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Tenured UC Riverside professor faces rare firing discussions

The UC Board of Regents is scheduled to discuss firing a Riverside professor. Sarkis Joseph Khoury has a history of quarrels with the university and says he's the victim of a witch hunt.

By Larry Gordon, Los Angeles Times

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The University of California Board of Regents is scheduled this week to discuss a highly unusual proposal to fire a veteran tenured professor and deny him the perks of emeritus retirement.

The case involves a UC Riverside international finance professor who has been in lengthy court disputes over UC allegations that he improperly received outside income during sabbaticals.

Because of confidentiality rules covering personnel actions, the regents' agenda item mentions only an unnamed UC Riverside professor; it does not give a reason for the possible discipline. University officials refuse to release those details, saying that would violate privacy rules.

However, Sarkis Joseph Khoury and one of his attorneys confirm that he is the professor in question and contend that the regents' discussion is the result of his long-term disagreements over his sabbaticals; his Republican political views and Lebanese heritage; and his advocacy for hiring minority professors, among other matters.

Khoury, who has been sued by UC and has taken the university to court as well over the last 15 years, said he has not violated any UC rules and is the victim of a witch hunt and efforts to squelch dissent on the Riverside campus.

Khoury, who is 65 and joined UC in 1984, said he informed the university this month of his intention to retire from the A. Gary Anderson Graduate School of Management because of a neck injury suffered in a recent car accident. He also said he does not want the emeritus status that allows retired faculty to attend departmental meetings and in some cases keep offices and labs. But he said he does not think it is fair for the university to strip him of such status, even if UC rules say he would still be able to receive his pension.

"Of course it bothers me," Khoury, an expert on international banking and transnational mergers, said in a recent phone interview. "It's a matter of honor. It

would allow them to say they have succeeded in destroying Khoury and be a lesson to others for being outspoken."

In roughly the last two decades, regents have dismissed half a dozen tenured faculty members for various reasons, UC system spokesman Steve Montiel said. According to UC faculty policy, conduct violations include plagiarism, sexual harassment of a student, racial discrimination, failure to carry out teaching duties and using UC facilities for personal gain. The possible penalties include a written censure, demotion, suspension and dismissal.

Only the regents can fire a tenured professor after review by a campus faculty committee, the campus chancellor and the system president, officials said.

"It is extremely unusual," Robert Anderson, a UC Berkeley economist and chairman of the UC system's Academic Senate, said of such firings. But he and several other faculty leaders and UC officials said they could not publicly discuss any specific case.

A regents committee is scheduled to discuss the matter in private session Wednesday, and the full board is supposed to vote on it, again in a closed meeting, on Thursday. Khoury said he will not attend the meetings, which coincidentally will be held at UC Riverside.

The disputes began so long ago that some UC administrators involved have since died. In 1995, UC Riverside demoted Khoury over allegations that he improperly received \$30,000 for teaching at the University of British Columbia while on a UC sabbatical in 1988. Khoury, who denied that charge and said he was given only expense money, sued UC, and a Superior Court ruled that the university system had waited too long to pursue any discipline and ordered him reinstated to his full professorship.

Among other related cases, UC sued him again in 2007 for financial damages and penalties for that alleged sabbatical violation and two others later at universities in Sweden and Lebanon. A state appeals court ruled nine months ago that UC had to first complete an in-house investigation and review, and the state Supreme Court in July declined to hear an appeal. Khoury, who unsuccessfully ran for Congress in the past, is countersuing UC.

James Link, the Pasadena attorney who represented Khoury in the recent appeals court case, said UC has spent so much on lawyers in cases against his client that the total must dwarf any sabbatical fees in question. "That's money that should have been in the school system, not going after professor Khoury," Link said.