

Testimony for the People's Hearing on Threats to Diversity and Academic Freedom in Higher Education

John Mckiernan-Gonzalez, Ph.D. (speaking for myself as a private citizen, and not for any institution or organization)

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People's Hearing Chaired by Texas Rep. Lulu Flores (D-Austin)

Other Panelists: Texas Reps. Sheryl Cole (D-Austin), Mary González (D-El Paso), Suleman Lalani (D-Houston) and Christina Morales (D-Houston)

My name is John Mckiernan-Gonzalez, I am a faculty member in the department of history at Texas State, and the director of the Center for the Study of the Southwest. I am here as a tax payer, not a faculty member and not an administrator. And, for the first time, me da cosa estar aqui, worried about whether speaking to my elected representative may cost me my job.

These are my taxpayer credentials: I am the author of *Fevered Measures*, the first book examining the role the border and border communities played as policy laboratories for federal public health agencies between 1848-1942.¹ And, I am the co-editor of *Capturing Labor: a history of unfree work in the Southwest*.² As a published taxpayer, I trade in context and narrative. So, let me begin with context.

Texas has maybe 32 million people. Of these, there are 5 million students in public schools, which translates into (crosses fingers) 400,000 grads, all of which deserve the possibility of a first class public university education.³ And, the 50,000 slots in Austin will never be enough.

¹ John Mckiernan-Gonzalez, *Fevered Measures: Public Health and Race at the Texas-Mexico Border, 1848-1942* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012)

² Jessica Pliley and John Mckiernan-Gonzalez, eds. *Capturing Labor: a History of Unfree Work in the Southwest* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2026)

³ Bureau of the Census, "Texas," *Quick Facts Texas* (DC: Bureau of the Census), <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/TX/RHI725219>, accessed 08/17/2026. The Texas Educational Association reported 5,456,642 students enrolled in public schools in Texas. Office of Research and analytics, Texas Educational Association, *Enrollment in Texas Public Schools* (Austin: TEA, 2026), <https://tea.texas.gov/data-reports/school-performance/accountability-research/enroll-2025-26.pdf>, accessed 08/17/2026

Context 2: Maybe 125 years ago, the lege established SWT as a normal school to educate teachers for communities across the state.⁴ About 30 years ago, President Denise Trauth kicked off a forced march to R1 status for SWT.⁵ This was both enhanced rewards for peer-reviewed publication AND increased recruitment of students across Texas. The number of ‘white students’ has been consistent since then, but the vast majority of enrollment growth of Texas State from 24,000 to 50,000 students has been from Latino households, mostly in Austin, San Antonio, Houston and Dallas and rural Texas, be it the eagle shale or West Texas. As our ex-provost Dr. Gene Bourgeois used to say, “the most Texas of Texas Public Universities.”⁶

We (Texas State University) are a majority women, majority-minority, (tuition dependent) HSI with a national reputation for being incredibly veteran friendly, queer friendly and academically and intellectually progressive. GO BOBCATS.

And, right as the university would arrive – now with enhanced land grant status – Dr. Trauth tragically retired because of a cancer diagnosis.

The road to R1 for Texas State university was enabled by Texas State faculty and a broad Latino commitment to higher education.

But, Texas State also has its own Latino excellence narrative that overlaps with the overthrow of jim crow in this state. In the 20s, Graduate Elena Zamora O’Shea published the first environmental humanities themed novel *El Mesquite*.⁷ In the 30s, some grad whose first teaching job was at Uvalde went on to become senator, senate majority leader, vice president, president and san marcos and Fredericksburg gad-about – all with support from poll-taxed Mexican American communities.⁸ In the 50s, migrant farm worker and veteran Tomas Rivera cashed in his GI Bill after WWI and then went on to write *Y no se lo*

⁴ Texas State University Registrar, “History of the University,” *Catalog*, <https://mycatalog.txstate.edu/undergraduate/general-information/history-university/>, accessed 08/17/2026

⁵ Texas State University, “Biography: Dr. Denise Trauth,” *Texas State University*, <https://www.president.txst.edu/denisetrauth/biography.html>, accessed 08/17/2026. Actually, she became president in 2002, which makes it a 22 year forced march.

⁶ This turn of phrase was readily circulated in a variety of public fora. I have memorized the sentence whenever I explain Texas State University student body demographics to people outside and inside the state of Texas.

