAS under the radar, forcefully, and without scrutiny. The lack of transparency and accountability is unjust and deeply harmful to students, faculty, and staff in LMAS and other programs, people who are dedicated to caring for students and supporting their success, the very values that ironically are supposed to be at the core of UNT's mission.

The State in the Classroom and Academic Freedom in Texas
Leonard Bright, Professor
Public Service and Administration
President of the AAUP–Texas A&M University

Introduction

Thank you, Madam Chair and members of the panel of the People's Hearing, for the opportunity to submit this testimony. I have spent more than twenty years in higher education and more than fifteen years serving students at Texas A&M University. I provide a perspective from the front lines of Texas higher education and to describe the consequences that increasing political intervention is having on academic freedom, faculty governance, curriculum, and ultimately the education Texas students receive. My central concern is straightforward: Texas is crossing a dangerous line between governing its public universities and politically controlling what happens inside its classrooms.

Legislative Intervention and Academic Governance

In recent years, the Texas Legislature has significantly expanded state control over public higher education. Senate Bill 17 dismantled diversity, equity, and inclusion offices and restricted DEI-related activities at Texas public universities. Senate Bill 37 went further by restructuring important aspects of university governance and increasing the authority of governing boards over curriculum and academic matters traditionally entrusted substantially to faculty expertise.

Supporters of these measures argue that intervention is necessary to address ideological conformity and ensure institutional accountability. Universities should, of course, be accountable. Public institutions should be responsible stewards of taxpayer resources, maintain

rigorous academic standards, and provide students with high-quality education. But accountability is fundamentally different from political control over academic inquiry.

These laws were followed by the passage of A&M's new censorship policy, which has created an environment in which syllabi, course materials, and academic programs are subjected to heightened scrutiny when they involve politically sensitive subjects such as race, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and gender identity. Professors may be required to explain, justify, modify, or remove material because administrators fear that its inclusion could conflict with state law or university policy. In some instances, courses can disappear entirely.

My Experience at Texas A&M University

I know this because it happened to my course. In January 2026, Texas A&M canceled my graduate-level ethics course after the semester had already begun. I had met with my students and taught the first class. The course was not canceled because I was unqualified to teach it. It was not canceled because it lacked academic rigor. Nor was it canceled because students complained about its content. The controversy centered on whether and to what extent I would discuss race, gender, sexual orientation, and gender identity when those subjects became relevant to our examination of ethics and public service.

This distinction is important because my course was a discussion-based graduate seminar. Student questions, current events, case studies, disagreements, and ethical dilemmas were integral parts of the educational process. It would have been academically irresponsible for me to promise in advance precisely when a subject would arise or to guarantee that a relevant ethical issue would not be discussed because it involved a politically sensitive demographic category.

I teach future public servants. Ethical questions involving government routinely intersect with race, gender, religion, sexuality, discrimination, policing, immigration, health disparities, civil rights, and the treatment of citizens by public institutions. How can professors responsibly prepare future public servants if they must first determine whether discussing those realities crosses a political boundary established outside their disciplines? That is not ordinary academic oversight. It is political supervision of academic inquiry.

A Growing Paradox in Texas Higher Education

These policies have also produced a troubling paradox within Texas higher education. Consider students studying similar subjects at different institutions within the same state. A student attending a private university in Texas may examine race, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, and other controversial subjects as part of the ordinary academic judgment of faculty and their institutions. Similarly, students attending Texas two-year colleges may encounter many of these same subjects in courses in history, government, sociology, psychology, literature, and related fields without being subjected to the same restrictions now applicable to public universities.

But when a student transfers to a four-year public university—or enters a graduate program at Texas A&M, the University of Texas, Texas Tech, or another Texas public university—the regulatory environment changes. The student has not changed. The academic

subject has not changed. History has not changed. What has changed is the degree of political control over the classroom.

The result is difficult to justify educationally. A student attending a private institution or a two-year college in Texas may have greater freedom to encounter controversial ideas than a graduate student preparing to become one of the state's next researchers, professors, public administrators, or professional leaders. In effect, Texas risks creating a system in which a student advancing within public higher education, the more the state may determine which ideas their professors can teach, and which questions their classrooms can explore.

