

Controversial prof fired for privacy breach, harassment, Acadia letter reveals

Dr. Rick Mehta, a tenured professor and self-styled firebrand for 'academic free speech,' was fired on Aug. 31

<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/nova-scotia/rick-mehta-acadia-university-1.4819220>

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Acadia University associate professor Rick Mehta is shown in a handout photo. He stoked a national debate about free speech on campus after making controversial comments on social media and in the classroom, and was fired from his post in late August. (Rick Mehta/The Canadian Press)

Acadia University says professor Rick Mehta harassed and intimidated his colleagues and students, breached privacy and failed to teach the required course material — all allegations in a letter outlining why the school fired the controversial faculty member.

Those are just some of the numerous complaints levelled against Mehta and summarized in an eight-page letter he provided to CBC News. Many of the complaints were documented over the

past year while he was a tenured associate professor of psychology at the Wolfville, N.S., university.

Mehta, a self-styled firebrand for "academic free speech," was fired on Aug. 31. He believes he was fired because he spoke out against the university's new mission of "committing to social justice."

The Acadia University Faculty Association said last week it considers the firing of a tenured professor "very serious" and plans to take his dismissal to arbitration. Mehta is still receiving his \$112,527 annual salary and benefits pending the outcome of the arbitration.

While Mehta said the university gave him "broad and unspecified reasons" for being let go, the letter — written by the university's Vice-President of Academic Heather Hemming on Aug. 3 — delivers a detailed review of the school's grounds for disciplinary action against him, which ultimately led to his dismissal.

'Reprehensible' actions

In the letter, Hemming writes that it is "reprehensible" that Mehta posted to a publicly available Dropbox account a recording of one of his classes in which a student disclosed her rape experience.

"This action further demonstrates your disregard for the privacy rights of students and suggests you are more concerned with public online support than the interests of students," Hemming wrote.

The letter also states that Mehta's conduct toward students and colleagues created a "poisoned" work and teaching environment, noting that Mehta posted criticism of colleagues to social media.

"Many members of the psychology department have expressed genuine concern for their safety," Hemming wrote.

Mehta said he doesn't know why his colleagues would be concerned, adding that he is a quiet, soft-spoken person.

"Since I started to become outspoken, all my colleagues stopped talking to me," he said.

Mehta said some of his colleagues had panic buttons installed in their offices because they were afraid of him. He discovered this when he read a report into the complaints against him by Dalhousie University professor emeritus Wayne MacKay.

'Voluminous' details

Hemming also cites the external three-month long investigation overseen by MacKay as well as an internal investigation conducted by Acadia's Dean of Science Jeff Hooper, while noting the supporting details are too "voluminous" to repeat in the letter.

Mehta said he was only offered limited time to review the reports from MacKay and Hooper before being fired.

He wasn't allowed to have a copy of the reports unless he signed an agreement preventing him from distributing any confidential information related to complaints against him or retaliating against any complainants.

"It's the secrecy that prevented me from not agreeing to those conditions," said Mehta in an interview with CBC News.

Complaints from faculty

Mehta said the university is using their harassment and discrimination policies to suppress his dissent against the school's "social justice" agenda.

"By definition, if we're committing to one point of view than the other alternatives can't even be discussed, much less debated," said Mehta.

He objects to the university's statement that his dismissal was not in response to his rights to free speech and academic freedom, but in response to numerous complaints from members of faculty, staff and students regarding unprofessional and inappropriate conduct.

"That's their claim," said Mehta. "But the evidence for those claims are weak. There's no specifics provided for each of those broad categories, so they can just say 'academic misconduct' but you can always say, 'Why was whatever I happened to say happened to be objectionable?'"

In the letter, Hemming writes that Mehta has made "rude, intolerant and degrading comments" to students. Several students give examples of such interactions with Mehta, and CBC News has redacted their names [from the letter below](#) to protect their privacy.

They include one example where Mehta told an Intro to Psychology class that sexual assault survivors are not victims and women are assaulted because they put themselves in dangerous environments.

