

Academic independence of UBC research institute under threat, says director who resigned

<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/peter-wall-institute-director-1.4914839>

Philippe Tortell says he can no longer lead the Peter Wall Institute for Advanced Studies



Alex Migdal · CBC News · Posted: Nov 22, 2018 6:46 PM PT | Last Updated: November 22



Philippe Tortell is an oceanographer who has led the institute since 2016. (Supplied/Peter Wall Institute for Advanced Studies)

26 comments

The director of a prominent research institute at the University of British Columbia has resigned, citing a series of directives from the university's president, which he says threaten the institute's academic independence.

Philippe Tortell, an oceanographer who has helmed the Peter Wall Institute for Advanced Studies since 2016, says he couldn't lead the institute in good faith after being asked by UBC president Santa Ono, who chairs the institute's board of trustees, to axe most of its core programs and to instead pursue research overseen by UBC administration.

- **Academic research should be funded by public tax dollars — not corporations, says ethicist**

The institute opened in 1996 with the help of a \$15-million donation from Vancouver real estate developer Peter Wall. It has since brought together scholars from different disciplines to produce independent research.

'Good research doesn't work like that'

Tortell said he submitted two drafts of a strategic plan for the institute's future to its board of trustees — its governing body — in May and October. After the second meeting in October, the board met in-camera without Tortell present.

Then last week, Tortell said he received a list of directives from Ono to cut the scholar program in half, eliminate three other initiatives and have academics work under existing "research clusters" — funded research teams — led by UBC's vice-president of research.

He resigned Tuesday in a surprise announcement to faculty deans and department chairs, arguing that the board's vision was "wholly inconsistent" with the institute's values.

"UBC's problem is that they're trying to dictate from the top, from the administrator's role, what research should be done. And good research just doesn't work like that," he told CBC News on Wednesday.



UBC has regularly ranked as one of the world's top research universities. (Christer Waara/CBC)

Resignation disappointing: Ono

The institute's direction is ultimately shaped by the university's president, according to its founding agreement, so the board has the ability to make these directives.

But Tortell's resignation drew outcry online from faculty.



[charlesmenzies@charlesmenzies](https://twitter.com/charlesmenzies)

It is such a shame that Philippe Tortell has been compelled to resign as Director of PWIAS in response to strong arm techniques of UBC's managerial class.

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[Shannon Walsh](#)@Shannondwalsh

Shocked that one of the best intellectual experiences of my academic career is being dismantled. Philippe Tortell was an inspirational leader and visionary that was facilitating world-class interdisciplinary breakthroughs. @ubcprez this is very discouraging

Dr. Jennifer Berdahl@JBerdahl

Philippe Tortell for @ubcprez: His resignation speech as Director of the @WallInstitute shows guts, integrity, vision, and an understanding of what it takes to make breakthrough research discoveries, something @UBC desperately needs right now. <https://youtu.be/7L1A6jT4UMw>

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The institute's scholar program funds up to 12 faculty members annually to spend a year in residence, often producing surprising research. For instance, two of its 2016 scholars, a microbiologist and an architect, designed a composting toilet to help with sanitation issues in refugee camps

UBC psychology professor Kalina Christoff, who was a Wall Scholar in 2017, said Tortell's resignation was demoralizing for faculty and that it points to administration dictating research interests.

- **Suspension of TRU professor could violate academic freedom, faculty association says**

In a statement, UBC president Santa Ono, who chairs the institute's board, said Tortell's decision to resign was unexpected and disappointing.

Ono said he met Wednesday with the institute's two distinguished professors, Brett Finlay and Derek Gregory. He also plans to meet with the board's four other trustees this week.

The two UBC-appointed trustees, Judy Illes and Maxwell Cameron, are members of existing research clusters at UBC.

Ono said the in-camera meeting was used to discuss Tortell's proposed budget and "various topics," which he called standard practice. He said he would be "listening closely to the views of our stakeholders as we pursue next steps."



UBC president Santa Ono says he'll be meeting with the institute's board of trustees this week. (Rafferty Baker/CBC)

"As a public academic institution, UBC places paramount value on academic freedom, and on supporting interdisciplinary research," he said in the statement.

The UBC faculty association, which advocates for academic freedom, wasn't available for comment Thursday.

