

[Waterloo Region](#)

# UW has terminated staff not complying with vaccine policy, professors begin unpaid leaves

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WATERLOO — The University of Waterloo’s decision to mandate COVID-19 vaccinations has led to a series of terminations for staff over the past few weeks and the beginning of escalating disciplinary conduct for its professors.

Staff terminations have come after the provincial government announced it was looking at removing the requirements for mandatory vaccine policies in the workplace near the removal of the vaccine passport, which came into effect on Tuesday.

“We do think the highest risk is behind us, that we’re heading into a lower risk environment, and that the need for vaccination policies across Ontario sectors, whether it’s health, or in colleges and universities, is no longer necessary,” Ontario’s top doctor, Kieran Moore, said at a news conference in February.

Current guidelines require universities to have a mandatory vaccine policy in place, which requires educational sessions for those who do not provide proof of vaccination. It also gives universities the option of requiring regular testing for individuals who choose not to get vaccinated.

However, universities across Ontario have unanimously taken the stance of fully mandating vaccines.

And even if the province follows through on its intention to remove the mandate for workplaces, Waterloo spokesperson Nick Manning said it will not be changing its policy during the winter term.

“We continue to keep this policy under review and expect to update our community before the start of the spring term,” he said.

While this may mean professors who have not complied with the order could return to campus next semester, it will have little impact on the staff who have already been terminated.

Waterloo has said its entire community is now more than 99 per cent vaccinated but with a massive population that includes tens of thousands of students, staff and faculty, it leaves potentially hundreds dealing with the fallout of the mandate.

Michael Palmer, a Waterloo chemistry professor, has been one of the loudest opponents of the school's vaccine policy and was one of the 40 signatures in an open letter denouncing the university's stance last year.

Palmer first came to public attention on the matter when he circulated a course outline in Sept. 2020 for his biochemical pharmacology course, saying in-class exams weren't mandatory "because of the COVID fake emergency." The university later issued a statement saying it "respects the academic freedom of our faculty to express their opinions" but did not share the same opinion as Palmer.

Palmer said he is not against vaccines but is deeply concerned with mRNA vaccines — most notably Pfizer and Moderna's COVID-19 vaccines — and potential "toxic effects" on the human body. Palmer points specifically to Pfizer's findings and a series of issues he said were not followed up with clinical trials to fully determine potential harms.

This includes damage to blood vessels, the possible introduction of auto-immune diseases and the inflammation of organs and tissues.

Palmer said he has been systematically denied conversation whenever he points out any of these concerns.

Both the Moderna and Pfizer vaccines were authorized for use in Canada under an interim order for the importation, sale and advertising of drugs for use in relation to COVID-19.

Health Canada maintains that negative adverse effects are extremely rare.

"There has been no engagement with the university or any type of dialogue; it was just simply a gun to your head, and you comply or else," said Palmer on the school's policy. "This is how it has felt this entire time."

Palmer and longtime mathematics professor Edward Vrscay have been vocal against the school's mandates since they were introduced ahead of the fall semester.

Vrscay has been with the university for over 35 years and still has a cohort of graduate students under his watch. His focus is on ensuring these students can continue with their studies without disruption, he said, a situation that is becoming harder to manage as the university escalates its penalties.

Both Vrscay and Palmer said they have started with the university's disciplinary process outlined in the Memorandum of Agreement between the university and the faculty association.

This process starts when the university issues a letter to a faculty member informing them they have failed to comply with the vaccination requirement and advises that discipline is being considered. The university follows the disciplinary process prescribed in the agreement, which Palmer describes as an escalation of unpaid leaves.

Palmer said he is currently on an eight-day unpaid leave. Once it finishes, he said, he will start the cycle again. This will likely go on until an indefinite suspension is issued, he said.

It's the same process for other professors who have not followed the school's mandatory order.

“The mere fact that we haven't even been able to have conversations and actually have people listen and talk and respond in good faith within our institution — which is supposed to be built around respect for the search of knowledge and norms of collegial governance — we feel we have been totally set aside and disrespected,” said Waterloo philosophy professor John Turri.

“The fact that this has been so one-sided that other perspectives have not even been allowed to express themselves throughout the process is a very concerning thing.”

Turri points to the university's public historical data on [positive COVID-19 cases on campus](#), which found the introduction of a mandatory vaccine policy was associated with one fewer positive COVID-19 test on campus every two months.

“Does this benefit justify the costs of the policy?” he said. “How can firing employees who work remotely promote health and safety on campus?”

By the start of the winter term, university staff were beginning to be told they were on unpaid leave. Now, many of them have been terminated.

The Waterloo Region Record spoke with three staff members who were terminated in February for not complying with the vaccine mandate. Each staff member said they were not anti-vaccine but rather “for choice.”

All three staff members said they were working remotely at the time of their termination and said they were more than willing to continue with the remote model — something that has largely been embraced in Waterloo Region's tech sector to keep unvaccinated employees in the workforce.

Those requests were ultimately denied by the university.

Now, each of them is moving on from careers that in some cases have lasted longer than a decade, with little hope they will ever have their jobs reinstated, regardless of changing provincial mandates.

“On whether any terminations under this policy are final. In short, yes,” said Manning.

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