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WATERLOO REGION

Waterloo students barred from campus question criteria used for religious accommodations

'The university has really left me no choice but to cancel my co-op and dedicate my time to fighting this'

By **Robert Williams** Record Reporter

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WATERLOO — Taydon Sinopoli should be attending a co-op placement for his third-year winter term at the University of Waterloo.

Instead, he's reviewing the university's internal policies, working with a lawyer to understand the Ontario Human Rights Code, and gearing up for a final hearing over the school's denial of his application for a religious accommodation for its vaccine policy.

"I know people who have been approved, and a lot more people who have been denied," said Sinopoli, a practicing Christian and third-year environmental engineering student. "In some cases, applications have been almost identical, with the exact same reasoning and the exact same letter from a pastor or religious leader, and one of them was approved and the other wasn't."

Sinopoli and a small contingent of students who were similarly denied religious accommodations have spent months asking the university what the criteria is for who gets approved and who doesn't.

Without showing proof of a COVID-19 vaccine, each has been barred from campus and unable to participate in any classes that aren't offered online.

"There's no rhyme or reason as to who is getting approved, who is allowed to be exempt from the rules and who isn't," said Sinopoli. "So, this whole process has been trying to determine what those set of criteria are, but the university isn't giving anything."

When asked for the criteria, the university said in a statement the "accommodation request and supporting documentation will be reviewed by appropriate staff members within the University of Waterloo. Individuals will be contacted if there are any questions or concerns with the request or supporting documentation."

The school's AccessAbility Services is responsible for facilitating the accommodation process for employee and student vaccine accommodation requests due to medical or religious concerns.

It did not provide any further explanation on what criteria it uses to make the decisions outside of an outline of the accommodation application process and a link to the [papers students need to fill out](#).

The province's chief medical officer of health, Kieran Moore, announced on Wednesday he had removed the mandatory

vaccination requirement for post-secondary institutions at the beginning of the month.

While pandemic restrictions may be lifting, Moore said vaccination remains the province's best line of defence against COVID-19 and advises anyone who is eligible to get their vaccines. Close to 86 per cent of Ontario's population has now received at least one dose.

The original vaccine mandate for post-secondary-institutions only required universities to provide rapid antigen tests and an educational session to those who didn't comply. However, universities across the province took it a step further and implemented strict vaccine policies in line with hospitals and long-term care facilities.

Despite Moore's recent removal of the mandate, Waterloo has said it intends to keep its policy — which does not allow any faculty, staff or students on campus without proof of vaccination or a university-approved accommodation — until the end of the term.

The university said it will review the policy for the spring term.

Regardless of whether it changes its policy this week or next term, Sinopoli said, he will be going forward with his battle.

He has now been given vaccine exemptions to fly on WestJet and Air Transat on religious exemptions, and said he hopes as more independent boards approve his exemption, the university will come to a similar conclusion.

"Even if the university ends the vaccine mandate come next term, there is no saying they won't bring it back in the future," he said. "If there is another variant and the cases begin to spike and the cases come back up, I'm trying to put something in place so that if something happens again, I can have the security to know I'm already accommodated and don't have to go through the entire process."

In the beginning of January, he asked the university to reassess his original application — it was denied in December after more than two months of deliberation. After a second review, the university once again denied Sinopoli's submission.

Then he filed a notice of challenge, complete with further documentation. It was also denied in mid-February.

Now he's at the final stage of the internal process, which means filing for an appeal with the school and hoping for an oral hearing. If granted, a council will hear his case, he can call witnesses who can in turn be cross examined, and the council will vote on a decision.

The council is intended to be independent, and is comprised of faculty, students and board members.

In the meantime, Sinopoli currently has a "vaccine non-compliant" status with the university, which means he is unable to apply for any courses that take place on campus.

The Record spoke with three other students who were denied religious accommodation. One has been forced to take the semester off and work, while the other two are trying to manage with only online courses.

None of the students said they were given clear indications why their request for accommodation was denied, and at least one of them has followed Sinopoli's path and is pursuing an appeal.

All three said they didn't understand why the university — which claims its faculty, staff and students are more than 99 per cent vaccinated — couldn't have offered regular testing for the small minority who are unvaccinated.

For Sinopoli, he chose not to take part in his co-op placement this semester because he doesn't feel comfortable working in the field when he doesn't know if he'll be allowed to graduate.

"If I'm unable to continue my studies and unable to graduate, a co-op is essentially meaningless," he said. "So, the university has really left me no choice but to cancel my co-op and dedicate my time to fighting this."



Robert Williams is a Waterloo Region-based reporter for The Record. Reach him via email: robertwilliams@torstar.ca

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