Several senior executives have left the university in the past year, including Louise Cowin, the vice-president of students who oversaw the school's first standalone [sexual assault policy](#), and Andrew Simpson, vice-president of finance and operations.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Alex Migdal

Journalist

Alex Migdal is a web journalist for CBC News in Vancouver. He's previously written for The Globe and Mail, Guelph Mercury and Edmonton Journal, and most recently reported on the refugee crisis in Turkey. You can reach him at alex.migdal@cbc.ca.

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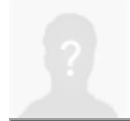
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REALTIME



- **Doug Edmunds**
Yep, nothing new here.
Big money been controlling information for decades now, not surprising to see it affecting curriculums.
• 17 minutes ago
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• **Gregg Butler**

Universities in general are going off the rails.

- 3 hours ago
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• **George Hancock**

@Gregg Butler Yes. The administration is only interested in corporate success and the student body is increasingly interested only in "safe speech". In both cases the result is the suppression of the kind of openness in ideas that universities should stand for.

- 28 minutes ago
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- **Doug Edmunds**

@George Hancock

When a school is run for 'profiteering' purposes, reality and truth are the first to be hit.

- 16 minutes ago
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- **Mark Mealing**

Ono's position is understandable but also reprehensible. This is entirely the wrong sort of direction to give such an institute, whose effectiveness depends upon its independence.

- 3 hours ago
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- **George Duquette**

It's not the first time narrow minded, dictatorial administrators overstep their mandate and kill inspiring and promising research projects which can benefit the whole community. Politics and power should never mix with science and departmental scientists should sit on committees which decisions affect project outcomes.

- 5 hours ago
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- **Mike Smith**
UBS stopped being a place of higher education and enlightenment for Canadian students some time ago. Its transformation is almost complete and this is an example of the sort of thing we can expect so long as the same types of people are allowed to run the show.
Suggest a complete discontinuance of provincial funding for this obviously wealthy and wayward institution.

- 10 hours ago
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- **Carol Becker**
Philippe Tortell will more than likely end up in the US doing what type of work he wants. As for comments here on making money, Yes that is the bottom line of all universities. As for a Canadian student that cannot get into a big name university. As an ex-lowly clerk that worked at a university, get into what university you can. Do your courses, work hard and keep good marks. In your second last year apply to transfer to the University of your first choice (usually I found people did this to... » more

- 11 hours ago
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- **Andy Shilkinson**

UBC is a for profit business selling housing and stamped pieces of paper for hundreds of thousands of dollars a sheet.

The lands and original buildings were paid for by taxpayers, now their grandchildren and great grandchildren can't get into UBC even with a 90% average because they'd rather take more money from a foreign student.

Close the dump down and let nature take it back.

- 12 hours ago
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- **Ann Moxley**

@Andy Shilkinson How about a New President?

- 12 hours ago
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- **Denis O'Brien**

@Ann Moxleyone who is an academic, not another self promoting administrator.

- 6 hours ago
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- **Jean Ansley**

What the heck is going on in academia? Problems seem to be endemic all over the world, but Canadian universities are being drawn into disrepute.

Thompson Rivers University (a very small place):

"The association representing Canadian university faculty has launched an investigation to determine whether Thompson Rivers University has violated the academic freedom of economics professor Derek Pyne.

He had gained international attention for his peer-reviewed research into the way faculty in... » more

- 13 hours ago
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• **Mark Mealing**

@Jean Ansley

'What the heck is going on in academia?'

It began in the late 70's, when University boards decided that their institutions were better to be run, not by academics with teaching experience, but by MBAs trained for the dollars. This applies at all levels, including in colleges, as has been my own experience; & works to their general detriment.

- 3 hours ago
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• **George Hancock**

UBC is having real problems. Santa again? Oh no.

- 13 hours ago
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• **Jim Redmond**

I strongly believe that all of these "research" institutes should be shut down because of their left bias --- studying politically motivated issues like "climate change".

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- **Denis O'Brien**

@Jim Redmond ...let me guess...Business and Economics.....I recall as a Sociology T/A years ago, just how dull and lacking in critical thinking skills many people attracted to that discipline are.

- 6 hours ago
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- **Mark Mealing**

@Jim Redmond
Ever heard of evidence? 'I just don't believe' is not a sound academic statement.

- 3 hours ago