Social media posts

Quoting the MacKay report, Hemming wrote that Mehta made numerous discriminatory or harassing posts on social media.

You seem to be under the impression that your rights of 'free speech' and academic freedom trump all other obligations to the university- *Heather Hemming, Acadia's vice-president, academic*

"Indigenous peoples, racialized minorities, women, sexual identity and gender expression, immigrants and multiculturalism are all targets," she wrote

Hemming wrote that Mehta does not appear to recognize his responsibilities under Acadia's harassment and discrimination policy.

"You seem to be under the impression that your rights of 'free speech' and academic freedom trump all other obligations to the university and members of the university community," wrote Hemming.

'Perspectives are subjective'

Mehta said he never discriminated or harassed students or colleagues.

"I have never done any of the acts that have been attributed to me," said Mehta.

"There might have been a dispute, but it would not have been how most reasonable people would define harassment or discrimination."

When asked if he harassed or intimidated students, Mehta said, "perspectives are subjective. It was only from a small number of students in the course.

"So what's ignored is the larger number of other students who ... actually thought it was refreshing that I was actually trying to get them to think in the first place, much less think critically," said Mehta.

Mehta recalled a time when he upset students by saying in class that much of the hate and division in society could be stemming from our education system teaching "identity politics."

"I know that that upset a number of students and they'd walked out from my classes. At one point one student even screamed out, 'Next time try teaching psychology!'" said Mehta.

Mehta takes issue with what he said is a lack of methodology in the reports.

~~How do you know that what people were not misquoting? How do you know that people were~~



Many of the complaints against Dr. Rick Mehta were documented over the past year while he was a tenured associate professor of psychology at the Wolfville, N.S., university. He has taught there since 2003. (Elizabeth McMillan/CBC)

'Harmful effects'

For the past several months, concerns, cautions and counselling over the "harmful effects" of Mehta's teaching, interactions with faculty and students and social media use have been brought to his attention, but have fallen on deaf ears, Hemming wrote.

"Instead of taking responsibility for your actions, you have defiantly refused to adjust any of your conduct and 'doubled down' on this activity by seeking support from free speech advocates outside the university community under the guise of 'freedom of expression' and 'academic freedom.'"

The letter also says Mehta's lessons contained significant deviations from the curriculum, according to an analysis conducted by his colleagues.

"A significant amount of class time (in some classes 90% or more) was spent on topics which are irrelevant, or not connected to the course syllabus," wrote Hemming.

She goes on to write that he did not deliver the course the university contracted him to teach, part of what she described as a "serious breach" of Mehta's responsibilities as a professor.

The letter states that in mid-January, Mehta's regular use of "irrelevant" non-academic sources in class was informally brought to his attention by the school, yet Mehta made no changes.

Mehta said nothing was informally brought to his attention. He said the university always proceeded to discipline him without any warnings.

Mehta said he offered a few concessions to the university before they fired him: To move offices away from his colleagues that may have been uncomfortable around him, teach different courses and not be Facebook friends with students while they're in his courses.

The university was not interested in his offers, he said.

Mehta has no regrets

Hemming disputes Mehta's claim that his teaching approach of offering different perspectives and being "provocative to promote critical thinking" is the reality in his classroom.

"Students report that you are quick to shut down people who disagree with your perspective and that you often ignore students who you do not wish to hear or respond to," Hemming wrote.

Mehta said he had no regrets about his comments, actions or teaching style.

He said he was bringing up different points of view, which were backed up with academic or non-academic evidence.

Mehta said he's received some support from the public and a few academics such as Jordan Peterson — a controversial psychologist who contends that political correctness throttles free speech.

Peterson said the Acadia documents should be made public, in a tweet on Sunday.

Mehta said he agrees with Peterson.

In the university's statement, spokesperson Scott Roberts said academic freedom, free speech, and open debate are actively encouraged and vigorously defended at Acadia, however the university requires its campus to be free from harassment and intimidation.