

January 30, 2026

Lori Rice-Spearman
President's Office
Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center
3601 4th Street
Lubbock, Texas 79430

Sent via U.S. Mail and Electronic Mail (President@ttuhsc.edu)

Dear President Rice-Spearman,

FIRE, a nonpartisan nonprofit that defends free speech,¹ is concerned by Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center's cancellation of Medical Students for Choice's January 26 speaking event featuring retired third-trimester abortion provider Shelley Sella.² "Beyond Limits: A Conversation with Shelley Sella, MD" was meant to give "a physician's perspective on third-trimester abortion care, ethics, and patient centered medicine."³ But, on January 19, TTUHSC's chapter of Turning Point USA and off-campus pro-life activists Mark Lee Dickson and Jim Baxa began a campaign to get the event cancelled, including "direct appeals to Texas Tech System Chancellor Brandon Creighton over social media."⁴ By January 23, TTUHSC

¹ For more than 25 years, FIRE has defended free speech and other individual rights on America's university campuses. You can learn more about our mission and activities at fire.org.

² Adam Cahn, *Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center Cancels Late-Term Abortionist Speech Following Public Outcry*, TEX. SCORECARD (Jan. 23, 2026), <https://texasscorecard.com/state/texas-tech-university-health-sciences-center-cancels-late-term-abortionist-speech-following-public-outcry/>. The recitation of facts here reflects our understanding of the pertinent information. We appreciate that you may have additional information and invite you to share it with us. Reporting suggests that Medical Students for Choice is a national organization with no ties to Texas Tech, yet Medical Students for Choice is listed as a recognized student organization on TTUHSC's website. *Medical Students for Choice*, TEX. TECH UNIV. HEALTH SCIS. CTR., <https://ttuhsc.campuslabs.com/engage/organization/medical-students-for-choice> (last visited Jan. 27, 2026).

³ Cahn, *supra* note 2.

⁴ *Id.* TPUSA argued that since abortion is illegal in Texas, TTUHSC hosting this event would mean it would be promoting an illegal activity on government land. But this argument is immaterial given that 1) speech of a student organization is not the speech of the university, *see Rev. Rul. 72-513* (1972-2 C.B. 246), and 2) the First Amendment protects the mere advocacy of unlawful conduct, *Brandenburg v. Ohio*, 395 U.S. 444, 447-48 (1969).

informed the *Texas Scorecard* that it had “determined that it is not in the best interest of the university to host this event on campus,”⁵ and that the event would no longer take place.

Cancelling a student organization’s event that merely *discusses* a controversial medical procedure because others are opposed to the speaker and her views is not in the best interest of TTUHSC or any other institution of higher education which, by its nature, should be dedicated to open debate and discussion. Rather, it is viewpoint discrimination, which the Supreme Court has labeled the most “egregious” act of censorship.⁶ As a public institution bound by the First Amendment,⁷ TTUHSC is obligated to protect speech that some members of a community *will* find controversial or offensive.⁸ The First Amendment protects students’ and student groups’ broad expressive right to both invite and hear speakers free from limitations based on “orthodoxy or popularity of their political or social views[.]”⁹ As the Supreme Court has explained:¹⁰

[Speech] may indeed best serve its high purpose when it induces a condition of unrest ... or even stirs people to anger. Speech is often provocative and challenging. It may strike at prejudices and preconceptions and have profound unsettling effects as it presses for acceptance of an idea.

This is especially true of the right to discuss political issues, the protection of which lies at the core of the First Amendment.¹¹ Protecting speech that challenges prejudices and preconceptions is crucial to discussions of medical procedures among medical students and professionals, who will likely face multiple decisions directly affecting whether their patients live or die. Allowing political judgments to deny academics and clinicians access to information and debate about medical procedures will impair the ability to make informed medical judgments.

⁵ Cahn, *supra* note 2.

⁶ *Rosenberger v. Rector & Visitors of the Univ. of Va.*, 515 U.S. 819, 829 (1995).

⁷ *Healy v. James*, 408 U.S. 169, 180 (1972) (“[T]he precedents of this Court leave no room for the view that, because of the acknowledged need for order, First Amendment protections should apply with less force on college campuses than in the community at large. Quite to the contrary, ‘the vigilant protection of constitutional freedoms is nowhere more vital than in the community of American schools.’”) (internal citation omitted).

⁸ The Supreme Court has repeatedly held the First Amendment protects speech that others find controversial or offensive. *Texas v. Johnson*, 491 U.S. 397, 414 (1989) (burning the American flag is protected by the First Amendment, the “bedrock principle underlying” the holding that government actors “may not prohibit the expression of an idea simply because society finds the idea itself offensive or disagreeable”); *Hustler Mag., Inc. v. Falwell*, 485 U.S. 46, 50 (1988) (a parody ad depicting a pastor losing his virginity to his mother in an outhouse is protected).

⁹ *Brooks v. Auburn Univ.*, 296 F. Supp. 188 (M.D. Ala. 1969); *cf. Stanley v. Georgia*, 394 U.S. 557, 564 (1969) (It is “well established” that the First Amendment confers and protects the right to speak as well as “the right to receive information and ideas.”).

¹⁰ *Terminiello v. Chicago*, 337 U.S. 1, 4 (1949).

¹¹ *Buckley v. Am. Constitutional Law Found.*, 525 U.S. 182, 186-87 (1999).

Furthermore, by cancelling Medical Students for Choice's event with Sella, TTUHSC has ratified an impermissible "heckler's veto,"¹² putting campus speech at the mercy of those most willing to silence their opponents. Allowing objectors to dictate what speech may take place on campus is a clear violation of the First Amendment. More practically, it also invites further political interference in the education and development of TTUHSC students, again to the detriment of their future patients.

We request a substantive response to this letter no later than the close of business on February 6, 2026, confirming TTUHSC will allow Medical Students for Choice to reschedule its event with Sella, and that moving forward, it will not cancel student events based on negative reactions from the campus community or the public.

Sincerely,



Haley Gluhanich
Senior Program Counsel, Campus Rights Advocacy

Cc: Lawrence Schovanec, Texas Tech University President
Brandon Creighton, Texas Tech University System Chancellor
C/o Dede Kirkpatrick, Executive Assistant

¹² See *First Amendment Glossary*, Heckler's veto, FIRE, <https://www.thefire.org/research-learn/first-amendment-glossary> (last visited Jan. 28, 2026).