

Head of UBC research institute resigns over academic freedom concern

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The director of a celebrated research centre at the University of British Columbia has resigned over what he sees as the university's meddling in its academic independence.

Dr. Philippe Tortell, director of the Peter Wall Institute for Advanced Studies, issued his abrupt resignation after a presentation to department heads at the university on Tuesday. At the conclusion of his speech, Dr. Tortell's voice broke with emotion as he said he could no longer lead the institute because the board of trustees was issuing directives that threatened its core mission.

Dr. Tortell, who had served as director for two years, said the board was insisting that the Peter Wall Institute, a place where scholars are given the freedom to pursue interdisciplinary projects outside traditional research constraints, align its work with the university's strategic priorities, which are centred on research clusters.

"I disagreed quite strongly with that," Dr. Tortell said in an interview Wednesday. "This institution was meant to exist with a lot of autonomy."

He added that the board made its decisions at an in camera session from which he was excluded.

UBC President Santa Ono, who is also the chair of the Peter Wall Institute board, said in a statement that UBC places paramount value on academic freedom and is committed to fostering the interdisciplinary research for which the institute is renowned.

Max Cameron, another of the Peter Wall Institute's five board members and a political science professor, said the director's resignation came as a shock. The board has since heard from people around the university that they're unhappy about the proposal to link the university's research clusters with the Peter Wall Institute, and he said the board plans to keep listening as it searches for a path forward.

"The goal of the board was to find ways of aligning the institute with the strategic plan of the university and ensuring that it has as much impact and visibility and contribution to our community as possible. There was certainly no question of infringing on academic

freedom," Dr. Cameron said. "There were just different visions of what the institute should be doing. "

In his letter to faculty, Dr. Tortell, an oceanographer, wrote that the "university must be a bastion of curiosity-driven fundamental research, where great minds freely explore new intellectual horizons through unfettered and unscripted work."

He explained that the board suggested eliminating a majority of Peter Wall Institute programs including international research round tables and distinguished visiting professors. The most contentious stipulation was that "all Wall scholars must engage directly with the existing research excellence clusters." There are 33 such clusters at the Vancouver campus that range from migration to educational neuroscience.

Evan Thompson is a UBC philosophy professor in the middle of a year's fellowship at the Peter Wall Institute. He compared losing the director to the loss of a parent.

"We didn't see this coming at all," Dr. Thompson said.

He called the Peter Wall Institute a special place at UBC that sits outside existing faculty structures.

"It brings together scholars and scientists and artists from across the university, and internationally, in a way that doesn't answer to any particular university research project. It's meant to have them interact in a free and intense way to generate new ideas and projects that would not happen any other way," he said.

He would not be interested in pursuing a fellowship if research was supposed to be tied to the university's research clusters, he said.