



February 15, 2022

Dr. William P. Gilligan
Interim President and Professor Emeritus
Emerson College
180 Tremont Street, 14th Floor
Boston, Massachusetts 02116

Sent via Electronic Mail (william_gilligan@emerson.edu)

Dear President Gilligan:

FIRE is gravely concerned to learn that Emerson College revoked recognition of its student chapter of TPUSA for the chapter's purported inability to secure a suitable staff or faculty advisor, despite clear indications the group made dozens of good-faith efforts to do so. Not surprisingly, TPUSA's difficulty in obtaining approval of faculty or staff members follows the Emerson administration's public condemnation of TPUSA by Emerson's administration for asserted "anti-Asian bigotry and hate" and a "Formal Warning" sounding in same—despite Emerson's acknowledgement that the group criticized the Chinese government, not its people. This revocation directly contravenes Emerson's policies that honor the "high importance" of the First Amendment and claim to guarantee students the rights to "freedom of speech," "freedom of political belief and affiliation," and "freedom of peaceful assembly."¹

Loss of recognition carries meaningful consequences. It means that TPUSA is "frozen until a new advisor is found," has no "access to funds or [the] ability to reserve space,"² and is disallowed from using "Emerson's brand and likeness[.]"³ Additionally, TPUSA is not eligible for any Emerson Recognition and Achievement awards because Emerson has forced it to operate as an independent organization.⁴

¹ EMERSON COLL., STATEMENT ON FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION, <https://www.emerson.edu/departments/community-standards/code-community-standards/statement-freedom-expression> (last visited Feb. 8, 2022).

² EMERSON COLL., STUDENT ENGAGEMENT & LEADERSHIP, <https://www.emerson.edu/departments/student-affairs/undergraduate-student-handbook/student-engagement-leadership#studentorg> (last visited Jan. 26, 2022).

³ Email from Jenna Coviello, Program Coordinator for Student Engagement and Leadership, to Sammi Neves, President, Emerson College-TPUSA (Jan. 18, 2022, 12:43 p.m.) (on file with author).

⁴ Email from Coviello to Neves (Feb. 9, 2022, 1:45 p.m.) (on file with author).

Requiring student organizations to gain the approval of a university employee or faculty member operates as a *de facto* limitation on student organizations' viewpoints, particularly when the administration has placed its finger on the scales by sending the message—to its faculty and employees—that it disapproves of the group's expression.

In this case, that censorship is a conscious choice: Emerson could, today, assign a staff member to serve as an advisor. Or it could grant the organization a variance to allow it to have a part-time or affiliated faculty member as an advisor, which might expand the pool of potential advisors. Given Emerson's continuing refusal to offer the slightest defense of its students' expressive rights, we will not hold our breath.

Emerson's treatment of TPUSA is deeply shameful for an institution of higher education that claims to uphold free expression. Your administration's own statements about the group have chilled faculty and staff who may otherwise have been interested in advising the organization, even if they do not support its views. This callous indifference to the rights of TPUSA's members renders Emerson's promises of freedom of expression fleeting at best, leaving a stain on a school whose motto pledges to honor "Expression Necessary to Evolution."

Be advised that FIRE will continue to call public attention to Emerson's abandonment of these duties to its students by all means possible. We invite you to convince us that we have no reason to do so.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Graham Piro".

Graham Piro

Program Officer, Individual Rights Defense Program

Cc: Jenna Coviello, Program Coordinator for Student Engagement and Leadership
Erik Muurisepp, Assistant Vice President for Campus Life
Jim Hoppe, VP and Dean of Campus Life