

Students weigh in on what to do about Dr. Rima Azar

- February 26, 2021
- Erica Butler



https://www.chmaf.com/welcome/students-weigh-in-on-what-to-do-about-rima-azar/?fbclid=IwAR1fBfHrXLuKRmpla6MUNQ_ED0ULP-RqKis7XV1ND3LOM8tbcyHd4fYRPIM

The Mount Allison Black Students' Union and other campus groups are calling for the removal of Dr. Rima Azar from her teaching position in the Mount Allison psychology department.

This week, a personal blog Azar started in July 2019 came to the attention of the Mount Allison community, and students have been expressing their disappointment at its contents. Among other things, Azar denies the existence of racism in Canada and New Brunswick.

The Black Students' Union issued a statement shortly after the blog came to light saying it is "deeply offended by Dr. Azar's comments and believes she has no place teaching at Mount Allison University."

The statement goes on to say, "Her behaviour does not foster [an] inclusive nor fair learning environment and some students have already expressed that they will avoid taking classes with Dr. Azar. No student should fear discrimination by a professor."

**The following letter was sent to the
University on behalf of the BSU regarding
recent concerns about Dr. Rima Azar's blog
(www.bambisafkar.ca)**

"The Black Students' Union has been made aware of the blog of Dr. **Rima Azar**, a tenured professor in the Psychology Department here at Mount Allison University. Throughout many posts on this blog, Dr. Azar expressively denies the existence of systemic racism in Canada, and mocks the use of this term. She denies the genocide of Indigenous peoples in Canada, and denies the barriers faced by Black and Indigenous people. She argues against inclusive hiring policies, and makes many other offensive remarks about the Black Lives Matter movement, Indigenous Sovereignty, sexual violence, gender identity, all while calling for the acceptance of racist beliefs."

"The BSU is deeply offended by Dr. Azar's comments, and believe she has no place teaching at Mount Allison University. Her behaviour does not foster an inclusive nor fair learning environment, and some students have already expressed that they will avoid taking classes with Dr. Azar. No student should fear discrimination by a professor.

As Black students, we already face enough barriers outside of the classroom. It is especially disappointing and offensive to have our experiences ridiculed by an accredited professor.

We are shocked that someone with her caliber of education fails to understand and acknowledge the ways that Canadian institutions are founded on colonialism and white supremacy. Further, she holds positions at various other institutions. We believe that given her position of power and involvement in the field of healthcare, her conduct is especially inappropriate."

"We demand that the University honour its commitment to equity, diversity, and inclusion, by immediately reprimanding Dr. Rima Azar, whose conduct clearly goes against the University's values. We are calling on the University to address this issue promptly. Dr. Azar's blog is not new, and there are abundant examples of her intolerance, dating back to July of 2019.

Our demands are the following:

1. Dr. Azar to be removed from her position at Mount Allison University.
2. MTA to publish an official statement condemning Dr. Azar's conduct, affirming the specific values she has breached.
3. MTA to call for the removal of Dr. Azar from the various other universities and councils in which she is involved.

This is not the first incident of racism coming from a Mount Allison faculty member. We hope that the University will act promptly to make this one of their last."

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Statement from Mount Allison Black Students' Union, [as posted on Instagram](#) this week.

The same day, Mount Allison University administrators announced they have initiated an internal review process to look into the "inappropriate" comments in Azar's blog.

Mount Allison students Zoë Wright and Helen Yao have had some direct experience with Dr. Rima Azar. CHMA reached out to them to hear their thoughts on the Azar blog, and what should come next.

Zoë Wright is a fifth year student at Mount Allison and a Two-Spirit Indigenous person.

Wright says that after reading Azar's blog for the first time they were disappointed, but not surprised. Wright's previous experience with Azar had already left them feeling unwelcome in the professor's class.

In Wright's first year, they took a class with Dr. Azar, and approached the professor to touch base about accommodations they had arranged through the Meighen Centre.

"I went up after one of the lectures to just introduce myself," says Wright. "To put a face to a name that you'd be hearing. I mentioned that I was Two-Spirit, and I would prefer her using they/them pronouns when addressing me."

"Her response, straight to my face was, 'No, I don't believe in other identities,'" recalls Wright.

"That was really jarring. And it actually is a big factor for why I didn't publicly come out until several years later," says Wright.

"It was someone who I was supposed to respect in a classroom environment," says Wright. "And I was really confused, because I wasn't sure how I was supposed to continue this class, and respect and learn from someone who didn't respect me back."

Wright says they haven't encountered a similar attitude throughout the rest of their time at Mount Allison, and while they hadn't reported the incident at the time, they have since the blog came to light.

"I know a lot of students who might be in a position similar to how I was when I was affected," says Wright. "So I felt like speaking out now and reporting it was really important to give a voice to those who can't."

Wright says the situation surrounding Azar calls for education and further dialogue on campus.

In addition to a need for sensitivity training, Wright also sees an opportunity, "to open a dialogue between people who have been affected by Dr. Azar's words, but also between people who hold the same views as Dr. Azar."

