

[Waterloo Region](#)

University of Waterloo fires professor over vaccine mandate

Move comes in same week school says it's dropping its vaccine mandate; other faculty also facing termination

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WATERLOO — At least one professor at the University of Waterloo was fired this week for not complying with the school's mandatory COVID-19 vaccine policy.

This comes after the school announced on Tuesday it was suspending its mask and proof of vaccination requirements for entry to campus, effective May 1.

Michael Palmer, a chemistry professor, was notified Monday his position with the school — a post he has had for more than two decades — has been terminated.

“I’m an old warhorse. I knew what was coming and I had already made up my mind that I was not going to budge and this was simply how things were always going to play out,” he said. “This is not something that devastates me. I’m OK, I’m going to pick myself back up.”

The university's discipline process for faculty follows an escalation of suspensions before a final termination. Palmer was first notified he was being placed on a three-day paid leave earlier this year, followed by an eight-day unpaid leave, and finally termination on Monday.

The process for each professor is handled by the dean of their respective department, with some moving quicker than others to follow through with the terminations. The Record is aware of at least two other professors in the suspension process, and one lecturer set to be terminated on Thursday.

Palmer said he is now in the process of procuring a lawyer, and intends to file a grievance over his dismissal, which he alleges did not follow proper procedure.

Palmer's termination is considered “with cause,” which means he will likely not be eligible for a severance package under the current conditions.

“I will make no bones about it, I think this is a purge and it is a vendetta to get rid of all people who dared to defy the university and its set of superior wisdom,” said Palmer. He has a medical degree from Germany and spent more than 10 years working in laboratories and diagnosing infectious pathogens before joining Waterloo’s faculty.

Palmer has long been an opponent of mRNA vaccines and has been calling for further studies on possible adverse effects, including damage to blood vessels, the introduction of auto-immune diseases and the inflammation of organs and tissues.

As set out by the province, Waterloo was required to have a vaccine policy in place for its community for the fall semester. Under the guidelines, anyone who chose not to be vaccinated had to take part in an education session and submit to regular testing. However, universities across the province chose to institute mandatory vaccination policies, with little leeway for both medical and religious exemptions.

The province removed its requirement for the university to have a vaccine policy on March 1, but Waterloo announced it was keeping its in place until the end of the term.

Now, it has suspended its vaccine policy for the spring term but cautions it may be forced to bring it back based on public health indicators.

“If the situation changes, it may become necessary to bring back requirements for mask wearing and proof of vaccination on short notice,” a memo reads. “To ensure we can minimize any disruption to work and learning if this happens, we will maintain a requirement for all members of our community to provide information on their up to date vaccination status.”

Waterloo president Vivek Goel said Wednesday the vaccine status information will only be used for planning purposes if requirements are brought back — the current mandate only requires two doses, but subsequent policies could require a third or fourth dose. Goel said it will be important to have an updated view of where the community is at before reintroducing another mandate.

“We’re sending a very clear signal that things could change very quickly, and we could have a requirement to reimpose the requirements on short notice,” he said.

If Waterloo does reinstate a vaccination policy, employees will once again be subject to the university’s discipline policy if they don’t comply.

Many staff who didn’t comply with the original mandate were terminated in February, and students are currently unable to enrol in in-person classes. Unvaccinated staff are not allowed to teach this semester.

When asked why the university didn’t just allow for regular testing as an alternative, Goel said that due to the amount of mixing and activity that takes place in a school setting, the university felt a strict vaccine mandate was required.

“There are very different views about the appropriateness of a testing regime as an alternate to vaccine, and these are things that are being debated out there,” he said. “Certainly, in the advice we got from the Council of Chief Medical Officers of Health, it was very clear they did not feel that a testing regime would be an adequate substitute.”

Disciplinary action

Along with Palmer, mathematics professor Edward Vrscay, philosophy professor John Turri and lecturer Rosina Kharal are moving through University of Waterloo’s disciplinary process.

Vrscay, who has been with the university for more than 35 years, has entered his eight-day unpaid suspension and awaits a notice for his eventual termination.

Kharal, a former Waterloo student, expects to be served her termination notice Thursday.

Kharal said the vaccine mandate has consumed her life since its announcement in late August. She has spent the last few months researching the school’s policy, sending [letters](#) outlining her findings, and speaking with members of the community to hear their stories.

In one instance, she said, a computer science student who was given a vaccine exemption at Wilfrid Laurier University was denied the same accommodation at Waterloo. After filing a grievance, she said the student was told their decision would come the day after the deadline to drop their courses.

The student was eventually denied their grievance, was forced to drop their classes without pay, and now has withdrawal notices on their official transcript. Kharal said the student was subsequently kicked out of university residence as well.

“What is the justification for these decisions made by the university?” she asked. “Is it worth the trauma and this injustice that they’ve inflicted on their own people?”

For months, Turri has been calling on the university to provide its benchmarks and measures of success for the rollout of the vaccine mandate.

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.

Now, he points to Ontario provincial COVID-19 data for March 22, which found that not fully vaccinated people had the lowest positivity rate per 100,000 people at 8.49, compared to 11.38 for fully vaccinated and 13.53 for vaccinated with a booster.

Turri said there is no clear evidence that unvaccinated individuals who comply with regular testing pose an elevated risk to a community that is overwhelmingly vaccinated to begin with.

“If they’re doing a cost-benefit analysis I would very much like to hear what that turns out and what they’re feeding into that analysis,” he said.

In response, Goel said the success of the mandate is shown in the high level of compliance the school has had.

“One of the things about public health is that success becomes hard to measure because we don’t know if we didn’t have high levels of vaccination whether there would be more outbreaks happening in our community.”

If Waterloo is able to have students, faculty and staff back on campus interacting with limited disruption, “that’s a success for me,” said Goel.

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