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# Controversy deepens after professors who opposed university president get fired

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By [Susan Svrluga](#) February 8 at 11:29 PM



Mount St. Mary's University in Maryland (Photo courtesy of Mount St. Mary's)

Last month, a student newspaper published [a shocking story: Reporters at the Mountain Echo](#) wrote that Mount St. Mary's University's new president planned to cull 20-25 students from the

freshman class deemed unlikely to succeed in the first weeks of school in order to improve the college's retention numbers and thus its rankings.

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

And when discussing the plan with professors who objected to it, President Simon Newman told them — in a conversation that was independently confirmed by the Washington Post — that they needed to stop thinking of freshmen as “cuddly bunnies,” and said: “You just have to drown the bunnies ... put a Glock to their heads.”

On Monday, the faculty advisor to the Echo was fired.

So was another member of the faculty, Thane Naberhaus, a tenured professor of philosophy who had expressed concerns about that and other proposals of the president's.

Edward Egan, the campus newspaper advisor, was a professor of law and former trustee of the university.

He is an alumnus and the son of an alumnus at the private Catholic university in Maryland.

“I feel bad personally, but I feel bad for a place that I love,” he said Monday evening, “and I feel bad for our students.”

Naberhaus, the former director of the university's honors program, whose doctorate is from Georgetown, said the reasons given for his firing were vague, that he had been disloyal to the university. He disputed that. “If anything, I've shown tremendous loyalty,” he said. He has been outspoken in recent criticism of the president's policies, concerned about its mission and identity. “I care about the institution. I'm trying to save the place.

“Who's to determine what's loyalty, and who's to define that?” he asked.

It was completely antithetical to the principles of academic freedom, he said. “A lot of us have been likening this to North Korea. It's like a police state.”



Letter sent to Thane Naberhaus (Photo courtesy of Thane

Naberhaus)

The changes resonated loudly in the Mount St. Mary's community, especially following the demotion of the university's provost, David Rehm last week, [first reported by Inside Higher Ed](#). He remains on the faculty but has been replaced with an interim provost. Rehm did not immediately respond to a request for comment Monday.

Rehm had initiated an email conversation with concerns about the president's plans that was disclosed in the Echo story.

A university spokesperson said in an email that "The University can confirm that Edward Egan and Thane Naberhaus are no longer employed at Mount St. Mary's University. It will issue no further comment consistent with the practice of the University on personnel matters."

He said that the new advisors of the student paper are Pratibha Kumar, assistant professor in the department of communication, and Michael Hillman, the executive editor of the Emmitsburg News-Journal.

In an interview with the Post in January, Newman strongly defended his intention to identify students who were struggling early in their academic careers — in keeping with research about student retention and the importance of the first six or so weeks of school — and, if they chose not to remain enrolled, to fully refund their tuition.

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

Peter Bonilla of the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education said he was shocked. "Firing a tenured professor — that's nuclear.

“That’s something that universities don’t do lightly. It’s definitely a shock if a tenured professor has gotten the ax; it raises a lot of questions about their right to free speech, their right to dissent.”

*[Alumna says it’s not a bunny-eat-bunny world]*

Several alumni said they were upset by the news. JoAnn Hallahan, who graduated in 1981, said David Rehm had impressed her and her two children, who also graduated from “the Mount.” “He’s always been there for the students,” she said. “He’s an ethical guy.”

She is not impressed with Newman or his retention plan. “I probably would have been kicked out, my son would have been kicked out, half my friends would have been kicked out,” she said. “It’s not Princeton — people go to the Mount for a Catholic university education. People talk about faith, community, leadership. What he’s doing is wrong.”

An alumni chapter leader resigned Monday evening after hearing the news.



After the university president was quoted as saying struggling freshmen were like bunnies that should be drowned, a protester was photographed on campus

*[\[Provost: Tenure is disappearing, but it's what made U.S. universities the best in the world\]](#)*

The chairman of the board, John Coyne, sent an email January 22nd to employees describing “a forensic investigation” following the Echo story. “We found that the retention program, as conceived, is indeed meant to retain students by identifying and helping at-risk students much earlier in their first semester — the first six weeks — than we have ever done before. It takes an innovative approach that includes gathering and analyzing information from a range of sources, including our faculty whom we have trained on how to have rich, supportive conversations with students. We also noted that the design of a (if necessary) thoughtful, eventual conversation about the student’s own discernment process and the refund of tuition was also intended to be in keeping with our Catholic identity.”

That plan was beset by some start-up problems, Coyne wrote, but the board supports it. “We strongly believe this program will make Mount St. Mary’s a better university, and more broadly, because it’s the right thing to do for students and families.”

The investigation confirmed Newman’s quote about bunnies. It also “found that The Mount has significant work to do in its admissions program, as well as our marketing and branding, in order to create a stronger fit for our incoming freshmen. This has been an area of under-investment and is a tremendous opportunity to advance the university in a bold, new direction.”

Coyne also wrote, “By far, our largest finding was deeply troubling. We found incontrovertible evidence of the existence of an organized, small group of faculty and recent alums working to undermine and ultimately cause the exit of President Newman. This group’s issues are born out of a real resistance to positive change at Mount St. Mary’s. Apparently they are not done with their personal attacks and are continuing, both directly and through others, to malign and denigrate President Newman and our plans for the university’s future by circulating mischaracterized accounts and flat out falsehoods.

“This will not stand and cannot be let to stand at our university. One of our hallmarks requires each member of the Mount Community to treat others with dignity and respect and with the highest integrity. As such, the university will hold those individuals accountable for these actions.

“Part of our findings included the discovery that the same small group of faculty who launched this initiative also apparently met together and actually ‘worked on’ the very Mountain Echo article that resulted in the deliberate mischaracterization of the retention program and whose distribution to the public media by them has caused damage to the reputations of both President Newman and Mount St. Mary’s University.” He wrote that the university’s “proud history” of a student newspaper had been tarnished by a small group of faculty with an effort to advance their own personal agenda.

“We concluded that President Newman continues to be the right kind of talented leader to be at the vanguard of Catholic higher education growth. We also concluded that President Newman’s vision for the future is exactly what will lead to Mount St. Mary’s being recognized as a top Catholic University.”

On January 10th, he wrote, the board passed a unanimous resolution of full confidence in Newman. “The board is also continuously being shown that the president enjoys the widespread support of the faculty, student body and broader university community.”

Change is hard, he wrote, but they are moving a 200-plus-year-old institution into a dynamic and bright future.

Susan Svrluga is a reporter for the Washington Post, covering higher education for the Grade Point blog.