The result is difficult to justify educationally. A student attending a private institution or a two-year college in Texas may have greater freedom to encounter controversial ideas than a graduate student preparing to become one of the state's next researchers, professors, public administrators, or professional leaders. In effect, Texas risks creating a system in which the further students advance within public higher education, the more the state determines which ideas their professors can teach, and which questions their classrooms can explore.

That is higher education working in reverse. Academic freedom should not depend upon the type of Texas institution a student happens to attend.

Academic Programs and Politically Disfavored Fields

This broader environment must also inform our understanding of changes occurring within academic programs devoted to Mexican American and Latino studies, African and African Diaspora studies, women's and gender studies, and related interdisciplinary fields. Universities may have legitimate reasons to periodically reorganize departments and academic programs.

But when academic fields are consolidated, diminished, reorganized, or eliminated during a period in which those same subjects have been repeatedly targeted in political debates, policymakers and the public should ask difficult questions: Why these programs? Why these subjects? Why now?

Most importantly, we should ask whether these decisions are based primarily on legitimate academic considerations—such as enrollment, scholarship, disciplinary developments, resources, and educational mission—or whether they are responses to political pressure. The integrity of our universities depends upon the answer.

The Chilling Effect

The most serious consequence of political interference may not be the course that is canceled or the academic program that is reorganized. The greater danger is what happens afterward. A professor observes what happened to another faculty member and quietly removes a reading. Another professor avoids discussing a controversial case. A junior scholar decides that pursuing a particular research question could jeopardize tenure or promotion. A department concludes that proposing a new course is simply not worth the institutional scrutiny it might generate. Eventually, government does not have to directly censor professors. We begin censoring ourselves.

That is the chilling effect, and its consequences are difficult to measure precisely because the courses never proposed, readings never assigned, questions never asked, and research projects never pursued leave very little documentary evidence behind. Yet those invisible consequences can fundamentally change the character of a university.

Consequences for Texas

Texas has much more at stake than an internal disagreement between professors and policymakers. Our universities compete nationally and internationally for outstanding faculty, researchers, graduate students, research grants, partnerships, and investment. Talented scholars have choices about where they build their careers. Students have choices about where they pursue advanced degrees.

If Texas develops a national reputation as a state where political officials or political appointees determine the boundaries of legitimate academic inquiry, we should not be surprised when talented faculty and students choose institutions elsewhere. Texas became an economic powerhouse in part because it invested in universities capable of producing research, innovation, independent thought, and a highly educated workforce. The state jeopardizes those achievements when political judgment begins replacing scholarly expertise.

Academic Freedom Protects Everyone

Academic freedom should not be understood as belonging to one political ideology. Academic freedom is neither liberal nor conservative. It protects the ability of scholars and students to pursue questions wherever evidence leads, including conclusions that professors, university administrators, elected officials, and members of the public may strongly dislike.

Today, the politically disfavored subject may involve race, gender, or sexuality. Tomorrow it may involve climate science, vaccines, religion, American history, economics, evolution, energy policy, firearms, or another controversial subject. Once government creates the machinery through which political authority can determine acceptable academic inquiry, no discipline, viewpoint, or professor is permanently protected from that machinery. That is precisely why academic freedom must be defended as a principle rather than according to whether we agree with the speech, scholarship, or subject being protected.

Recommendations

I respectfully urge Texas policymakers and university governing boards to reaffirm the distinction between legitimate public accountability and political management of academic inquiry.

Universities should be held accountable. The legislature should demand academic excellence, responsible stewardship of taxpayer resources, transparency, and meaningful educational outcomes. At the same time, faculty with appropriate disciplinary expertise should retain a meaningful role in determining curriculum, course content, teaching methods, and scholarly standards. Shared governance should be protected rather than treated as an obstacle to accountability. Most importantly, political officials and governing boards should resist efforts to

determine which academically relevant questions professors and adult students are permitted to examine. Hold our universities accountable, but do not teach our classes from the State Capitol.

Historians should be free to follow the historical record wherever it leads. Scientists should be able to investigate difficult scientific questions. Medical educators should be free to examine health disparities and their causes. And professors of public administration should be permitted to ask students challenging ethical questions about government, power, discrimination, responsibility, and justice.

