

Probe of professor's blog a form of cancel culture, free-speech group says

Group calls internal review an 'egregious violation' of academic freedom, urges Mount Allison to reconsider

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Mount Allison University has launched an internal review after complaints about the personal blog of health psychology professor Rima Azar. (Brian Chisholm/CBC News file photo)

Mount Allison University's decision to launch an internal review following complaints about the personal blog of one of its professors is an "egregious" violation of academic freedom, a group dedicated to the protection of free speech and scholarship says.

Earlier this week, Mount Allison announced it was conducting an internal review after receiving complaints about an associate psychology professor's blog.

In a statement, the university said "serious concerns have been expressed" about posts related to systemic racism, sexual violence, gender, and colonization.

"We neither support nor agree with the inappropriate comments that have been posted to this blog," the university said.

- **[Professor's blog posts spark backlash, prompt internal review at Mount Allison](#)**

On Wednesday, the Society for Academic Freedom and Scholarship rallied to the professor's defence.

The society, a group of Canadian professors headed by philosophy professor Mark Mercer, sent a letter urging Mount Allison to rethink its decision.

"The professor alluded to in the tweet is Rima Azar, associate professor of health psychology, and the comments Dr. Azar posted on her blog "Bambi's Afkar" concern matters of public and academic importance, such as freedom of expression, university policies, the existence of systemic racism in Canada and teaching in a multi-cultural society," the group said in a letter to Mount Allison.

"SAFS is concerned that Mount Allison's [statement] violates Dr. Azar's academic freedom and will function to suppress discussion and inquiry" at the university.



Mark Mercer, president of the Society for Academic Freedom and Scholarship, says Mount Allison has "no legitimate reason" to look into Azar's postings. (Submitted by Mark Mercer)

In an interview, Mercer said Mount Allison has "no legitimate reason" to look into Azar's postings, and said he sees its decision to do so as a response to public pressure.

"It's an expression of cancel culture and it perpetuates cancel culture," Mercer said. "As soon as the investigation is called, that's an act of cancelling."

Azar declined to comment on the internal review or on the society's response.

Mount Allison acknowledged Friday that it has received the letter, but did not respond to questions about whether it will continue with the review.

"We have no further comments at this time," communications officer Aloma Jardine said in an email.

Mercer said he has not heard back from Mount Allison yet, but that he is hopeful the university will change its position and use the controversy as a "teachable moment."

"When we're confronted with positions that we think are false or dangerous, we should analyze them, discuss the arguments for and against," not shut them down, he said.



Mount Allison University should be using the controversy around the complaints as a teachable moment about the academic values of free speech and discussion, Mercer said. (Submitted by Mount Allison)

No topics should be off-limits, Mercer says

Earlier this week, Jonathan Ferguson, president of Mount Allison Students' Union, said it received multiple complaints about Azar's blog.

The complaints were not about any one post specifically, he said, but rather about "what this professor was saying throughout her blog ... denying systemic racism in New Brunswick or in Canada, talking about BIPOC students in unkind ways, labelling Black Lives Matter a radical group — stuff that doesn't run in line with the values of our institution at all."

- **More than 80% of people who answered survey believe racism exists in N.B.**

Husoni Raymond, a St. Thomas University graduate who was mentioned in Azar's blog, tweeted: "So one Black person wins an award and that means there's no racism? Disappointing to see a professor who's still ignorant to what racism is and will be using her power within the institution to uphold racists ideologies. Racism IS in Canada. Racism IS in NB."

Raymond was responding to a post by Azar in which she said, in part:

"NB is NOT racist. Canada is NOT racist. We do not have 'systemic' racism or 'systemic' discrimination. We just have systemic naivety because we are a young country and because we want to save the world.

"Oh, one quick question to Mr. Husoni Raymond: Upon your graduation from St. Thomas University, you have been named the 2020 recipient of the Tom McCann Memorial Trophy for your 'strong leadership and character' ...

"If NB is as racist as you are claiming, would one of its prestigious universities be honouring you like that?"

Mercer said no topics should be off-limits.

"The point of freedom of expression on campus is to remove impediments from discussion ... so that people can say what's on their mind," he said.

"So when a university says it doesn't support this view, then that's the institution saying there's a party line. And then when they say they're investigating, then they're saying there are some things that cannot be said."

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