

Protesters push to reinstate Wheaton profesor disciplined for same-God comments

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WHEATON, Illinois (RNS) Protests and prayer marked the first day of the spring semester at Wheaton College after an acrimonious holiday break during which the evangelical school pushed ahead with termination proceedings against a tenured professor who said Muslims and Christians worship the same God.

Despite wind chills dipping below zero, several dozen students gathered on the steps of the evangelical school's Edman Memorial Chapel Monday (January 11) with signs reading, "Academic Rigor = Academic Freedom." Others chanted "Reinstate Doc Hawk" over the ringing of the chapel bells.

Wheaton administrators did not permit media onto the campus, but a handful of reporters and photographers gathered on the sidewalk just outside the gates.

Last week, the college confirmed it had started termination proceedings against Larycia Hawkins, who wore a Muslim headscarf during the Advent period preceding Christmas as a sign of solidarity with Muslim believers. Her case now goes to a faculty review board.

The political science professor, who has taught at Wheaton since 2007, also posted a photo of herself on her Facebook page wearing a hijab. She wrote, "I stand in religious solidarity with Muslims because they, like me, a Christian, are people of the book. And as Pope Francis stated last week, we worship the same God."

Wheaton has said it took issue not with the professor's photo, but with her justification for it.

Hawkins stood by her belief that Muslims and Christians worship the same God, which the college said "seemed inconsistent with Wheaton College's doctrinal convictions."

On Sunday, Hawkins again took to Facebook, this time asking supporters not to engage in “demonizing others in defense of me.” Instead she requested prayers for Provost Stan Jones's health and for those opposed to the school's actions to “shower Wheaton College and its students, staff, faculty, and administration with thoughts and prayers and actions that emanate love, grace, peace, and if necessary, forgiveness.”

Both students and faculty dressed in “a sign of embodied solidarity” with Hawkins, posting pictures of themselves wearing all black on social media using the hashtag #ReinstateDocHawk.

“Students still believe that reconciliation is possible by reinstating Dr. Hawkins with tenure immediately, ending the termination process, and issuing a public apology to Dr. Hawkins,” student supporters said in a statement.

Administrators responded with their own statement: “College leadership continues to listen to the concerns of its students expressed through social media, a peaceful demonstration, and meetings with the administration. While we appreciate this feedback, since this is a personnel issue, the administration will continue to approach it through the established process put in place to handle such matters.”

But it was not only students protesting. Wheaton psychology professor Michael Mangis said “quite a few” faculty planned to wear their full academic regalia to class—some, until Hawkins is reinstated.

That doesn’t mean those faculty members all are taking a side, he said, but simply expressing solidarity with a professor under siege.

Mangis had expressed his support for Hawkins in a comment on her original Facebook post. An article published Saturday on the *Time* magazine website suggested Mangis and Hawkins received a different response from Jones, who admitted to Mangis privately that Hawkins’ statement was “innocuous.”

Mangis said race and gender may have played a role in Hawkins’ case, however unintentionally. Hawkins is Wheaton’s first-ever tenured black female professor.

“Wheaton has been so long entrenched in the white male American evangelical group mindset, it’s hard to shake out of it,” Mangis said. “Wheaton has to bring in fresh voices. It’s not right to say to the fresh voice, ‘You don’t sound like a white

male American evangelical.’”

Additional protests are expected to continue throughout the week. Students are planning a sit-in in the offices of President Philip Ryken and Jones, the provost, according to their release. Several faculty members also are planning “teach-ins,” in which they will present information to students about the college’s actions.