

1 December 2021

Adam Steinbaugh, Director
Individual Rights Program, FIRE
510 Walnut Street, Suite 1250
Philadelphia, PA 19106

Dear Director Steinbaugh:

Thank you for questions and continued advocacy for academic freedom. I trust the factual background below resolves your concerns regarding the internal review of the GoKAR! project at The University of Texas at Austin (UT Austin). I assure you that UT Austin, just like FIRE, remains resolute in our commitment to academic freedom. I am writing to share information about our expedited review, which was completed on November 24, 2021, and resulted in a resumption of all activities associated with the GoKAR! research study.

The university received a copy of a complaint filed with the U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights regarding GoKAR! The complaint asserted that GoKAR! was not a research study, but instead a program or benefit only available to people who identify as white while excluding people of color who may be interested in its educational materials. There were some public descriptions of GoKAR! that created confusion about its nature, such as the full name of the project (“GoKAR! Educational Program: Teaching Anti-Racism to Preschoolers at Home”) and the description on a university research website: “This project will create an educational program that addresses structural racism in ways that are accessible and developmentally appropriate for preschool-age children.”

It would be inconsistent with university policy and federal and state law for UT Austin, a public university, to provide an educational program only to people who identify as white. A research study, on the other hand, would not have the same concerns, assuming it has been properly vetted by the university’s Institutional Review Board.

The university asked the faculty to temporarily pause their work in order to evaluate the nature of GoKAR! and determine whether it was a properly vetted research study or a program. The pause was limited to the delivery of materials to new participants, while otherwise allowing work already in progress to continue without limitation. The purpose of that limited pause was to avoid distributing materials to a broader group of participants (if GoKAR! were indeed a program) after the university received notice of the complaint.

The university completed its expedited review on Wednesday, Nov. 24 and lifted the pause.

In a message to the GoKAR! researchers, I shared the belief that internal documentation confirms that GoKAR! is a research project, which was approved by UT Austin’s Office of the Vice President for Research and the Institutional Review Board. I noted, however, that some of the public-facing descriptions of GoKAR! unintentionally created ambiguity and may have led some to question

1 Dec 2021

Page 2

whether GoKAR! is an education program that excludes potentially interested parents and children who do not identify as white, rather than a targeted educational research study. Going forward, the Provost's Office will work with the Office of the Vice President for Research to improve our faculty mentoring programs and research promotion practices to better support and protect our faculty and their research work. To this end, I asked the team in the Office of the Vice President for Research to lead a discussion on options to more clearly communicate the research nature of GoKAR!

In summary, because the public-facing materials raised legal questions, we implemented a temporary pause to vet the issue before resuming the new work, without disrupting the ongoing portions of the project. There is still a pending complaint with DOE. The university takes its commitment to civil rights seriously and will cooperate with DOE if they independently decide to review the matter.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'S. L. Wood', written in a cursive style.

Sharon L. Wood
Executive Vice President and Provost
Cockrell Family Chair in Engineering #14

Cc: Jay Hartzell, President
Charles Martinez, Dean, College of Education
Jay Bernhardt, Dean, Moody College of Communication
The University of Texas at Austin