If a body of scholarship is weak, challenge it with better scholarship. If an argument is wrong, demonstrate it with a better argument. If students disagree with a given set of ideas, teach them to examine the evidence and challenge the ideas intelligently. That is the purpose of higher education.

Conclusion

Texas does not need universities that protect adult students from difficult ideas. Texas needs universities that prepare students to confront difficult ideas, evaluate evidence, debate competing perspectives, and think for themselves. I therefore urge policymakers to restore and protect meaningful faculty authority over curriculum, strengthen shared governance, and end political interference in the academic work of Texas public universities. Trust professors to teach. Trust adult students to think.

A university that may investigate only politically approved questions is not a truly free university. And a state that seeks to lead the nation in research, innovation, medicine, technology, business, and public service cannot afford to make intellectual freedom a liability.

The issue before us is larger than Senate Bill 17, Senate Bill 37, A&M's new censorship policy, my canceled course, or any single academic program. The question is whether Texas will continue to support universities where scholars and students are free to pursue knowledge, even when the questions they ask and the answers they discover make people in power uncomfortable. For the future of Texas higher education, I believe the answer must be yes.

The Costs of Eliminating Women's and Gender Studies at UNT

Anonymous

Since joining the faculty at the University of North Texas, I have worked closely with the Women's and Gender Studies (WGS) Program, as an affiliated faculty member, as a member of graduate student committees, and as a member of its advisory board. Over the course of my time at UNT, the university's institutional commitment to Women's and Gender Studies education has steadily eroded, culminating in the program's elimination in 2025–2026. This dissolution carries significant and lasting costs for UNT's students, faculty, and the institution.

WGS courses train students in critical thinking, social analysis, complex problem-solving, written and verbal communication skills, and research methods. These are precisely the competencies employers consistently identify as essential. I have taught WGS

students who have gone on to careers in law, medicine and health care, public service, and beyond. For many students, WGS coursework functions as an established pathway into these careers; eliminating the program forecloses that pathway and, with it, students' access to the jobs it prepared them for.

When a university eliminates a WGS program, it loses far more than a single line of course offerings. Public universities across the country continue to offer robust WGS programs and as Texas institutions cut these programs, they become less competitive in faculty recruitment, student enrollment, and external research funding relative to peer institutions nationally. Further, UNT risks losing — and indeed has already lost — accomplished scholars as a direct result of recent Texas legislation targeting this field of study. Each departure represents lost expertise, lost mentorship, and lost research capacity that is difficult and costly to rebuild.

In addition, these departures create a pervasive sense of surveillance and a lack of trust in the administration among faculty who remain and whose research and teaching focus on areas related to gender and/or sexuality. Finally, WGS students at UNT have built public-private partnerships with community organizations, companies, and advocacy groups, often at no cost to the state. Indeed, these partnerships were integrated into the design of WGS courses. Given UNT's stated commitment to building community partnerships, their loss represents a further—and less visible—diminishment of the university's standing.

UNT's students who suffer the greatest loss. The dissolution of WGS narrows the curriculum available to every student on campus (not just for those who would have majored or minored in the field) and eliminates a proven avenue for developing job-relevant skills. As a result, the university's capacity to prepare graduates for the labor market is diminished.

Even more importantly, WGS gives students scholarly language and analytical tools to examine and understand the conditions of their own lives. UNT serves an unusually diverse student body — students of varied racial, ethnic, gender, sexual, and class identities, many of them first-generation. WGS courses are one of the few spaces on campus where students routinely encounter authors like them and scholarship that include them. To eliminate this program is to eliminate a vital means of self-knowledge and a serious path of scholarly inquiry into the world students are inheriting.

An Engineering Student's Case for Cultural Education at UT Austin
Sofia Alvarez, Undergraduate Student
Electrical Engineering, UT Austin

My name is Sofia Alvarez, and I am studying Civil Engineering at the UT at Austin, but a year ago I had the pleasure of adding a double major in Mexican American and Latino Studies, also known as MALS. The MALS department falls under the umbrella of what is currently being consolidated into the "Department of Social and Cultural Analysis".

