

267. Professors and students should be deeply troubled by the firing of professor Rick Mehta

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The three things most troubling about Acadia University's firing of tenured psychology professor Rick Mehta are the secrecy surrounding Acadia's decision, Acadia's failure to address properly any valid complaint it might have received against Dr Mehta's teaching, and Acadia's attack on freedom of expression on campus.

Because the firing is a personnel matter, Scott Roberts, a University spokesperson, declined to comment or "provide any elaboration" on Mehta's dismissal (<https://www.thestar.com/halifax/2018/09/07/controversial-nova-scotia-professor-fired-following-backlash-over-comments-in-classroom-online.html>).

Keeping the reasons secret is troubling because unless they have good information on how the university interprets its rules and evaluates complaints, professors at Acadia will not know just where the boundaries are. Their ignorance and puzzlement will change their behaviour, making them more cautious and fearful in their teaching and talking.

Good teaching, though, requires professors to be natural and unaffected, and able to take risks. An insincere or mannered professor will not earn the trust of their students, and students need to trust their teacher if they are to investigate the world boldly and express their findings honestly.

Acadia's refusal to explain why Dr Mehta was fired also stymies the public's ability to understand and have confidence in Acadia as an institution of higher learning.

One reason for the secrecy might be to maintain the privacy of those who complained about Dr Mehta. But surely Acadia could give its reasons and evidence without naming any names.

Despite Acadia's silence, it seems to be known that students and others complained to the administration at Acadia that Dr Mehta frequently went off topic in his classes and wasted class time, included material on tests that wasn't covered in class, and on occasion was less than rigorous in his teaching. It seems also to have been alleged that Dr Mehta was careless with the privacy of one or two students.

Complaints such as these must be taken seriously. If a university administration finds any to be valid, intervention, even sanctions, could be warranted. Yet the intervention must be measured. Intervention should, at least in the first place, be aimed at improving the professor's teaching.

Only if after such efforts problems in teaching prove intractable should a university decide to fire a professor. Otherwise, a university can make no claim to be a community of peers who support and help each other. Acadia, however, set aside normal supervisory and support procedures for teachers and moved with all haste to fire Dr Mehta.

Finally, and perhaps most troubling, is that the firing constitutes an attack on freedom of expression. Dr Mehta is the direct victim of this attack, but it will have effects on campus culture at Acadia and elsewhere.

Again, Acadia has not said why Dr Mehta was fired, but it is known that administrators at Acadia received complaints about Dr Mehta's outspokenness and controversial views. Dr Mehta has views that some people find offensive, repellent, or pernicious, and for the past two or three years, he has been far from shy about making them known.

Indeed, the impression one gets from reading the news reports is that Dr Mehta was fired mainly because he's an outspoken defender of offensive ideas.

Universities are places of inquiry, and discussion is central to inquiry. To function properly, members of the university community need to be able to hold and express views that others reject, including views that upset and disturb others.

Not only should students and professors alike be free to hold whatever views they wish, they should also be encouraged to speak their minds, even to be outspoken. Chastising a professor either for their views or for speaking them often and loudly is contrary to the university's mission.

A tactic used in universities nowadays to control discussion is to level the charge of harassment or creating a toxic environment against those who speak unpopular views or who are eager to speak them. Harassment should be dealt with as harassment, but universities, if they are to serve their mission, need to say firmly that no one can be harassed simply by the content of a view or even by the excited expression of that view.

Dr Mehta has not been following people around berating them, or blocking their path in the hallway, or anything else that might be harassing, at least not according to public information.

Universities should repudiate the contention that a professor's outspokenness can poison the campus. They should help those students who are unfamiliar with and distressed by the culture of contention to adapt to that culture. Indeed, they should help students to come to feel at home in it.

Acadia, though, so far from embracing the culture of contention that marks a good university, through its actions is weakening that culture. Giving tacit support to the idea that outspokenness harms academic culture constitutes a serious attack on freedom of expression on campus and, thereby, on the university's mission.

The Rick Mehta affair at Acadia University is about a small mob of students and professors seeking to impose an orthodoxy of opinion by undermining the culture of contention, and an administration doing its best to help them. Or at least that's what the current public evidence says.