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PRESS RELEASE

**First Amendment Groups Urge University of Wisconsin-Stout To Keep Historic Paintings  
On Display**

**UPDATE: Chancellor Modifies Course, Paintings to be Relocated**

**UPDATE:** August 8, 2016- Shortly after receiving NCAC and FIRE's letter on Friday, Aug 5<sup>th</sup>, Wisconsin-Stout Chancellor Bob Meyer announced the two paintings will not be placed into storage but will instead be relocated for display under "controlled circumstances." In an interview with local radio, Chancellor Meyer explained the intent behind his initial decision was not to censor, but was rather a strategic "business" move to encourage more Native American student applications to the university. Today, NCAC's Director of Programs Svetlana Mintcheva commented on the new developments in the following statement:

"While we are pleased that the works will remain on display, the Chancellor's explanation of the decision to move the paintings to a less visible location is even worse than the move itself. In justifying the decision as a 'business' one, whereby more Native Americans may be attracted to Stout were they spared the encounter with a national history which may make them 'feel bad,' he appears to be treating future students as mere consumers and education as a mere product. This betrays the mission of a University, which is to challenge, to help students confront the past critically, to make them think. Encounters with an often brutal history are part of the educational process, censoring stories that don't feel good is not. What's worse is the disrespectful and patronizing assumption that future students need to be shielded from these historical realities."

**ORIGINAL PRESS RELEASE:** New York, NY, August 5, 2016- The National Coalition Against Censorship (NCAC) and the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE) are urging the University of Wisconsin-Stout to reverse a proposal to place historic paintings depicting First Nations peoples into storage because some claim that they reinforce negative stereotypes of Native Americans.

In July, the University of Wisconsin-Stout Chancellor Bob Meyer announced two paintings depicting interactions between White Traders and First Nations people were to be removed from public view because of the "harmful effect" they potentially exert on students and other viewers. The paintings, commissioned by the Works Progress Administration in 1935, were this summer flagged by the University's Diversity Leadership Team as promoting racial stereotypes and "acts of domination and oppression." NCAC strongly encourages the University to keep the paintings

on display and use them as an opportunity to foster dialogue around the historical and educational significance of the works.

The joint letter to Chancellor Meyer notes that “any effect speech may have upon its audience is necessarily contingent upon an observer’s individual experiences and beliefs” and that the First Amendment prevents state officials, including employees at state universities, from suppressing expression because it is subjectively considered harmful or offensive.

Chancellor Meyer’s proposal follows a number of similar incidents involving historic artwork. In November, for instance, a fresco depicting African-Africans picking tobacco was shrouded at the University of Kentucky after students of color protested the images provided a “terrible reminder” of their ancestors’ subjugation and enslavement. "There has been a recent increase of complaints about historical paintings at public universities and government buildings, but that is not in itself a bad thing. What concerns us is that administrators are responding to these complaints by censoring the works, rather than using the controversy around them as an opportunity to discuss difficult subject matter," said Svetlana Mintcheva, NCAC’s Director of Programs. As a “marketplace of ideas,” NCAC argues universities should use historic paintings as avenues for important discussion on difficult issues such as the lingering effects of systemic racism and oppression. "When somebody disagrees with an idea or a representation, they should have the opportunity to express their position. More speech is always better than less speech," Mintcheva said.

[READ THE FULL LETTER HERE](#)

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*The National Coalition Against Censorship (NCAC) is an alliance of 50 national non-profit organizations dedicated to defending freedom of thought, inquiry and expression.*