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cc:

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Halifax, March 01, 2018

Dear President Ricketts,

I am writing concerning the recent events at Acadia University involving psychology Professor Rick Mehta. More specifically I would like to express my concern regarding some inconsistencies in Acadia's treatment of Professor Mehta. On January 29, 2018 Professor Mehta appealed his teaching allocations for the 2018/19 academic year which was in stark contrast to allocations in previous years and which he therefore perceived as some kind of disciplinary action against him. I trust you are familiar with the content of Professor Mehta's letter (available here: <https://www.dropbox.com/sh/irte2um6pui74kg/AACC1qmecdEP3IN17y6-dsFDa?dl=0&preview=Mehta+-+Appeal+of+Teaching+Allocations+-+Jan+2018.pdf>.)

In his response to Professor Mehta, dated February 20, 2018, Dean of Pure and Applied Science, Dr. Jeff Hooper denied the appeal and justified the decision in part by pointing out that "giving a new faculty member a pair of introductory courses like this is a common practice across the faculty ... there clearly are departmental considerations behind the allocation" and that "This [change of teaching allocation] is not disciplinary action". Further, Dr. Hooper explicitly stressed that Professor Mehta's academic freedom is not affected by the course allocation change: "you have the same rights [regarding "freedom of teaching and of discussion] within the courses you have been allocated as you would within those you would prefer". Furthermore, Dr. Hooper states that at the time of the appeal " the designated Head ... Dr. Raeside ... had not written a letter regarding neglect of professional responsibilities [to Professor Mehta]". In other words, Dr. Hooper clearly states that the changed course load allocation was based on departmental needs, not Professor Mehta's performance, and that Professor Mehta would have *the same rights* regarding freedom of teaching and discussion in the newly allocated courses.

In his letter to Professor Mehta, dated February 26, 2018, Designated Head, Dr. Robert Raeside states that he has "received several comments from students and an assistant involved in your course who have indicated the level of anxiety in the class is high to the extent that some students are not attending class. Student comments have clustered into four areas:

- content on a test that was not dealt with in class or in assigned readings

- spending excessive time in class on non-class-related matters
- use of non-academic sources for lecture content
- making provocative racist and transphobic comments in class”.

Dr. Raeside also states that he and Professor Mehta have “discussed these matters by emails since 7 February, wherein I have provided as much detail as I can.” One would therefore assume that Dr. Hooper was aware of the nature of the concerns expressed by Dr. Raeside when he wrote his letter to Professor Mehta.

Furthermore, on February 13, 2018, Vice President Academic, Dr. Heather Hemming wrote to Professor Mehta informing him that because of complaints the university has “determined the necessity of proceeding a formal investigation” and she specifically states that the “University has a legal responsibility to provide an environment free from discrimination and sexual harassment and personal harassment”. Again, the content of this letter would have been known to Dr. Hooper when he wrote the January 20, 2018 letter to Professor Mehta.

The foregoing paragraphs suggest one of two scenarios, neither of which shows Acadia University in a positive light:

1. The change in the course allocation for Professor Mehta was not motivated by “common practice” but the first step of disciplinary action taken against him. In this case the letter written by Dr. Hooper is dishonest and one has to wonder why a Dean of Pure and Applied Science would resort to dishonesty when communicating an important decision made on behalf of the university an employee of the university.
2. Dr. Hooper’s letter was truthful, that is he genuinely believed that the change of the course allocation was not part of a disciplinary action and that Professor Mehta would have the same rights regarding freedom of teaching and discussion in the newly allocated courses.

Without very good evidence one should never insinuate that someone is lying. So I set aside here scenario 1 and assume that Dr. Hooper’s letter to Professor Mehta was truthful in every aspect. That is, Dr. Hooper would have believed everything he wrote while being aware that Dr. Hemming had informed Professor Mehta that he was formally under investigation because of concerns regarding the university’s responsibility to provide a harassment free environment, and plausibly also being aware about the nature of the complaints Dr. Raeside had discussed by e-mail with Professor Mehta since February 7, 2018.

This situation leaves us with some very puzzling paradoxes. On the one hand both Dr. Raeside and Dr. Hemming imply that Professor Mehta violated university policies and failed to provide an environment free of any discrimination and harassment. On the other hand, Dr. Hooper clearly states that Professor Mehta is not being disciplined, that he will continue teaching, and that his freedom of teaching and expression is not affected.

Let us assume for argument’s sake that Professor Mehta has indeed made “provocative racist and transphobic comments in class”. In this case allowing him teach *any* courses would be violating the policies cited by Dr. Hemming. Yet, Dr. Raeside writes under the rubric ‘suggested remedies’: “I fully understand that university teaching should expose students to a range of viewpoints, and especially in a

discipline like Psychology some of these perspectives may be challenging to students. However, in a first-year class it is imperative that the approach be well-balanced and must be in line with the published resources, i.e., the text book”. The special emphasis on a first-year class and the new allocation of upper year classes to Professor Mehta seems to suggest that Professor Mehta’s approach would be acceptable for second, third or fourth year classes. In other words, Acadia University provides “an environment free from discrimination and sexual harassment and personal harassment” for first-year students but not for older students. This seems a very problematic university policy.

While we assumed in the previous paragraph that Professor Mehta has made “provocative racist and transphobic comments in class”, there is very little evidence that he actually did. Dr. Raeside admits in his letter that “the students have not expressed in writing the precise details of the racist and transphobic comments”. Given the severity of the accusation, however, it would seem of the utmost importance that Dr. Raeside is certain that the comments the students refer to were in fact racist and transphobic. One would assume in this case most students who attended the class would recall the comments. So the question arises: how many students complained specifically about racist and transphobic comments and what exactly did Professor Mehta say according to their recollection? Given the apparent inability to produce a single racist or transphobic comment and the problematic inconsistency discussed in the previous paragraph, it would seem that Acadia University has really no grounds alleging that Professor Mehta made any racist and transphobic comments in class.

In light of the issues discussed in this letter it would appear that Professor Mehta, a respected teacher and himself a member of a visible minority, has been treated very unfairly by Acadia University. As you emphasize in your welcome message: “Acadia’s professors have always been regarded as among the most innovative teachers”. Innovative teachers do not stick to textbooks or shy away from challenging discussions. Instead they prepare students to become, as you say, some of the “best performers in every sector of society”. I respectfully ask that you end the formal investigation, issue a public apology to Professor Mehta, and allow him to continue teaching in an environment that is free from discrimination and personal harassment.

Thank you very much for your time

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