If we look back to April 2024, Texas Senate Bill 17 banned diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives at public universities, leading to the closure of the Division of Campus and

Community Engagement at UT. Then, in April 2025, UT Austin announced the removal of its flag requirements, including the Cultural Diversity, Ethics, and Writing flags. And now, as of February 2026, UT has announced that it will be consolidating its cultural humanities departments.

There is a clear pattern emerging. Resources, programs, and opportunities that support communities of color at UT are being steadily taken away. These attacks have been slow, deliberate, and calculated. If we do nothing, we will wake up one day to find that everything that once made this university feel inclusive and intellectually honest has disappeared.

As someone double-majoring in Engineering and Latino Studies, I'm constantly asked why. People often look confused, as if the two fields don't belong together. But as a civil engineer, I will be working on public projects—and those projects should ultimately serve the surrounding community. How can I meaningfully serve a community if I have never taken the time to understand the community?

When I came to college, I had no idea that Latino Studies was even an option as a major. I was exposed to it once I got to UT – through my Visual and Performing Arts undergraduate core requirement AND through my Cultural Diversity and Ethics flags… which, as I mentioned earlier…. no longer exist. This frightens me.

Although my fellow engineering peers are exceptionally intelligent and capable of great things, I worry about what happens when technical ability is not paired with ethical reasoning. The engineering degree plan is extremely rigorous; it leaves little room to branch out or explore other disciplines. The flags and core requirements are often the only opportunities engineers have to step outside their major.

Engineers at UT Austin are currently missing an entire dimension of education. If we remove the spaces that teach future engineers how to think critically about race, culture, and ethics, then what are we really producing? It begins to feel less like education and more like mass-producing technically skilled workers for large corporations, without ever asking them to consider who their work impacts.

After adding the double major, I was curious to find others in a similar position. I reached out to my MALS advisor and asked whether any other engineering students were double-majoring or minoring in Mexican American and Latino Studies. It turns out there weren't any others—at least as of Spring 2025, I was the only one.

This says something about how far-removed Engineering majors are from College of Liberal Arts and from cultural dialogue – unless they intentionally seek it out themselves. And this is sad because my MALS classes have changed the way I move through the world, and they have honestly completely changed my life. They reshape the way you understand the world ….. and that's why they're trying to take them away. My MALS classes have given me a safe space to find my voice, and gain confidence talking about sensitive issues. One major is educating me for a career. The other major is educating me for life.

Although my MALS major still exists, I worry about what will happen next if enrollment drops. This would give the university justification to eliminate the major entirely. And now that

departments have been consolidated, we have been placed in a neat box—easier to manage, easier to restrict, and easier to cut. I am scared for the future of my major, because once these spaces are gone, it will be so much harder to get them back.

Political Interference has No Place in Texas Higher Education
Patrick Rosenthal, Former Student
UT Austin

I am writing to express my unequivocal support for Mexican American and Latino Studies at the UT and for the faculty and scholars who have dedicated their careers to these fields. These programs should be taught and shaped by experts in their disciplines, free from political interference or attempts to restrict academic freedom for political gain. Universities must remain places where history, culture, race, economics, and society can be studied honestly, rigorously, and without fear that politicians will eliminate an academic field simply because they are uncomfortable with its subject matter.

I graduated from UT in 2006 with a degree in Liberal Arts, and one of my favorite courses was African American Culture. I did not find the course political or radical. I found it factual, thoughtful, and enormously helpful in understanding the history and world around me. That is exactly what a great university education should do: expose students to scholarship and perspectives that deepen their understanding of society.

Mexican American and Latino Studies are especially important at the University of Texas. The history and culture of Texas cannot be fully understood without understanding the experiences and contributions of Mexican American and Latino communities. These programs also contribute important scholarship on inequality, education, economic opportunity, culture, history, and equitable access to resources.

Closing or dismantling these programs would be a profound mistake. A society that restricts scholarship because of political pressure risks becoming intellectually stale and increasingly backward. Universities cannot fulfill their mission if scholars are only permitted to study subjects or reach conclusions that are politically acceptable at a particular moment in time.

I can think of few paths more morally wrong for a great public university than being forced to close legitimate academic programs because politicians object to the subjects they study. As a proud 2006 Liberal Arts graduate of the University of Texas, I strongly support these programs, their faculty, their students, and their academic freedom. I hope UT will defend them vigorously.

