



FIRE

Foundation for Individual
Rights and Expression

May 12, 2023

Higher Learning Commission
230 South LaSalle Street
Suite 7-500
Chicago, Illinois 60604-1411

Re: University of St. Thomas (St. Paul, Minnesota)

Sent via HLC Complaint Form

To the Higher Learning Commission:

As a nonpartisan nonprofit dedicated to defending freedom of speech in higher education, the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression (FIRE) respectfully submits this complaint regarding the University of St. Thomas, which is not in compliance with HLC's Criteria for Accreditation section 2.D., requiring the institution to be "committed to academic freedom and freedom of expression in the pursuit of truth in teaching and learning." *Criteria for Accreditation; Criterion 2. Integrity: Ethical and Responsible Conduct; 2.D.*, HIGHER LEARNING COMM'N, <https://www.hlcommission.org/Policies/criteria-and-core-components.html>. FIRE submits this complaint for HLC's consideration in advance of St. Thomas's upcoming Comprehensive Evaluation in October 2023. *Statement of Accreditation Status, Univ. of St. Thomas*, HIGHER LEARNING COMM'N (Apr. 4, 2023), <https://www.hlcommission.org/component/directory/?Itemid=&Action=ShowBasic&instid=1385>.

Failure by St. Thomas in this regard is illustrated by its rejection of the College Republicans student group's request to host speaker Michael Knowles due to his political views. Zach Greenberg, *University of St. Thomas promises free speech, yet practices censorship by denying College Republicans request to host Michael Knowles*, FIRE (Aug. 17, 2022), <https://www.thefire.org/news/university-st-thomas-promises-free-speech-yet-practices-censorship-denying-college-republicans>. Specifically, the university refused to allow the group to host Knowles because, according to administrators, he has in other settings "made statements that are derogatory to the transgender and autistic community." *FIRE Letter to the University of St. Thomas* (June 28, 2022), <https://www.thefire.org/research-learn/fire-letter-university-st-thomas-june-28-2022>.

This rejection violates not only HLC's accreditation standard but also St. Thomas's institutional policies that purport to clearly commit the university to free expression.

Specifically, St. Thomas professes that “[s]tudents have the right to freedom of expression,” and “free inquiry and free expression are indispensable elements for the achievement of the goals of an academic community.” *Student Bill of Rights*, UNIV. OF ST. THOMAS (2007), <https://www.stthomas.edu/student-affairs/departments/dean-of-students/policies/bill-of-rights> [<https://perma.cc/CQ5U-BHH6>].

But the actions of St. Thomas belie these commitments, as freedom of speech protects the right of student groups to invite speakers to campus—even those who may express views offensive to other students, administrators, or members of society at large. This well-established, axiomatic free speech principle ensures students can host and attend a wide array of expressive events on campus. The university need not endorse the views of every speaker, student, or group on campus, and it remains free to add its own voice to their discussions. However, St. Thomas cannot promise free speech then practice censorship by limiting students’ choice of speaker solely because of opposition to the speaker’s viewpoints.

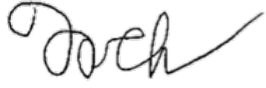
While private universities may elevate religious tenets above a commitment to free speech, St. Thomas has not done so, as evidenced by its official policies clearly establishing expressive freedom as concordant with its Catholic intellectual tradition. Zach Greenberg, *University of St. Thomas promises free speech, yet practices censorship by denying College Republicans request to host Michael Knowles*, FIRE NEWSDESK (Aug. 17, 2022), <https://www.thefire.org/news/university-st-thomas-promises-free-speech-yet-practices-censorship-denying-college-republicans>. St. Thomas’s continuing accreditation by HLC and the university’s clear, written commitment to free speech principles require the university to conform its practices to these principles, even when such practices conflict with institutional religious values.

FIRE sought to resolve this matter before seeking HLC’s intervention. We wrote St. Thomas detailing our objections on June 28, 2022. *FIRE Letter to the University of St. Thomas*, <https://www.thefire.org/research-learn/fire-letter-university-st-thomas-june-28-2022>. In response, St. Thomas conceded it denied the College Republicans’ request to invite Knowles because of his viewpoints, stating that “[a]n internet search revealed examples of incendiary remarks by Mr. Knowles toward people who identify as transgender and people with autism. . . St. Thomas does not invite speakers who have a clear history of showing disrespect toward marginalized people.” Abigail Crouse, *St. Thomas response to FIRE Letter* (July 13, 2022), <https://www.thefire.org/research-learn/st-thomas-response-fire-letter-july-13-2022>. This response suggests St. Thomas will continue to reject student requests to host controversial speakers in violation of its commitment to free speech.

Accrediting agencies like HLC are often the last line of defense for students’ expressive freedoms. Standard 2.D. is one of the strongest protections for student expression at private institutions in the United States. To ensure compliance with this standard as HLC evaluates St. Thomas later this year, we urge HLC to require the university to adopt a content-neutral policy and practice of processing student group speaker requests. This corrective action would allow students to host a variety of speakers and bring St. Thomas into compliance with HLC’s Criteria for Accreditation section 2.D.

I can be reached at zach.greenberg@thefire.org and at (215) 717-3473, should you need additional information or have any questions. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Zach", with a long, sweeping flourish extending to the right.

Zachary Greenberg
Senior Program Officer, Student Organizations, Campus Rights Advocacy
Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression