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# The controversy at Mount St. Mary's goes national after professors are fired

By [Susan Svrluga](#) February 9 at 6:48 PM

## How one Maryland university sparked national controversy

Professors from universities across the country — from Stanford to North Carolina Central to the University of Nebraska to Harvard — signed a petition Tuesday calling on the Mount St. Mary's University administration to reinstate professors who had been fired.

Within hours of being posted, the petition had more than 2,400 digital signatures, a symbol of the outrage from some in the campus community as well as in broader academic circles who viewed the terminations as retribution against faculty who had opposed the president. They also said the decisions threaten the academic freedom at the private Catholic university in Maryland and violate the school's core principles.

Alumni wrote letters to the university's board, parents emailed the Archdiocese, and students planned a day of fasting and prayer for the campus on Ash Wednesday.

The controversy began months ago, when the provost and some professors had raised concerns when the president asked for a list of students unlikely to succeed in college several weeks into the school year; one said it was too early to separate those who would do well from those likely to drop out. Simon Newman, the president, told professors, "there will be some collateral damage."

Newman also said, as first reported by [the student newspaper the Mountain Echo](#) and independently confirmed by The Washington Post, that "this is hard for you because you think of the students as cuddly bunnies, but you can't. You just have to drown the bunnies ... put a Glock to their heads."

*[\[University president says struggling freshmen are bunnies that should be drowned\]](#)*

On Monday, many were shocked by the abrupt termination of a tenured professor who had objected to the president's policies, and a law professor and former trustee who had been the adviser of the Mountain Echo, the student paper that published a [special edition](#) about the president's student retention plan.

The two professors were fired without severance, effective immediately, they said.

A few days earlier, David Rehm, who had raised several concerns about the president's retention plan, was removed from his position as provost. He remains on the faculty.

[\*\[Controversy deepens after professors who opposed university president are fired\]\*](#)

The board chairman called Newman's remarks an "unfortunate metaphor" but strongly affirmed his support for the president in an email to employees late last month and in other forums.

A university spokesperson said Tuesday evening that the board chairman was unavailable for comment.

Newman, a graduate of Cambridge University and Stanford, where he earned his MBA, was an entrepreneur and private-equity chief executive officer before he was appointed president of the second-oldest Catholic university in the country in 2015.



Simon Newman, president of Mount St. Mary's University

He arrived with ambitious plans, including doubling enrollment and a multi-pronged effort to lower the 20 percent to 25 percent of students who leave without finishing freshman year.

One piece of that larger retention initiative would include identifying students who were struggling as quickly as possible — within the first weeks of the school year — having a frank discussion with them and, if they did not plan to remain in school, offer to refund their tuition.

[\*\[Mount St. Mary's University president explains his efforts to retain students\]\*](#)

The campus newspaper, [The Mountain Echo](#), wrote in January that Newman had pushed a plan to dismiss 20 to 25 freshmen early in the academic year — before the deadline for submitting

enrollment data to the government in late September. That could theoretically lead to an improvement in a school's federal retention data, because those who might have left school without graduating would not ever have been counted in the first place. In order to help identify struggling students, a survey was given to all freshmen.

In an email exchange, obtained by the Post, some professors expressed concern about the survey, and one shared with colleagues some questions he said were from the survey that troubled him, given that the survey was not confidential and would be used to judge students. It included questions such as:

“How often were each of the following things true in the last week?:

I felt depressed.

I felt that I could not shake the blues, even with the help of family and friends.

I thought my life had been a failure.

I felt that people disliked me.”

The interim provost — who was hired to replace Rehm — sent a message to students Monday afternoon telling them that professors Thane Naberhaus and Ed Egan, the newspaper adviser, were no longer on the faculty but that “we have a plan in place to be certain that the classes for which they were responsible will be taught by other qualified faculty and the students will be advised by well qualified people.”

She also wrote that “change is hard,” a phrase both Newman and the board president have used to urge patience through the transitions of new leadership.

A spokesperson for the university wrote in an email Tuesday evening that, “Mount St. Mary's University policy is to keep all personnel matters confidential. However, in light of disclosures by terminated faculty member Thane Naberhaus, we will confirm that Mr. Naberhaus was terminated because his actions violated multiple university policies and the University's standards of ethical conduct.

“He was not terminated for expressing differing views from those of the Administration. To have done so would have been contrary to the academic and educational environment that has always characterized Mount St. Mary's University.”

Many alumni and others responded with various forms of concern and protest.

