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Wellesley College may hire professor fired from partner university in China allegedly for advocating for democracy, freedom

Posted by Matt Rocheleau December 2, 2013 01:37 PM

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By Matt Rocheleau, Town Correspondent

Wellesley College is considering hiring a professor who made headlines recently when he was recently fired by a university in China, allegedly because he spoke out in favor of democracy and individual freedom.

A formal invitation has not yet been extended, but the college “is moving forward with a possible appointment” of professor David Xia Yeliang as a visiting fellow in Wellesley’s Freedom Project, which includes a focus on the concept of freedom in different societies, campus spokeswoman Sofiya Cabalquinto said.

“While the circumstances of Professor Xia’s contract non-renewal with Peking University and his academic record may be in dispute, his credentials as an advocate of academic freedom and human rights are solid,” Cabalquinto said in an emailed statement. “It is Xia’s experience as a practitioner of dissent that fits well with the work of the Freedom Project. The exchange of diverse ideas, perspectives, and experiences is at the heart of the liberal arts, and Wellesley is committed to fostering that exchange.”

Xia was fired in October by Peking University, where he had taught for the past 13 years.

Xia and some Wellesley faculty who support him have said he was fired because of his political views. The university [has said](#) he was fired because he was not a good teacher.

The university had notified Xia in June that he may be fired. That announcement prompted more than 130 faculty at Wellesley College to [sign a petition](#) saying leaders of their institution should “reconsider” a newly-formed partnership with Peking University if the university fired Xia.

However, shortly after Xia’s firing, Wellesley faculty voted that the college should continue its partnership with Peking University.

Yet, the faculty said wanted to examine more closely the Wellesley-Peking relationship, which includes faculty and student exchanges, joint research, virtual collaborations and other ties.

“Wellesley’s faculty has also committed to shaping the future of our partnership with

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Peking University,” said a statement in early November from Wellesley College president H. Kim Bottomly. “A faculty committee will develop Wellesley’s recommendations for the parameters and elements of the partnership. These recommendations will be brought to the full faculty body at Wellesley for approval and will then be shared with faculty counterparts at Peking University for their consideration.”

In recent weeks, another Boston-area school has been reexamining its partnership with an overseas university.

Brandeis University [suspended](#) its decade-old partnership with Al-Quds University in Palestine after the foreign school’s president refused to condemn a campus demonstration in which marchers reportedly flashed Nazi salutes amid banners depicting images of suicide bombers as martyrs.

Brandeis stressed that it has suspended, not terminated, the partnership with Al-Quds, Brandeis leaders [said](#) they are reaching out Al-Quds leaders to discuss the issues further and are open to reconsidering the suspension.

Soon after, Syracuse University [suspended](#) its ties with Al-Quds, while Bard College announced it would maintain its partnership with Al-Quds.

At Wellesley, professor Susan Reverby, one of the lead signatories of the petition that called for the college to reconsider its partnership with Peking University, said by email that a major accomplishment of that petition and the public support for Xia was that it “opened up an international conversation at Wellesley and elsewhere about the nature of these kinds of international ‘partnerships’ and how much they affect the very soul of liberal arts colleges in the United States.”

The president of Wellesley said she expects the conversation around campus generated by the controversy over Xia’s firing will be helpful as the school considers forming other overseas partnerships.

“In considering Wellesley’s collaborations with international institutions, including Peking University, our faculty debated difficult questions in a robust and respectful exchange of ideas and perspectives,” Bottomly wrote in a statement in early November. “I believe that Wellesley’s open approach to the complexities inherent in international exchanges will strengthen the college as we extend our global outreach.”

Matt Rocheleau can be reached at mjrochele@gmail.com. Looking for more coverage of area colleges and universities? Go to our [Your Campus pages](#).



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