Wright points out that Azar's blog is anonymous. Though the professor shared her first name and some personal details, it was not listed under her full name and did not reference her position at Mount Allison.

“It’s clear that she didn’t feel respected enough or have enough trust in her peers and her colleagues to speak out about this in person,” says Wright, “and I think that is just as much of a problem as the people who are affected by her words.”

“I think this is a really great opportunity to open a dialogue into making Mount Allison a more accepting space for everybody to voice their opinions, but also feel safe.”

Helen Yao is a third year Mount Allison student, and a member of Divest MtA, a group of students working to convince university administration to direct its endowment funds away from investing in fossil fuel companies.

Yao is mentioned by name in Azar’s blog, in response to coverage of Divest MtA in the Argosy. Azar has written many a blog post in opposition to the divestment movement, and casting doubts on the “apocalyptic view/prediction” coming out of the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.

Yao didn’t discover that she was named in Azar’s blog until this week, when parts of it started to circulate on social media. Yao says Azar appears to not believe generally accepted science on climate change, and has misunderstood and mis-framed aspects of it. But Yao sees a bigger pattern that concerns her.

“A prevalent theme that appears in the blog is that she seems to be very committed to denying the existence of structural inequality,” says Yao. “And I think she justifies it most of the time with personal anecdotes, and her personal opinions... She utilizes these cases to somehow make generalizations about everyone’s lived experiences.”

The most-quoted example of this is a blog post in which Azar flatly denies the existence of racism in New Brunswick, and uses prominent activist Husoni Raymond as an example. Because Raymond, one of the founders of Black Lives Matter Fredericton, has been honoured (apparently “lavishly”, as writer Jonathan Kay recently put it in a column in the National Post) by his alma mater St. Thomas University, Azar questions his assertion that racism exists at all in the province. She writes:

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

Yao says she found this type of fallacy at play Azar's blog more worrisome than her criticisms of the Divest movement.

"I think her attacks on me are very much different from her attacks on some other people," says Yao.

Azar's criticisms of Yao tend to focus on her being misguided or brainwashed, says Yao. "But when it comes to her attacks on Black and Indigenous people, for example, that is based on the fact that their realities somehow aren't real."

Yao also took a first year course from Azar, but doesn't recall problematic behaviour from the professor. "She didn't really express her personal opinions that much in her teaching of an introductory course," says Yao. "However, I don't think that means that these opinions don't have harmful implications when it comes to her practices and her teaching."

"As a [psychology] professional, she should be even more cognizant of the fact that each individual operates within their unique material and emotional reality," says Yao. "And be very careful about making generalized statements, especially ones that directly referred to her colleagues or her former students. And she should really be weighing the impact of her statements before she makes certain claims."

Yao says the incident makes her question Azar's qualifications to teach about topics like the social determinants of health.

"I think this just demonstrates an inability to empathize with people and an inability to acknowledge the reality of what is going on, and an inability to acknowledge scientific evidence," says Yao.

Divest MtA has joined the Black Students Union in a call to have Azar removed from her teaching position, saying that freedom of speech doesn't mean freedom from consequences.

"A lot of the debate on campus, unfortunately, has devolved into well, she has a fundamental freedom of speech. She has the ability to express our opinions and her free thoughts. So why are we essentially censoring her?"

"The very easy response to that is obviously, No, no one is calling for censorship. No one is saying that she doesn't have the right to these opinions and thoughts. But that doesn't absolve her from consequences.

Especially for someone who is supposed to be more qualified and who holds a position of power.”

1. **Dr Janet E Hammock, Professor Emeritus of Music, Mount Allison**

University says:

[February 26, 2021 at 11:51 am](#)

The comments by Wright are the sorts of comments that are made by a great teacher. Their recommendation that this incident open up a university-wide engagement in educating everyone about what structural racism is, and that conversation will likely have to be ongoing and developing throughout at least 6 months to a year. After that, will come, hopefully, more workshops and small discussion groups to learn how to take steps to change structural racism. Guests can be brought to the campus who have experience in leading such workshops. Because this is not easy to teach. And not easy to change! My hope is that this professor and others who share her views will learn, too, and maybe instead of being turfed out, she will be “turfed in” and begin her studies right here at Mount A.

[Reply](#)



2. **Killer Marmot** says:

[February 26, 2021 at 4:28 pm](#)

The intolerance for opinions that differ from the mainstream at Mount Allison is extraordinary. People don't just want to rebut Azar's opinions — in fact, there's precious little effort to rebut her at all. Instead they want to publicly humiliate her and destroy her career.

At this point, reading up on Mao's Red Guard might serve.

Commenting Guidelines

CHMA values your opinion. To publish your comments on our website we expect you to be respectful and courteous as if you were having a conversation in public. We will not publish comments that include vulgarity, obscenity, or sexually explicit content; hate speech, threats or harassment; personal attacks, insults, and defamatory statements; threats or suggesting committing a criminal act; content or reasoning based on false statements and/or inauthentic content or activity; language or content that is potentially harmful, advocates harm and/or incites harm or constitutes a potential threat to public safety.