



American Association of University Professors (AAUP)

President, Jiseon Lee Isbara
School of the Art Institute
36 S. Wabash
Chicago, Illinois 60603

June 24, 2026

CC: Martin Berger, Provost and Senior Vice President of Academic Affairs
Camille Martin-Thomson, Dean of Faculty
Dawn Gavin, Interim Dean of Faculty
Delinda Collier, Graduate Dean
Shaurya Kumar, Chair of Faculty
Adam Mack, Faculty Liaison
Amy Vogel, Faculty Senate Chair
Chair of the Board of Trustees, Eric Lefkofsky

Dear President Isbara:

We are writing to express our concern about the School of the Art Institute's suspension and investigation of art therapy professor Savneet Talwar. In an April 17, 2026, letter, Director of Employee Relations Andrew Daley accused Talwar of "alleged conduct expressing an anti-Israeli, antisemitic [sic], and/or pro-Palestine viewpoint." On April 20, Provost Martin Berger met with Prof. Talwar and then summarized his actions in a letter that imposed an interim suspension and ordered Prof. Talwar to keep quiet about the investigation and suspension.

These actions endanger principles of academic freedom in numerous ways:

1) **Prof. Talwar's assignment is fully protected by principles of academic freedom and does not meet any criteria for a discriminatory act.** The Daley letter announced an investigation of Talwar "alleged conduct expressing an anti-Israeli, antisemitic [sic], and/or pro-Palestine viewpoint," claiming as the basis for this "an academic assignment that focused solely on the issues of a Muslim woman with strong sympathies for the Palestinian cause."

The assertion that a "pro-Palestine viewpoint" would violate the school's anti-discrimination code is a shocking act of ignorance. In reality, the only plausible example of discrimination displayed in this entire case is this university official openly expressing what seems to be an official discriminatory ban on support for Palestinians in this letter. It is important to note that Prof. Talwar's assignment dealt with the views of an imaginary character. Suspending Prof. Talwar for creating a hypothetical example would be similar to punishing a professor for assigning a novel in which a character said something offensive.

This astonishing attack on academic freedom is even more extraordinary because this imaginary character expressed nothing that any reasonable person could find discriminatory, but instead "felt deeply affected by the violence against Palestinian civilians and was critical of the home government's limited response." No one could deny that there are real people who hold this opinion that art therapists might encounter in their work. Even if someone thinks that this imaginary character's concern about "violence against Palestinian civilians" is somehow antisemitic, assignments for art therapy students can and should include references to dealing with clients who hold potentially offensive opinions.



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2) **The interim suspension of Prof. Talwar violates professional standards of academic freedom and the professional standards for art therapists.** SAIC recognizes the importance of academic freedom and has agreed to follow its principles. The SAIC faculty handbook specifies that faculty can grieve “a violation of academic freedom” and cites the core 1940 Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure. In a statement to Inside Higher Ed, the administration declared, “Our institution has a steadfast commitment to academic freedom. We do not discipline faculty for protected classroom discussion of national, religious, racial, or cultural topics.”

But that is precisely what has happened in this case. Prof. Talwar’s assignment clearly is protected by academic freedom and meets all professional standards for art therapy. The assignment asks for critical self-reflection (including the impact of countertransference on the treatment itself), and ethical application of art therapy theory and practice. This is entirely in line with the statement of Ethical Principles of Art Therapists issued by the American Art Therapy Association (see <https://arttherapy.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Ethical-Principles-for-Art-Therapists.pdf>). The investigation and punishment of Prof. Talwar undermines the professional education and training that art therapists must undergo in order to serve future clients.

3) **The interim suspension of Prof. Talwar violates AAUP standards for both the standard of interim suspensions and the due process required for them.** The suspension of a professor, even with pay, is a form of discipline. A suspension without due process violates the academic freedom of professors to speak in the classroom, and it violates the rights of students to hear from their instructor.

According to the AAUP’s *Recommended Institutional Regulations on Academic Freedom and Tenure*, “Pending a final decision by the hearing committee, the faculty member will be suspended or assigned to other duties in lieu of suspension, only if immediate harm to the faculty member or others is threatened by continuance. Before suspending a faculty member, pending an ultimate determination of the faculty member’s status through the institution’s hearing procedures, the administration will consult with the Faculty Committee on Academic Freedom and Tenure [or whatever other title it may have] concerning the propriety, the length, and the other conditions of the suspension.” SAIC paid lip service to these AAUP standards by claiming that “immediate harm” justified the suspension of Prof. Talwar. But SAIC failed to follow the procedural requirements for a faculty committee to be consulted to determine if a suspension is justified. According to the AAUP’s Committee A Report on *The Use and Abuse of Faculty Suspensions*, in the rules requiring “immediate harm” to justify any suspension, “‘harm’ is meant to be understood as physical...” There is no allegation of any physical harm or threat of physical harm that could justify Prof. Talwar’s suspension, nor is there any explanation provided by SAIC for what the immediate harm is in this case.

4) **SAIC wrongly ordered Prof. Talwar not to discuss her suspension and investigation, in violation of her rights to speak.** Berger wrote to her, “because of FERPA obligations and the potential for claims of retaliation (discussed further below), I directed you to refrain from talking about this matter with any student and your Art Therapy colleagues.”

Berger claimed, “because this matter involves a student, we must all maintain confidentiality to ensure compliance with FERPA.” This is not true. Absolutely nothing in FERPA requires complete confidentiality in investigations. FERPA applies only to specific identifiable private student records—it cannot be used to impose a general silence on any discussion about a professor’s suspension. There is no FERPA requirement that professors must keep the news of their own suspension secret from colleagues. Banning conversations with colleagues violates both the academic freedom of a professor and the opportunity to seek out shared governance solutions to administrative violations of academic freedom. Academic freedom also protects extramural utterances and the right of a professor under investigation or suspension to publicly discuss their case. FERPA is not a license to violate the free speech, academic freedom, and due process rights of



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faculty. While a college must limit actual retaliation, it cannot silence speech by using a hypothetical fear of possible retaliation as the excuse for censorship.

5) **SAIC officials have allowed inappropriate factors to influence their actions in this case.** Provost Berger admitted, “one of the reasons this issue raises such serious concerns is that there have been multiple, prior complaints alleging the creation of a hostile environment within your department.” Faculty must be judged solely for their own actions. It is a serious violation of due process and the principle of individual justice to announce that a severe penalty such as an interim suspension is justified, in part, by mere allegations against other people within the same department. This admission undermines the credibility of any claim that a suspension was in any way necessary to protect the campus.

Please correct any errors or misunderstandings in our understanding of the situation based on the information we have available, and we welcome any additional information you can provide in response to this letter. But based on the evidence in the official documents, the School of the Art Institute appears to have committed numerous serious violations of academic freedom and due process and failed to follow both AAUP procedures and its own campus policies.

We strongly urge you to immediately rescind the unjust suspension against Prof. Talwar. We further encourage another look at the entire investigation, since it seems clear that a quick dismissal is the only appropriate response to an allegation based on no plausible claims of discrimination and addressing a classroom assignment fully protected by academic freedom. We also recommend SAIC adopt new policies and procedures to prevent future abuses of academic freedom.

Sincerely,

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