

Collin College fires third professor in transparent campaign to cull its critics

by [Adam Steinbaugh](#)

February 26, 2021

Yesterday, Collin College — a public institution in McKinney, Texas — said it would end its relationship with Lora Burnett, a history professor whose social media comments have attracted the attention of media, the public, and at least one state lawmaker.

That action is retaliatory — and Burnett is not the only Collin College faculty member being targeted. In recent weeks, at least two of her colleagues have also been terminated for criticizing the college's leadership, speaking out on political issues, and attempting to form a local chapter of a voluntary union.

There are a lot of moving parts, so here's a digest of what FIRE knows:

- Collin College faculty criticized the administration's plan to reopen during the COVID-19 pandemic. These critics included Lora Burnett, who [emailed district President H. Neil Matkin privately](#) to criticize the reopening plan. Matkin's comments downplaying the pandemic ("[blown utterly out of proportion](#)") and the [death of a nursing instructor](#) drew negative media attention to the college, and some outlets quoted professor Audra Heaslip, who had criticized the plan to reopen.
- During October's vice presidential debate, Burnett [tweeted](#) about Mike Pence: "The moderator needs to talk over Mike Pence until he shuts his little demon mouth up." After the tweet was compiled by

conservative [media outlets](#) highlighting faculty members' tweets about the debate, concerns were raised by — [according to Matkin](#) — “college constituents” and “legislators.”

- Publicly, Matkin condemned Burnett. In an email to faculty, he [warned](#) that the college’s “execution of [the college’s] personnel policies will not be played out in a public manner.” The college soon privately issued two dubious [written warnings](#) to Burnett over her response to emails and a tweet about a deceased former professor. After FIRE [warned](#) the college in a [letter](#) that Burnett’s speech was protected, it [implied in a letter](#) of its own that it would not renew her contract — a form of retaliation that FIRE [warned](#) would violate the First Amendment. Declining to renew a contract because of protected expression [is retaliation](#) and it makes little difference whether it’s styled as a nonrenewal or a termination.
- Only one of those “legislators” who allegedly contacted the college is known. Rep. Jeff Leach [exchanged text messages with Matkin](#), asking if Burnett was “paid with taxpayer dollars.” Matkin assured Leach that he would “deal with it” and that Burnett was “[a]ready on my radar before the current issue.”
- The college fought to conceal this text exchange from the public, sending four letters to the attorney general of Texas — and [apparently spending \\$14,000 on legal fees](#) — seeking to withhold the records. After it [lost](#) and [the records became public](#), Leach [tweeted that Burnett’s termination was a “BIG WIN,”](#) then — after learning that Burnett had not yet been fired — [tweeted an image of a ticking clock](#), implying her time as a college employee was limited.
- Nine days later, the college [notified](#) Burnett that her contract would come to an end, citing “insubordination, making private personnel issues public that impair the college’s operations, and personal criticisms of co-workers, supervisors, and/or those who merely disagree with you.”

- Burnett is not alone. On Jan. 28, within hours of each other, the college [ended its contractual relationship with professors Audra Heaslip and Suzanne Jones](#) — who had both raised concerns about the college’s COVID-19 reopening and had established a Collin College chapter of the [Texas Faculty Association](#), a non-bargaining faculty union. Both were told that the college’s senior administration had intervened to overturn recommendations that their contracts be renewed.
- Heaslip was told she was being let go because she had not “worked collaboratively” with the administration and had gone “outside” of the “shared governance structure” by trying to “exert internal pressure” on the college not to reopen for face-to-face instruction, as the college’s board had “determined” that the college should be reopened.
- Jones received similar explanations, citing her criticism of the COVID-19 reopening and her participation in an [open letter calling for the removal of Confederate statues](#) — the college objected that she had signed the letter “[Suzanne Jones, education professor, Collin College](#).” Administrators also cited her participation in the Texas Faculty Association, objecting that the union’s website [mentioned the College’s name and identified Jones](#).

As FIRE’s repeated letters to Collin College have explained, all these professors’ actions are fully protected by the First Amendment.

Instead of recognizing that its faculty members have well-established First Amendment rights to criticize the college, comment on political affairs and global pandemics, and create voluntary unions, Collin College’s senior leadership has decided to set the institution’s reputation on fire and burn through taxpayer funds in a futile effort to protect themselves from criticism.

Collin College’s leadership has made a knowing and purposeful choice to ignore their fundamental obligations under the First Amendment and its board-level policy, which assures that faculty have the

“right to expect the Board and the College District’s administrators to uphold vigorously the principles of academic freedom and to protect the faculty from harassment, censorship, or interference from outside groups and individuals.”

Collin College’s board has remained silent in the face of this campaign. FIRE will continue to draw attention to Collin College’s actions until it meets its legal and moral obligations to honor the expressive rights of its faculty.

FIRE defends the rights of students and faculty members — no matter their views — at public and private universities and colleges in the United States. If your rights are in jeopardy, get in touch with us: [thefire.org/alarm](https://www.thefire.org/alarm).

Schools: [Collin College](#)

Cases: [Collin College: Faculty Member Issued Warnings Over Tweets About Vice President Pence, Deceased Professor](#)