[A petition started Tuesday](#) among academics objecting to the firings that gained more than 2,400 digital signatures in hours read, in part, “The manner and circumstance of their dismissal raises serious questions about the respect given to moral conscience and intellectual freedom at Mount St. Mary's.”

The American Association of University Professors, a national advocacy group, sent a letter to Newman urging him to rescind the termination of Naberhaus, the tenured professor. Hans-Joerg Tiede, of the association, added in an email to the Post:

“The AAUP views summary dismissals as inimical to principles of academic freedom. Central to the activities of the Association is the promotion of procedural standards that safeguard academic freedom, standards that are very widely accepted throughout the higher education community.

Under these standards, faculty are entitled to a hearing before an elected faculty body prior to dismissal. In such a hearing, the administration must demonstrate that adequate cause for dismissal exists. Coming, as it did, on the heels of public criticism of President Newman, the dismissal raises the question whether it was in response to this criticism. The AAUP views the right to address matters of institutional policy or action, which includes the right to criticize such policy or action, as an essential component of academic freedom.”

A letter signed by about 75 alumni expressed deep concerns in an open letter to the campus community.

Mike Lashinsky, an alumnus, wrote in an email to the Post:

“The actions of President Newman are an affront to the free exchange of ideas that are vital to an academic institution and the students who attend. David Rehm is one of the most talented, intelligent, dedicated, and passionate members of the MSM faculty and his demotion is a disgrace and an embarrassment to the entire MSM community... I will never donate money to MSM again.”

Others took to social media:

“It’s not about raiding and restructuring,” said John Singleton, who graduated from the Mount in 1986 and earned his MBA there as well. “An atmosphere of hostile takeover does nothing for our students at Mount St. Mary’s University. It sends all the wrong messages and gives the appearance of an out-of-control administration that refuses to abide by its own rules.”

“There is a troubling resistance to shared governance by President Newman and the Board Chairman John Coyne,” he said. “This shared governance is written in to our university’s governing documents and bylaws. Violating them puts our institution at risk.”

It’s also required by the organization which accredits the university.

He and two other alumni wrote an open letter to the students, sharing concerns they had earlier raised with the board:

To the Students of Mount St. Mary’s University,

As alumni we are writing this letter because of serious concerns about the leadership and direction of Mount St. Mary’s University. Until now, we had been reluctant to speak out publicly in the hope that the Board of Trustees would resolve the crisis that has overtaken our beloved alma mater before word of it spread beyond a limited circle. But after reading the accounts of President Newman’s bizarre behavior and heavy-handed methods in the Mountain Echo,

Washington Post, and other news media, we have decided to come forward with additional information. Our purpose is to avert irreparable damage to the university.

As members of the Advisory Board of the College of Liberal Arts we have met with President Newman on several occasions. Our last meeting took place on October 23, 2015. During President Newman's presentation that day he exhibited contempt for the Mount's Catholic identity and tradition and called for a radical de-emphasis of the liberal arts education for which the university has been justly noted. Surveys, he explained, indicate that terms like liberal arts and philosophy do nothing for young people and that the Catholic Church is today less influential in the lives of the young than ever before. Only a few weeks after Pope Francis's historic U.S. visit, our new president's comments seemed both narrow and inaccurate.

When the discussion turned toward ways of increasing assistance to Mount students who required personal and academic support, President Newman demurred, responding that many Mount St. Mary's students had "bad attitudes," were "judgmental," and did "not feel very good about themselves." At that point, Dr. Joshua Hochschild, who was conducting the meeting, cautioned the president to cease casting sweeping aspersions on the Mount's students. (Within two weeks, on November 3, 2015, President Newman summarily dismissed Dr. Hochschild as Dean of the Liberal Arts College without the courtesy of a face-to-face meeting.)

That a person should seek the leadership of an academic institution for whose deeply rooted traditions he has only disdain is in itself anomalous and strange. This hostility is all the more disturbing in that it is combined with highly unconventional, abrasive personal conduct. The reckless and indefensible actions of President Newman are not an aberration or a fabrication but a documented pattern of behavior. To this we can attest with certainty. Whether it be the administration of questionable surveys to profile students, the manipulation of faculty to advance dubious purposes, or the vulgar and defamatory language directed at the Mount and her students, Simon Newman and his collaborators have brought shame on this university and therefore relinquished the authority to lead it.

It is with deep affection for the Mount and a resolve to preserve its reputation and integrity that we urge an emergency meeting of the Board of Trustees for the purpose of appointing a new interim president until a replacement for Mr. Newman can be found.

Yours for Mount St. Mary's,

John Singleton, C'86  
Joseph Baldacchino, C'70  
David McGinley, C'11