⁷ Elena Zamora, *El Mesquite* eds. Leticia garza-Falcon and Andres Tijerina (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2000). For a skilled contextualization, see John Moran Gonzalez, *Border Renaissance: The Texas Centennial and the Emergence of Mexican American Literature* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009)

⁸ Robert Caro, *The Path to Power*; Robert Caro, *Means of Ascent*; Robert Caro, *The Master of the Senate*; Robrt Caro, *The Passage of Power*

trago la tierra.⁹ And, in the 80s, Dean Jaime Chahin did the Chicano Dean thing long before it was a thing and before it became not a thing in this state.¹⁰

Context 3: the department of history and the college of liberal arts have been great custodians of the public trust and public funds given us. Since I have been tenured almost every person promoted to associate has won national and international book awards for their work.¹¹ just recently, my senior colleague Jimmy McWilliams recently became a Pulitzer prize finalist for *The Life and Poetry of James Sanford*.

Context 4: SB37 has stained the glorious future of enhanced research and salary funds for faculty AND THE possibility of smaller class sizes for students and faculty.

Within a day of its implementation, the university disbanded the Hispanic Policy Network, the Alliance Network and the Black Faculty and Staff Association. Student support staff were dismissed for saying that the university would continue to support its minority student. And then, even as we – as a university community started to wrestle with the possibility of enhanced research funds – the faculty senate was disbanded and then Tom Alter, a historian of radical labor movements, was dismissed for talking to self-identified radical labor movements.¹² A philosophy professor had his contract non-renewed for giving a talk on philosophy and foreign policy, where a fight broke out afterwards.¹³ Makes me wonder what that kind of responsibility holds for anyone who has gone to a bar. A professor in the physics department faced non-renewal, and it is unclear if it is because they expressed public support for immigrants, LGBTQIA students or Palestinian students.¹⁴ Others – in my department – were encouraged to stop teaching by the highest levels of the university, not their peers in the department. And, my deeply esteemed colleague, the

⁹ Tomas Rivera, *Y no se lo trago la tierra: and the earth did not swallow him up* (Berkeley: Quinto Sol, 1971)

¹⁰ Jaime Chahin, “The Forgotten Americans: A Voice for *Colonia* Residents,” *Children, Youth and Environments*, 15:1, *Environmental Health, and Other Papers* (2005), pp. 319-331. See also the interview in the Voces project with Jaime Chahin, <https://voces.moody.utexas.edu/collections/stories/jaime-chahin>

¹¹ Ronald Angelo Johnson, *Entangled Alliances*; Caroline Ritter, *Imperial Encore*; Sarah Coleman, *The Walls Within: the politics of immigration in modern america*; Casey Nichols, *Poverty Rebels*; Sara Damiano, *To Her Credit: Gender, Law, and Economic Life in Eighteenth-Century New England Cities*

¹² Ryan Claycamp, “University to reinstate Tom Alter after court order,” *University Star*, <https://universitystar.com/33119/news/texas-state-to-reinstate-terminated-history-professor-after-court-order/>

¹³ Emma Whitford, “court orders Texas State must reinstate professor after Palestinian-Israeli talk,” *Inside Higher Education* <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/quick-takes/2026/05/13/texas-state-must-reinstate-fired-prof-court-rules>

¹⁴ Arabella di Christina, “professor considers lawsuit against university, alleges censorship,” *University Star* <https://universitystar.com/35519/news/professor-considers-lawsuit-against-texas-state-alleges-censorship/>

faculty member who led the creation of the Latino Studies Minor in 2017, Gloria Martinez, (yes, more than 50 years after UT), was dismissed from her position as director of the Center for Gender and Ethnic Studies for supporting a student who asked whether there would be support for Latino students after sb 37.¹⁵ So, what have we been doing – as taxpayers – since receiving enhanced research funds.

Well, we talk about Tom's case. We talk about the philosophy department. We talk about who is next, and why.

And, as a tax payer, why should I care?

We don't talk about our research interests. We don't talk about research projects. We don't express interest about or responsibilities for being faculty in a first-gen, progressive, first class with a substantial, rural, urban and Latino community. We perform what Russell Vought has wanted to create: "terrorized state employees," not researchers, scholars and community members.¹⁶ And that outcome, *queridos y queridas*, is a waste of more than a century of public investment as well as my taxpayer dollars and yours.

Policy proposals:

- enhanced formal consultation between the progressive caucus and faculty and staff representative bodies across the state.
- A return to a state institution that understands the principles of academic freedom, freedom of assembly and free speech.
- A conversation about how our university leaders can do their best to defend and expand the resources associated with HSI and minority-serving designations means in Texas, a diverse, female majority, HSI, minority – majority, deeply diverse, wealthy and unequal state.

¹⁵ Jordan Elder, "hidden camera video," *News 4 San Antonio*, <https://news4sanantonio.com/news/local/hidden-camera-video-at-texas-state-raises-questions-about-dei-law-compliance>

¹⁶ Alice Herman, "Russell Vought: Trump Appointee who wants federal employees to be 'in trauma'", *The Guardian* 02/10/2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/feb/10/who-is-russell-vought-trump-office-of-management-and-budget>