A Tejana Scholar's Testimony on Identity, History, and Academic Freedom
Brenda Sendejo, Independence Scholar
Former Associate Professor, Anthropology, Georgetown University

Hello, and thank you for the opportunity to speak. I am a UT Austin alum. I earned a PhD in Cultural Anthropology with doctoral portfolios in Mexican American Studies and Women and Gender Studies, as well as a master's and a bachelor's degree in Cultural Anthropology. I served as a tenured professor at Southwestern University for fourteen years and am currently a business owner, scholar, and consultant.

I'm proud to call migrant farm workers, pecan shellers, Mexican immigrants, and fourth-generation *Tejanas* and *Tejanos* my grandparents. And yet, growing up in Corpus Christi, Texas, I was ashamed to be Mexican. I was ashamed of who I was. I knew little about my culture or history. I grew up surrounded by ideas about whiteness that were celebrated and rewarded. Systemic racism often reminded me that I was not good enough, that I did not matter. The stories and histories of my people and my culture were not present in the schools I attended. Then came 1989.

I entered UT Austin as the first person in my family to attend college. I came across a CMAS course with Dr. Martha Menchaca called Mexican American Culture. That course introduced me to Mexican American culture, hist and studies—to a world I did not know existed in books, films, the civil rights movement, and more. Society silenced my world, despite my family's nurturing love. It was hidden. Erased.

That course stirred something in me. It moved me. It changed something within me—at the soul level. To my core.

In 2003, I entered UT once again, this time as a doctoral student in the Department of Anthropology and its Mexican American and Borderlands program. And once again, I encountered a life-changing course: Mexican Americans in Texas Politics, developed by historian and prominent Chicana and Chicano movement activist Dr. Emilio Zamora in collaboration with the renowned Chicana feminist scholar and movement leader Martha P. Cotera.

These civil rights activists, advocates, feminists, and scholars understood in an embodied way the harm of erasing our stories and our histories. They continued the movement that had taken place at UT in the 1960s and 1970s, fighting for the development of the Center for Mexican American Studies at UT. Because of their efforts—and the efforts of their contemporaries and comrades—the flame within me grew. A light dimmed by systemic oppression was shining once again.

The course introduced students to women who had been prominent in La Raza Unida Party and in the political movements of the 1960s and 1970s. I met in person Martha Cotera, María Elena Martínez, Rosie Castro, and other powerful *Tejanas* of the movement. And I saw

myself in them. They and their stories would become the focus of my doctoral research and life's work.

I want to circle back to that little girl who was once ashamed to be Mexican—the first person in her family to attend college. Her journey had been possible through ethnic studies and the movement efforts of people who fought for ethnic studies to exist as something I could have the privilege of learning. They planted seeds in me. And those seeds grew.

After graduation I was hired as an assistant professor of anthropology at Southwestern University. I developed then taught the first courses in Chicana feminisms at the university and invited women like Martha Cotera and Maria Elena Martinez to speak to our campus community and students. And I witnessed something recognizable, a flame ignited in my own students that had lit within me.

I share my story here today because stories and histories are inseparable from our full humanity—from the right to exist without shame. My story—and so many others like it, including those of hundreds of my own students—illustrates the urgency and responsibility we have to young people, to our families, to our communities, and to the people we serve.

This is my story of the moral responsibility we—and the state of Texas—assume to help our communities and our youth recognize their immense worth. To have pride in who they are. To see their histories represented. To know that their stories matter.

I went on to become the first Tejana to receive a PhD in cultural and social anthropology at UT Austin. I then became the first Tejana to earn tenure in Southwestern University's 175-year history. And all of this happened because seeds were planted within me—seeds that told me I mattered. That my stories mattered. That my history mattered.

I will continue to share that message everywhere, for as long and as far as I live. I will continue to support the efforts of those who are doing the same for others. Because I know, in my mind, body, and spirit, the power of stories, histories, and remembering.

