



**LABORATORY MEDICINE & PATHOBIOLOGY**  
**FACULTY OF MEDICINE      UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO**



April 30, 2009

Dr. Allan Rock  
President, the University of Ottawa  
Ottawa, Ontario

Dear Allan,

I am writing to you in regards to the situation at the University of Ottawa concerning Dr. Denis Rancourt. I feel compelled to write to you since I believe that that Dr. Rancourt has been unjustly persecuted at the University of Ottawa and that the stellar academic career of Dr. Denis Rancourt has been put in significant jeopardy by the proceedings that have occurred at the University of Ottawa. However, more importantly, I believe that the students and faculty at the University of Ottawa will lose a unique opportunity to forge a new and vital approach to teaching and learning due to Dr. Rancourt's dismissal.

I am an alumnus from the University of Ottawa (B. Sc. (Hons) 1981). Currently, I am Professor, Faculty of Medicine and the Director of the Health Studies Program at University College at the University of Toronto. I have a research lab at the Faculty of Medicine which has been continuously funded since 1992 where we study developmental pathways involved in mammary gland morphogenesis and breast cancer. I also teach at both the graduate and undergraduate levels in both science and social science courses.

Allan, as I am sure you are aware through the myriad of articles and books written about the education system, there exists considerable concern about the nature of higher education in Canada. A recent example was the outstanding work by the professor at the University of Western Ontario, Dr. James Côté, entitled *Ivory Tower Blues*. In this interesting analysis, James Côté outlines serious impediments to undergraduate learning and teaching by students and faculty, respectively, due to a variety of forces which have impinged on the post-secondary education system. Foremost among these issues are the impediments to learning by students due to the single-minded obsession with obtaining marks of a high degree which are typically not warranted. Combined with the continuous erosion of student-professor contact us, a direct result of the chronic underfunding of the postsecondary education system in this province, the experience of students in Ontario universities has been reduced to sitting in classes and merely acquiring a corpus of information rather than the ability to become critical thinkers.

I mention all of this to you only by way of reminding you that many of the faculty in universities in Ontario are gravely concerned with these developments and are seeking a variety of ways to overcome the great limitations in pedagogy and research being acutely felt at Canada's post secondary institutions. It comes, therefore, at some considerable surprise and concern that the attempts by Dr. Denis Rancour to overcome some of these limitations, by using a distinct pedagogical approach in his classes in physics, has been met with considerable hostility. This is particularly concerning given that it occurs at an institution where critical thought and analysis as well as implementation of novel ideas are supposed to form the core

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mission of such an academic institution. Indeed, such approaches form the basis of the mission statement of the University of Toronto. I assume a similar mission exists for the University of Ottawa.

I must also state here that, similar to the approach of Dr. Denis Rancourt, I have used a variety of schemes in order to encourage students to learn both at the undergraduate and graduate levels. For some of these courses they have included the giving of "As" with the agreement that all students will faithfully be engaged in critical analysis of the topics that we cover in these courses. This approach has, by both my measure and the students' comments, been highly successful in helping to generate critical thought of difficult scientific principles. These sorts of approaches have also been compared by me to some of my other courses where more traditional methods of evaluation have been employed. For these different approaches, I continuously evaluate what are the consequences of the learning experience for the students as well as the types of interaction that are produced between the students as well as between the students and the professor in these varied settings. As a great deal of the literature on pedagogy will confirm, important fundamental consequences exist depending on these pedagogical approaches. As Dr. Rancourt appears to have pointed out in some of the documentation, he is keenly aware of the limitations of the current dominant paradigm in assessment of students and is providing an important alternative which, I expect, will ultimately serve as the basis for producing a generation of students who graduate from Ontario universities with profound skills of critical, independent learning and thinking. It is also important to remember that variations of this approach, while novel in the current era in Canada, has been employed at various universities around the world at different times, including such prestigious institutions as Cambridge in England.

It is my contention, therefore, that the dismissal of Dr. Denis Rancourt is unfair and diminishes the academic mission of the University of Ottawa. His dismissal is a loss to both the prestige of the research endeavors at the University of Ottawa and its mission in critical learning and teaching.

It is my hope, therefore, that you will seriously reconsider your actions concerning Dr. Denis Rancourt. I believe that he should be reinstated immediately and that the University of Ottawa should embrace the profound opportunities that exist in the approaches of such interesting thinkers as Dr. Rancourt. Contrary to some of the comments in the files I have read that form the basis of his dismissal, I believe that the approaches used by Dr. Rancourt will raise the academic prestige of the University of Ottawa in the long-term as an academic institution that embraces and promotes the development of critical thinkers rather than acting merely as a "filter" producing students with bookish knowledge but little critical understanding of their role in Canadian society and on the world stage.

I would be happy to discuss any of these issues with you at your convenience. I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Sincerely yours,

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Professor, faculty of medicine &  
Director, Health Studies, University College  
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cc. general distribution after May 7, 2009