

February 7, 2022

Dr. Neil Matkin, President

Collin College

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email: nmatkin@collin.edu

Dear President Matkin:

The American Historical Association views with alarm your decision not to renew the contract of Dr. Michael Phillips, professor of history. Recently, Professor Phillips asked his students to consider wearing masks to protect their own health and the health of their classmates. He has also provided historical context to current debates about public policies addressing the COVID-19 pandemic and other issues. The American Historical Association encourages historians to provide such context, and registers concern when our colleagues face disciplinary measures from employers when exercising their freedom to participate in public discourse.

Apparently, Professor Phillips violated a Collin College policy that states, “We cannot have any written language (signs, syllabus) anywhere requesting/requiring/recommending (verb choice doesn’t matter) masks. . . . We also cannot encourage folks to wear them in person. This is to comply with the governor’s executive order.”

Even considering Governor Greg Abbott’s executive order banning mask *mandates*, the Collin College web site situates Professor Phillips’s recommendation to his class well within institutional guidelines: “we encourage the campus community to wear masks indoors.” This policy is consistent with the governor’s order, which states that Texans are “encouraged” to use masks where transmissions are high.

More generally, it is disturbing that Collin College would not renew the contract of a history professor because he asserted his rights to free speech on matters of public concern. With his excellent record of teaching and scholarship, Professor Phillips would seem to be the victim of egregious overreach on the part of the Collin College administration. We fear that your actions will serve to intimidate other history professors who seek to teach about the history of pandemics and other controversial issues, and seek to protect the health of their students.

The AHA is especially concerned about your actions in this situation because it is not the first time. We note that you chose not to respond to our letter of October 12, 2020, regarding Professor Lora Burnett, even after a follow-up message was sent four days later. Collin College damages its reputation with its continued pattern of arbitrary nonrenewals and professional discourtesies.

We urge you to reverse your decision not to renew Professor Phillips’s contract.

Sincerely,



James Grossman

Executive Director