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WATERLOO REGION

UW fires another employee over vaccine mandate

The university is continuing with its disciplinary process for faculty who chose not to be vaccinated against COVID-19

By **Robert Williams** Record Reporter
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WATERLOO — The situation between the University of Waterloo and several faculty members who are choosing not to get vaccinated continues to heat up as more possible terminations loom.

University of Waterloo said Friday it has now terminated 50 employees in connection to its vaccine mandate — up from 49 at the end of March. The vast majority of these terminations are nonfaculty employees.

The university made vaccinations against COVID-19 mandatory for employees to participate on campus for the winter term. Those who did not comply faced disciplinary processes ending in termination.

Waterloo has since suspended its mandate for the spring semester, and will no longer require proof-of-vaccination as of May 1. However, the university said it could reinstate the vaccination requirement at any time.

Brock University in St. Catharines and Western University in London both announced this week they are maintaining vaccine mandates until at least September, and more schools could follow suit.

Meanwhile, unvaccinated faculty members at Waterloo continue to plead their case.

The university has already fired at least one long-standing faculty member — chemistry professor Michael Palmer — for refusing to get vaccinated against COVID-19.

Palmer was officially terminated last month after a long standoff with the university over the vaccine mandate. He had taught at the school for over 20 years.

He said this week he has retained a lawyer, but has yet to pursue litigation.

The Record is aware of at least four other faculty moving through the university's disciplinary process, which includes an escalation of paid then unpaid leaves before eventual termination.

Another professor, John Turri who teaches philosophy, continues to try and persuade the university's administration that there is a solution other than termination.

In an email exchange between Turri and President Vivek Goel in early April, Goel said the school's consequences for noncompliance were clearly laid out when the mandate was announced, and the school's recent suspension of the mandate "will not affect individuals who were not compliant in the period in which the policy was active."

Several students who were barred from attending classes on campus in the winter semester are also involved in disputes with

the university over accommodation requests.

Third-year engineering student Taydon Sinopoli has appealed the requirement to be vaccinated on religious grounds, and is waiting for a response from Waterloo. As done before, he said, the school has extended the timeline. Once it responds to his appeal application — now set for May 5 — it then gets passed on to the university’s Committee on Student Appeals and a tribunal will be formed. This process will last anywhere from one to three months until a final verdict is reached.

“I am continuing to fight for an exemption, despite UW lifting their vaccine mandate. The mandates have only been ‘paused,’ and could be brought back at any moment.” he said. “Other universities such as Brock and Western are requiring vaccines for the entire spring term until at least September. It is imperative that I still fight for an exemption because my studies could still be interrupted at any moment.”

Meanwhile, the university’s board of governors rejected a contention that Goel was in a conflict of interest over the vaccine mandate.

At least three professors, along with a group of staff members, sent a letter to the university’s board of governors and senate requesting an investigation of Goel over an alleged conflict of interest.

The professors — Richard Mann (computer science), Edward Vrscay (applied mathematics) and Xiaosong Wang (chemistry) — allege the school’s mandatory vaccination policy “may have been significantly influenced by (Goel’s) membership in the federal COVID-19 Immunity Task Force,” which advocated for mandatory vaccination.

The group alleges Goel’s background with mandatory vaccination advocacy played a role in his decision to go beyond the provincial government’s requirements for university settings and enforce mandatory vaccinations without an alternative for regular testing. Those who did not comply were told they would eventually be terminated.

This differed in approach from Waterloo’s neighbour institution, Wilfrid Laurier University, which chose not to terminate any unvaccinated faculty or staff. Instead, they were put on indefinite leaves.

After reviewing the allegation, the board of governors has found no wrongdoing by Goel.

A poll of 605 faculty members taken in late March by the Waterloo faculty association found that almost three quarters of its members — 72 per cent — were in favour of keeping the vaccine mandate in place for the spring term. About 20 per cent were not in favour, and nine per cent said they had no preference.

The association “urged the administration to maintain both the vaccine and mask requirements” for the spring term, it said in a release.



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