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Free Speech Groups Defend Student Threatened With Expulsion for Protest Art

Rock Hill, SC, 12/8/2016- The National Coalition Against Censorship (NCAC) and the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE) are defending the free expression rights of a Winthrop University student who is threatened with expulsion for her involvement in an art installation protesting a university building's controversial name.

Last month, a group named the Association of Artists for Change, made up in part by Winthrop University students, hung a series of stockings, shaped like bodies and filled with mud, on trees outside the University's Tillman Hall. According to the group's spokesperson, Samantha Valdez, the installation was intended to draw attention to the violently racist history of Benjamin Tillman, after whom Tillman Hall is named. The University removed the installation immediately and is threatening Valdez with suspension or expulsion from Winthrop, citing disruptive and disorderly behavior and the production of "hurtful" images.

NCAC and FIRE demand Winthrop University drop Valdez's disciplinary charges immediately, as they are not only disproportionate to her actions but also raise serious First Amendment concerns. It also notes that expression that causes offense is fully protected by the First Amendment. The letter urges the University to use the incident as a teachable moment, an opportunity for dialogue around important issues at a time of exacerbated racial tensions.

"By moving to punish Valdez, the Winthrop administration runs the risk of chilling the speech of others who wish to voice their opinions on important issues publicly on campus," said NCAC's Arts Advocacy Program Associate Joy Garnett. "In doing so, Winthrop, a public university, neglects its role as a 'marketplace of ideas' and also its responsibilities under the First Amendment."

[READ THE LETTER](#)

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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.