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Laurence Hegarty, left, and Peter Drake, who teach at Parsons the New School of Design, say the school is being irresponsible.

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Parsons Faculty Is Cut Amid Protests by Artists

A dozen members of the fine-arts faculty at Parsons the New School for Design have been told that they will not be teaching in the department in the fall. The move has ignited further conflict at the New School, whose embattled president, Bob Kerrey, received an overwhelming no-confidence vote from the university's full-time faculty in December.

Of the 42 fine-arts professors at Parsons — all working artists — 39 teach part time. On March 10 nine professors, who taught on either a semester-to-semester or year-to-year basis, received e-mail messages that said they would not be reappointed for the 2009-10 academic year. "We thank you for your work with us at the New School and wish you well in your future endeavors," the message read.

Three others who had been guaranteed a course load each semester received e-mail messages indicating that they would be teaching at the university but not in the fine-arts program. They have yet to be assigned courses.

Faculty members at Parsons and at other area universities are protesting the action. "If they can get away with doing it to these people, they'll do it to us," said Laurence Hegarty, a part-time professor at Parsons. "It is wrong to fire people, for no good reason, who have excellent track records as teachers, excellent track records as artists."

In an e-mail message sent to New School officials on Tuesday, faculty members from Columbia University's visual arts division called the move "anti-artist, anti-arts education and frankly anti-culture."

"We stand united in expressing our dismay at the recent firings (and demotions) of so many talented artist/educators," the e-mail message said. "The suddenness of this wholesale action coupled with the clear lack of prior dialogue makes these firings particularly grievous. But even more troubling is that these decisions were made during a period of crisis for all cultural institutions in this city and beyond."

The e-mail message was signed by Gregory Amenoff, the chairman of Columbia's visual arts division, along with five other Columbia professors: Tomas Vu-Daniel, Blake Rayne, Kara Walker, Jon Kessler and Thomas Roma.

A petition submitted on March 18 to the New School administration by members of the Parsons arts faculty said: "To not rehire faculty in this economic climate is both cruel and socially irresponsible. We therefore insist upon an immediate reversal of aforementioned summary firings."

The New School, for its part, disputes that characterization of the changes. "This is not a disciplinary action — no one's been fired," said Tim Marshall, the university's interim provost. "As you update the curriculum, you have to look at the best fit."

Mr. Marshall added that this was business as usual. "This is very typical of what happens in the school every single semester, all the time, all over the place," he said. "There's nothing extraordinary about what's happening here."

One of the most respected arts schools in the city, Parsons the New School for Design offers graduate and undergraduate degrees in areas like architecture, fashion, illustration and photography. The faculty members who were not reappointed — including Dale Emnart and Jean-Pierre Roy — mostly teach undergraduates.

Peter Drake, a part-time teacher who is helping to organize faculty resistance to the cuts, said his hours had been reduced by one-third. During an economic crisis, he said, "It is socially irresponsible for a university that has a history of being progressive to do this."

"Even if they do have the legal right," he added, "it's morally wrong."

Mr. Drake also criticized the university's decision to call the move "non-rehirings" as "a way of controlling the rhetoric."

"It's just the way of softening the blow without being accurate about what's really happening," Mr. Drake said. "If you see a corpse and refer to it as nonalive, it doesn't make it less dead."

Ms. Emnart said she was stunned to learn by e-mail that she was losing her fall teaching position after 22 years at Parsons. "I felt personally humiliated and also one of the fallen in the restructuring of the school," she said. "The manner of this e-mail was as though I was an account number."

Because of the collective-bargaining agreement with the union that represents part-time faculty, ACT-UAW Local 7902, the faculty decisions will not be confirmed until June 1.

Mr. Hegarty, the part-time professor, said he was considering organizing an exhibition called "Parsons Pink Slips" to show the work of the fine-arts faculty. Visitors would be asked to decide "who should be fired and who shouldn't be fired."

"It's a tongue-in-cheek response," he said.

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: April 7, 2009

An article on Saturday about cuts in the faculty at Parsons the New School for Design erroneously included a teacher among those who will not be returning in the fall. David Mann, of the fine-arts department, has been reappointed.