

People's Hearing on Threats to Academic Freedom
Lisa L. Moore

Bio:

Lisa Moore has lived in Austin since 1991, when she started teaching English and Women's and Gender Studies at UT Austin. She is the award-winning author or editor of several books about women's and LGBTQ+ literature, and a published poet. At UT Austin, Lisa helped create a major, graduate program, and eventually a department of Women's, Gender and Sexuality Studies. She also helped create the LGBTQ Studies Program and was its director from 2019-2023. Most recently, she was Chair of the Department of Women's, Gender and Sexuality Studies, but lost that position when the Department was closed this summer, along with six other ethnic and area studies departments. Starting August 16, Lisa will be a professor of English and Social and Cultural Analysis at UT.

Testimony

My name is Lisa Moore, and I am speaking today as a private citizen. I have been a faculty member at UT Austin since 1991 and most recently served as Chair of the Department of Women's, Gender and Sexuality Studies. Like several colleagues, I lost that position when the department was closed this summer along with six other departments. Beginning August 16, I will hold an appointment in English and Social and Cultural Analysis.

I want to thank Representative Lulu Flores and the organizers of this hearing for creating a public space to discuss the future of higher education in Texas. Representative Flores has supported women's and gender studies at UT for many years and witnessed the long effort required to build a strong academic program in this area.

I am here to discuss the chilling effect on academic freedom and the growing climate of censorship on Texas public university campuses. These developments follow the passage of Senate Bill 17 in 2023 and Senate Bill 37 in 2025. SB 17 eliminated diversity, equity, and inclusion offices across public universities and led to the loss of dozens of positions at UT Austin. SB 37 imposed major changes to university governance, including the weakening of long-standing structures of faculty oversight. Together, these measures have altered the conditions under which universities teach, conduct research, and govern themselves.

One lesson from the closure of Women's, Gender and Sexuality Studies and related departments is that academic programs may be most vulnerable when they appear

most secure. Over several decades we built a major, graduate program, and eventually a department. We trained students, produced internationally recognized research, and contributed to the intellectual life of the university. Yet that success did not protect us. In fact, our visibility and influence may have made us a target.

Fields such as gender and ethnic studies are often relatively small, but they have had a profound impact on universities and public life. Many practices that now seem routine emerged from decades of work by scholars in these fields: more inclusive teaching methods, accessibility initiatives, family and health accommodations, and broader efforts to make higher education available to people who were once excluded from it. These changes have benefited students, faculty, and staff across the university.

The attacks on these fields are often justified in different ways. Sometimes critics invoke budget concerns. At other times they claim to be promoting viewpoint diversity, enrollment efficiency, or workforce preparation. Yet the targets remain remarkably consistent. Programs that examine race, gender, sexuality, inequality, and power continue to face heightened scrutiny regardless of their enrollments, productivity, or contributions.

Although Texas law does not explicitly prohibit teaching about race, gender, or sexuality, the political climate has nonetheless produced widespread self-censorship. Faculty members increasingly feel uncertain about what they can teach and how they can teach it.

A recent conversation with an engineering department chair illustrates the problem. One of his most accomplished faculty members studies technology and health care outcomes. She felt that she could not teach her subject responsibly without addressing how race and gender shape access to health care and patterns of illness. Yet she was afraid to do so. She worried about public attacks, online harassment, and professional retaliation. My colleague told me, with real frustration, "I can't protect her."

This concern is becoming common. Faculty members are reconsidering courses they were hired to teach because they fear being targeted for discussing topics central to their disciplines. Colleagues have withdrawn courses on public health, politics, and related subjects because race and gender are essential components of those fields. The result is not open debate. It is silence.

Most professors are not activists or politicians. We spend our time conducting research, mentoring students, and sharing knowledge. Academic freedom exists because scholarship requires intellectual independence. When scholars begin avoiding legitimate subjects out of fear, the quality of teaching and research inevitably suffers.

The threat extends beyond any single department or university. Texas and Florida have attracted national attention, but similar efforts are emerging across the country. These developments should concern anyone who values public education, regardless of political affiliation. Universities function best when ideas can be tested through evidence, debate, and expertise rather than through political pressure.

The closure of Women's, Gender and Sexuality Studies at UT Austin is therefore not simply a local administrative decision. It is part of a broader struggle over who gets to produce knowledge, what questions may be asked, and whether universities can remain places of open inquiry.

I want to close with a simple request. Please oppose further legislation that restricts academic freedom, weakens faculty governance, or narrows what can be taught at public universities. And ultimately, I urge you to work toward repealing SB 17 and SB 37.

The future of higher education in Texas depends on our willingness to defend the conditions that make teaching, learning, and research possible.