

National Coalition Against Censorship

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NCAC PARTICIPATING ORGANIZATIONS

Actors' Equity Association
American Association of
School Administrators
American Association of
University Professors
American Association of
University Women
American Booksellers Foundation
for Free Expression
American Civil Liberties Union
American Ethical Union
American Federation of Teachers
American Federation of Television
& Radio Artists
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
Directors Guild of America
The Dramatists Guild of America
Educational Book & Media Association
First Amendment Lawyers Association
International Reading 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
PEN American Center
People For the American Way
Planned Parenthood Federation
of America
Screen Actors Guild
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
Writers Guild of America, East
Writers Guild of America, West

August 13, 2013

Kansas Board of Regents
1000 SW Jackson Street, Suite 520
Topeka, KS 66612-1368

Dear Regents,

As national organizations dedicated to free speech and individuals interested in maintaining a climate of free speech and open exploration of ideas throughout the Kansas University System, we are writing to express our concern over the recent censorship of an art exhibition followed by the sudden termination of the entire exhibition program at the Kansas University Medical Center Dykes Library and to urge you to restore that valuable long-established program.

It is our understanding that the incoming interim director of the Dykes library, Dr. Vince Loffredo, demanded that "Tom Gregg: Unsold - Grenades, Cute Animals and Bad Apples" be taken down in advance of its scheduled end date. At the same time, Dr. Loffredo announced the termination of the over 20-year-old rotating exhibitions program. Justifying his decision to close the exhibition, Dr. Loffredo cited a "fiduciary obligation to the state of Kansas" and claimed that the artwork did not support the campus' "core mission."

As the token curatorial fee for the Gregg exhibition had already been paid, the premature closing of this particular exhibition saved no money for the library, the university, or the state. Therefore, it appears that the content and viewpoint expressed in the work was the sole reason for the premature closing of the show.

Dr. Loffredo's actions as an administrator at a public university raise serious First Amendment concerns. The explanation that the artwork is somehow not in line with the campus' "core mission" is vague and subjective, and as a result opens the door for arbitrary censorship. The fact that a public official may not like a work of art or might disagree with the viewpoint expressed in it is no grounds for him to censor that work.

Besides being constitutionally suspect, the decision to close a show because of its content violates well-established principles of academic freedom and displays disregard for the core mission of an educational institution to advance knowledge, promote the exploration of ideas, and train a new generation of informed citizens and competent leaders by exposing them to a wide diversity of views.

Critical viewpoints are valuable to students of all subjects, perhaps even more so to students of medicine, who will surely be called upon at one time or another in their professional lives to come down on one side of a complex ethical issue. In the past, the exhibition program at the Dykes Medical Library has provided students with a place in which difficult questions could be explored and all manner of opinions and views could be expressed. The recent actions of the library's interim director have effectively removed that important space.

According to the AAUP's statement on Academic Freedom and Artistic Expression, "[a]cademic institutions are obliged to ensure that regulations and procedures do not impair freedom of expression or discourage creativity by subjecting work to tests of propriety or ideology." Kansas University's own statement of academic freedom reads "...the doctrines of academic freedom and free speech that are central to the classroom must extend to other areas of campus life. KUMC should encourage the ideological exploration of ideas and avoid policies or practices that bind the inquiring minds and spirits of students, faculty, and staff. KUMC faculty, staff, and students should not fear recrimination for engaging in such behaviors."

As the termination of the changing exhibition program coincides suspiciously with the closing of an exhibition for its content, it appears likely that the administration's real motive in terminating the program is the potential for the display of controversial work. There is no apparent alternative reason for the termination of a successful decades-old program that has served to showcase the work of many local artists at the symbolic cost of \$1000 dollars per year, which would, at market rate, hardly cover just the handling costs of one single exhibition.

We strongly urge you to reverse the rash and damaging decision to terminate the vibrant changing exhibitions program at the Dykes Medical Library and to support a climate of academic freedom at Kansas University. To avoid future conflict, we recommend that a joint panel of artists, curators, professors, and administrative staff be formed in order to review exhibitions.

For years the exhibition space at the Dykes Library has served as a venue for thought-provoking and challenging artwork. In the past, the University has displayed firm commitment to its own dictum that "the freedom to doubt and question must be guaranteed." We urge you to ensure it continues to do so in the future.

Signed,

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