



July 13, 2022

Zachary Greenberg
FIRE
510 Walnut Street
Suite 1250
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19106

Dear Mr. Greenberg:

I'm writing in response to your letter to University of St. Thomas President, Rob Vischer, dated June 29, 2022. Please direct future communication in this matter to me. The University acted consistently with its policies and was well within its rights when it declined to invite Michael Knowles, a third-party, to speak on campus.

St. Thomas is a private, nonprofit, Catholic university with campuses in St. Paul and Minneapolis, Minnesota and Rome, Italy. The St. Thomas mission statement reads: "Inspired by Catholic intellectual tradition, the University of St. Thomas educates students to be morally responsible leaders who think critically, act wisely, and work skillfully to advance the common good." St. Thomas has seven core convictions, which include: (1) pursuit of truth, (2) academic excellence, (3) faith and reason, (4) dignity, (5) diversity, (6) personal attention, and (7) gratitude. St. Thomas' mission and convictions are based upon Catholic social teaching.

A. St. Thomas Policies Regarding Free Expression

Consistent with its mission and convictions, St. Thomas promotes both the search for truth and the dignity of each person. St. Thomas supports and promotes free expression while also recognizing the responsibilities that come with being a member of a Catholic university community. The [Student Bill of Rights](#) provides in relevant part:

The University of St. Thomas recognizes that free inquiry and free expression are indispensable elements for the achievement of the goals of an academic community. Students have the right to freedom of expression, including the right to dissent, protest and/or take reasoned exception to the information and views offered in any course.

While students have the right to freedom of expression, including the right to dissent, protest, or take reasoned exception to the information and views offered in any course, this expression cannot interfere with the rights of others, impede the progress of instruction, or disrupt the processes of the university. Students have the responsibility to express views in a reasonable and orderly fashion as further described in the student policies.

Each student has the responsibility to know and abide by what is contained in the student policies of the University of St. Thomas and all other applicable university regulations and policies.

([Student Bill of Rights](#), Right 7, Responsibilities 8-9)

The University's [Student Policy Regarding Expression, Demonstrations and Sponsorship of Speakers and Organizations](#), provides additional clarification of the right of free expression at St. Thomas:

The University of St. Thomas mission, convictions, policies and applicable law together comprise our community standards. These community standards establish the expectations that apply to every person who is invited and chooses to join the St. Thomas community. The St. Thomas mission, convictions and policies have been developed collaboratively by our university community. They distinguish our community from other academic communities and reflect our community's unique identity and mission as a Catholic university.

- As an academic community, St. Thomas is committed to fostering an educational environment that promotes open dialogue and discussion; promotes the development, expression, exploration and evaluation of ideas; subjects ideas to critical thinking and rigorous analysis reflecting a diversity of perspectives; values expertise and originality; and promotes continuous reflection and awareness of self and others.
- As a Catholic university, we recognize the additional responsibility of each member of our community to respect the inherent dignity of each person; to foster an environment that promotes the exploration and thoughtful evaluation of personal beliefs and values; and to consider the moral implications of our beliefs, values and ideas, including their effects on others.
- As a community that understands and values the power of both words and actions, we recognize that although the expression of beliefs, values and ideas can be distinguished from conduct under many circumstances, the expression of beliefs, values and ideas also can have consequences that are indistinguishable from the consequences of conduct.

Subject always to these considerations, St. Thomas both allows and encourages students to openly discuss, ask questions about and explore challenging and controversial ideas in their personal search for truth at St. Thomas, so long as they do so in a manner that upholds our community standards.

It is also the university's view that educational objectives can best be accomplished through intentional planning, listening, reflecting and interacting. Accordingly, when challenging or controversial issues arise that affect large segments of our community, St. Thomas will offer forums through which these issues may be considered in an educative manner consistent with our community standards, without reproach or reprisal for participation in good faith.

([Student Policy Regarding Expression, Demonstrations and Sponsorship of Speakers and Organizations](#), Section III).

B. St. Thomas Clubs and Organizations Policies

The University's Campus Life Department provides students with opportunities to participate in meaningful educational and social experiences outside the classroom, including the ability to participate in officially recognized student organizations. Recognized student clubs and organizations are subject to applicable University policies, including the University's [Clubs and Organizations Handbook](#) ("Handbook").

St. Thomas is a private University, and its facilities are not a public forum. In order for a speaker to speak at a St. Thomas event, they must be invited. The Handbook provides the process through which student organizations may request that a speaker be invited to speak at St. Thomas and the process for student organizations to use St. Thomas facilities for other events. All student events are subject to an approval process and proposed events are evaluated, among other things, based on their educational value and consistency with St. Thomas convictions. The Handbook provides, in part,

Approval of student events and activities, including those with invited speakers and performers, will be based on, but is not limited to:

- the title, goals and objectives of the event;
- the format of the event;
- the availability of campus resources and support services;
- the impact on human and/or fiscal resources;
- the impact on campus facilities.
- the impact on the St. Thomas Community
- St. Thomas Conviction Statement
- the educational value of the activity or event

Student events and activities should not:

- violate federal, state or local laws
- violate the University's Convictions or applicable policy
- promote beliefs that are contrary to Catholic teachings
- present material that is derogatory of the Catholic Church, or is derogatory of any race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, disability, age or national origin
- includes content that is defamatory or obscene
- advocate for actions or positions that are deliberately intended to incite violence against any group or individual
- imminently threaten the physical safety of any community members
- constitute a clear, present and significant risk to the orderly implementation of the University's activities and its obligation to maintain a physically safe environment for its community and its members.

([Handbook](#), p. 34).

C. The Decision not to Invite Michael Knowles to Speak on Campus

When the College Republicans, a registered student organization, requested to bring Michael Knowles to campus last winter, St. Thomas followed its standard process for vetting student club event and speaker requests. An internet search revealed examples of incendiary remarks by Mr. Knowles toward people who identify as transgender and people with autism.

St. Thomas welcomes speakers who tackle difficult issues – but we expect them to do so while treating community members with dignity and respect to allow for productive discourse. St. Thomas does not invite speakers who have a clear history of showing disrespect toward marginalized people. To do so is contrary to the type of community we aspire to be – a Catholic community that strives to uphold the dignity of every human person

There are many credible speakers who have track records of offering dialogue on challenging and controversial issues in a respectful manner. Staff offered to explore other speaker options with this club and remain willing to do so.

D. No Violation of Contract or the First Amendment

As you recognize in your letter, the First Amendment limits government action. The First Amendment does not limit the rules or expectations St. Thomas or other private institutions may put in place for their communities.

St. Thomas values the opportunity for students, faculty and staff to discuss controversial and challenging issues in a thoughtful, educational manner consistent with our community standards. However, St. Thomas policies make clear that it is not adopting a right to free expression that mirrors First Amendment rights at public institutions. St. Thomas followed its policies in declining the request to invite Mr. Knowles to campus.

If you have additional questions about this matter, please direct them to me.

Sincerely,

/s/ Abigail Crouse

Abigail Crouse
General Counsel

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