

# NATIONAL COALITION AGAINST CENSORSHIP

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@tamus.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

## NCAC PARTICIPATING ORGANIZATIONS

Actors' Equity Association  
AICA-USA  
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 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  
Dramatists Guild of America  
Dramatists Legal Defense Fund  
Educational Book & Media Association  
First Amendment Lawyers Association  
Free Speech Coalition  
Global Alliance for Behavioral Health and Social Justice  
International Association of Art Critics United States (AICA-USA)  
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 Churches  
National Council of Jewish Women  
National Council of Teachers of English  
National Education Association  
National Youth Rights Association  
The News Guild-CWA  
PEN America  
People for the American Way  
PFLAG National  
Planned Parenthood Federation of America  
Poets & Writers  
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  
Unitarian Universalist Association  
United Church of Christ, Office of Communication  
United Methodist Church, United Methodist Communications  
Women's American ORT  
Woodhull Freedom Foundation  
Writers Guild of America, East  
Writers Guild of America, West

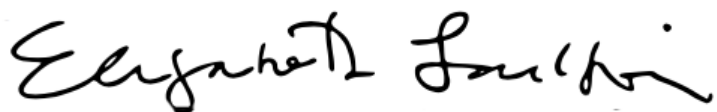
in Ancient Egypt and Greece, and today represents a cherished element of LGBTQ culture. Neither the history of drag nor its contemporary forms offer any evidence that it targets women with discriminatory intent.

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