Mi Educación es la Causa
Martha P. Cotera, Independent Scholar
Longtime Feminist

Ladies and gentlemen, *No hay vida, causa, ni libertad sin el conocimiento* (knowledge). Our gratitude goes to the Honorable State Representatives Lulu Flores, Cheryl Cole, Lalani Suleman, Cristina Morales, and Mary González for standing with us today. We also honor the late State Representative Irma Rangel. She would be proud of you—and of all of us—as we

channel her intelligence, energy, and moral clarity in demanding the restoration of academic freedom and excellence in higher education.

We dream, and we work! After 50 years, as academic and community leaders we finally established the Mexican American and Latino/a Studies Department at UT. And in an instant, it was snatched away, **(THANKFULLY) NOT** by **ANY MERITORIOUS** academic leader!

Ethnic and gender studies involve rigorous critical analysis of race, ethnicity, class, and gender. They provide insight into our development as a nation. They engage in rigorous scholarship based on facts, not ideology. It's a superb process for preparing culturally competent professionals; physicians, lawyers, educators, scientists, entrepreneurs, researchers, architects, engineers, mathematicians, artists, and policy makers. I challenge anyone who thinks that cultural competence is irrelevant to success….even fraudsters must be competent in fraudulent behavior and politics.

Major and minor degrees in Ethnic Studies benefit 47% of Texas's Latino workforce and, more broadly, 60% of Texas's population, preparing students for success in today's diverse workplaces. On February 20, 2026, UT's Civitas Institute hosted a conference on *America's Latino Future* (which we attended), and every panelist strongly supported expanding research, analysis, and curriculum on Latinos in Texas and across the United States.

We agreed, and we praised the Mexican American and Latino Studies Department, the Latino Research Institute, and the Center for Mexican American Studies for doing this work so effectively. Together, they have made the University of Texas one of the leading institutions in the nation for the study of the histories, cultures, and contemporary issues of Latinos in the United States.

That is why we are asking state legislators to work with our coalition to restore the department, along with other ethnic and gender studies departments at UT and at other state universities where they have been dismantled. As taxpayers and voters, we will partner with you to repeal legislation that has undermined academic freedom in Texas and dismantled academic departments that serve nearly 60% of the state's population. We do not submit!

Why Mexican American and Latino/a Studies Matters
Kara Alexandra Culp, Doctoral Student
UT Austin

Hi, my name is Kara Alexandra Culp. I am speaking today as a private citizen. I was born and raised in Texas and am the daughter of a Mexican immigrant. I am also the product of the public education system. I attended public K–12 schools from kindergarten until I graduated high school, I attended a public university for my undergraduate work, and I now attend UT Austin, where I study history. I am a former high school teacher, and I now study the history of education and public education as it affects Latino communities.

I think it is important to talk about the education of minority students as we discuss the attacks on higher education, because deliberate, creeping, and continuous attacks on public education have been occurring for decades in K–12. Segregation still exists in public schools today. It is obvious to the students in those schools and to the teachers who teach them. They might not deliberately use those words, but they know.

"Oh, you don't want to work at that school." "You don't want to send your kids to that school." "When you buy a house, make sure it's on this side of that highway." And so, it is in every school district in Texas and in most of the United States. In the case of San Antonio, where I am from, there are separate school districts, more than any other city in Texas and more than in most cities in the United States, much of it caused by redlining. This still exists.

Further, conditions in our public schools still lead to segregation. For example, one year I was responsible for teaching every English language learner in the ninth grade. Those policies ensured that those English learners did not have a single class with their native English-speaking peers throughout their entire high school career. Their math, social studies, science, English, and elective courses were all separate from other students.

The segregation continues. However, despite working hard as an English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher, I was removed because, according to members of the administration, I spoke "too much" Spanish to my students. They did not care that my ESL students performed at the same level as the native English speakers—or higher—on their social studies exams. Language discrimination and segregation still exist today. These conditions in K–12 prevent minority students from adequately preparing for higher education.

Mexican American and Latino/a Studies could help prepare teachers to work with English learners from marginalized communities because it equips them with the historical knowledge, cultural frameworks, and critical pedagogies necessary to understand student lived experiences. The field can also train educators in language learning within broad social forces rather than by student deficits. In doing so, it prepares educators to teach English learners not only how to navigate the classroom, but how to thrive within institutions that have too often marginalized their communities.