April 3, 2023

Vickie Spillers, Executive Director
Board of Regents, Texas A&M University System
Texas A & M University
P.O. Box 15812
College Station, TX 77841-5013

Sent via email to vickie@tamu.edu

Dear Ms. Spillers and the Board of Regents,

As a nonpartisan organization dedicated to freedom of speech, thought, and inquiry, the National Coalition Against Censorship is alarmed by the recent decision of West Texas A&M University (WTAM) President Walter Wendler to not only deny permission for a student group to present a drag performance, but to also forbid any drag performances to take place on campus going forward.

It is our understanding that in November 2022, Spectrum WT, a WTAM student-run LGBTQ group, initiated a plan to host a drag performance on campus to benefit the Trevor Project, an organization focused on suicide prevention among trans youth. In the following months, Spectrum WT adhered to the school’s protocols for proposing and registering on-campus events. By late February, the show had received “tentative confirmation.” But on March 20, while in the final stages of the approval process, the school informed Spectrum WT that the show would not take place, and announced a wholesale prohibition of drag on campus.

Shortly thereafter, President Wendler attempted to justify this flagrant disregard for academic freedom and the First Amendment. In his statement, President Wendler describes drag shows as an assault on human dignity, and claims they “discriminate against womanhood” by incorporating exaggerated presentations of gender. Wendler concludes that such performances should be banned on WTAM’s campus as they are inherently misogynistic and constitute harassment.

While President Wendler is entitled to his personal opinion, he should not have forced it upon others by trampling over free speech principles. The over-the-top performative elements of drag shows are widely understood as celebrating differences in gender expression. Drag is an art form dating back tens of thousands of years to performances...
in Ancient Egypt and Greece, and today represents a cherished element of LGBTQ culture. Neither the history of drag nor its contemporary forms offer any evidence that it targets women with discriminatory intent.

Further, President Wendler’s suggestion that drag performances can be seen as workplace harassment misrepresents the legal definition of harassment, i.e. conduct, targeted at an individual or group, that is “severe or pervasive enough to create a work environment that a reasonable person would consider intimidating, hostile, or abusive.” As a result, it trivializes the serious impact of actual harassment.

The principle of “equal treatment,” which President Wendler lauds in his statement, in fact demands that all students and student groups, regardless of their ideas or gender identities, be allowed to pursue their interests and activities. Indeed, the Texas Education Code forbids viewpoint discrimination on college campuses, particularly in relation to the activities of student organizations.

For these reasons, we ask the Texas A&M University System Board of Regents to overturn President Walter Wendler decision to prohibit drag performances on campus, and make a statement assuring student groups that their constitutionally-protected rights to free expression are recognized across its network of universities. If desired, we would be happy to assist in the creation of such a statement, please let us know if we can be of any assistance.

Sincerely,

Elizabeth Larison
Director, Arts & Culture Advocacy Program
National Coalition Against Censorship

CC via email:
John Sharp, Chancellor, Texas A&M University System
Walter Wendler, President, West Texas A&M University