

# NATIONAL [REDACTED] COALITION [REDACTED] AGAINST [REDACTED] CENSORSHIP [REDACTED]

President James H. Mullen, Jr.  
Allegheny College  
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March 1, 2019

Dear President Mullen,

I am writing to you on behalf of the Arts Advocacy Program at the National Coalition Against Censorship, a national project dedicated to protecting and promoting artistic freedom. We were disturbed to learn about the recent removal from your campus of a student art project featuring depictions of graffiti. We urge you to actively support art students in their right to express themselves freely on important issues of the day, and to fulfill your obligation as an educational institution to prepare young artists to show their work in a polarized world where social media misrepresentations are frequent and often also damaging.

It is our understanding that the student, working in an Art Department studio space, created a series of paintings that portrayed walls sprayed with graffiti. The images include typical found expressions such as "Big Cat," "Alien Luv," "Clap Thots," and "Kill Cops". College employees who saw the "Kill Cops" phrase misconstrued it as a literal threat to law enforcement. They took a photo of it, cropping out the rest of the painting, and posted it on social media, where it drew outrage from members of the college community as well as local law enforcement. The college issued a statement saying that it does not condone violence, and explained that the intention behind the work was "to call for an end to mindless violence and the language that leads to it, just the opposite from the context being circulated on social media." Nevertheless, the student removed the work.

Across the country, artists respond to current events by creating works that reflect upon their environment. This may include subjects such as street violence and police brutality that are sensitive, difficult or divisive. Such work is easily misconstrued, especially when the material is posted out of context on social media. As a result, its display — on college campuses, in a library or at a high school — is regularly followed by calls for its removal, often from the law enforcement community.

## NCAC PARTICIPATING ORGANIZATIONS

Actors' Equity Association  
American Association of School Administrators  
American Association of University Professors  
American Association of University Women  
American Booksellers for Free Expression  
American Civil Liberties Union  
American Ethical Union  
American Federation of Teachers  
American Jewish Committee  
American Library Association  
American Literary Translators Association  
American Orthopsychiatric Association  
American Society of Journalists & Authors  
Americans United for Separation of Church & State  
Association of American Publishers  
Authors Guild  
Catholics for Choice  
Children's Literature Association  
College Art Association  
Comic Book Legal Defense Fund  
The Creative Coalition  
Directors Guild of America  
The Dramatists Guild of America  
Dramatists Legal Defense Fund  
Educational Book & Media Association  
First Amendment Lawyers Association  
Free Speech Coalition  
International Literacy Association  
Lambda Legal  
Modern Language Association  
National Center for Science Education  
National Communication Association  
National Council for the Social Studies  
National Council of the Churches  
National Council of Jewish Women  
National Council of Teachers of English  
National Education Association  
National Youth Rights Association  
The Newspaper Guild/CWA  
PEN American Center  
People For the American Way  
Planned Parenthood Federation of America  
Project Censored  
SAG-AFTRA  
Sexuality Information & Education Council of the U.S.  
Society of Children's Book Writers & Illustrators  
Student Press Law Center  
Union for Reform Judaism  
Union of Democratic Intellectuals  
Unitarian Universalist Association  
United Church of Christ Office of Communication  
United Methodist Church, United Methodist Communications  
Women's American ORT  
Woodhull Sexual Freedom Alliance  
Writers Guild of America, East  
Writers Guild of America, West

Colleges and Art Departments need to educate their students about how to navigate this environment, and support them when they are attacked on social media. While we understand that the decision to remove the work was made by the student and not the administration, academic freedom requires active support for a diversity of views and opinions to thrive on campus.

Art students have a lot to learn by exploring the tensions presented by the violent language of Hip Hop, graffiti, and other visually and culturally powerful elements of their immediate environment. As engaged citizens, students should be free to question the ills experienced in our current environment, from violence in our communities to the tactics of law enforcement and the workings of government.

We are aware that the college has offered to further this conversation by holding a panel discussion with the Art Department and the student artist later in the semester. Yet such a discussion, while welcome, would be biased from the start if the cropped element of the painting on social media is the only representation of the painting that people can refer to.

We urge Allegheny College to encourage the student artist to re-display the work in the studio space and make sure that in the future, students are prepared to face controversy, including on social media. A commitment to academic and artistic freedom, in conjunction with discussions like the one that you are hosting later in the semester, will help the college to become a place where difficult subjects can be addressed in a thoughtful, deliberate and non-divisive way. Please let us know if we can be of further assistance.

Sincerely,



Joy Garnett  
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Cc:

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