

# The Detroit News

## UM declined to team with lead expert in Flint

[Kim Kozlowski, The Detroit News](#) 11:32 p.m. EST February 18, 2016



(Photo: Molly Riley / AP)

University of Michigan researchers declined opportunities last summer to work with the maverick Virginia Tech professor whose work exposed dangerous levels of lead in Flint's water system, opting to try to work with the state.

[Marc Edwards](#), a world-renowned expert on lead corrosion, said he sought to collaborate with two groups of UM experts before he assembled a team of Virginia Tech researchers [who demonstrated widespread elevated lead levels in Flint water](#). Edwards said at least one UM expert indicated his work appeared to be heading toward uncovering failures among state leaders.

“They said it looked like we were going to be going against the state, and they wanted to work with the state,” Edwards said.

While Edwards declined to cite names and added that UM is filled with scholars doing important work, he said activism in academia is struggling among scholars nationally because of fears of retribution, especially in funding.

“The reality is most professors are going to run from a controversy like this,” Edwards said. “One of my criticisms of professors is we’re cowards because we are always worried about our future funding. With one word, you can destroy relationships you spent years building.”

In response to Edwards’ remarks, UM spokesman Rick Fitzgerald said: “Collaboration is key as the university moves forward to identify ways in which UM and its research community — on all three campuses — can contribute to solutions for the Flint water crisis.”

Fitzgerald noted that UM President Mark Schlissel issued [a call to action late](#) last month that includes \$100,000 in seed money for UM researchers to identify ways to respond to the water crisis. That work began last month as hundreds of faculty, staff and students from the three campuses met in Flint to discuss [ways to move forward](#).

Newly released state government emails reviewed by The Detroit News also showed UM professors reached out to the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality in August to offer their assistance in Flint, but the effort apparently never went beyond the talking stage.

“We were indeed interested in offering our expertise,” Lutgarde Raskin, a UM professor of civil and environmental engineering, told The News via email. “We were in close contact with Marc Edwards from Virginia Tech through the summer, and learned about his plans to work with Flint residents to obtain samples for analyses. Given his team’s plans and recognizing his extensive expertise in corrosion and lead problems in water, we believed that he was the best researcher to assist the Flint community.”

Edwards’ work went beyond water testing. He also became an activist, paying for water testing kits long before he secured funding, [creating a website](#) to keep residents informed and challenging the MDEQ by filing Freedom Of Information Act requests. His sleuthing showed there were lead issues in Flint’s water while many government leaders insisted the water was safe.

“We have all this freedom, we have tenure but we are the last people on the planet who would exercise that freedom because of your professional survival, and funding,” Edwards said. “You are going against very powerful agencies — the Centers for Disease Control, the Environmental Protection Agency. What makes you think you have a chance against those folks? The odds are against you, so why even start?”

Edwards’ failed attempts to collaborate with experts at UM, one of the most prestigious universities in the nation, illustrate what some pundits contend is a culture in which academics can’t be activists in their own communities, since many fear losing state funding for their

institution or individual research. It also illuminates the limits of academic freedom, one of the bedrock principles of higher education.

“When you challenge the status quo, you are seen as getting political even if that’s what the data points to,” said [Jeff Schmidt](#), a Washington, D.C.-based author and activist who has written about the training and socializing of professionals. “The professor from Virginia Tech made a political decision to favor the people of Flint as opposed to favoring the interests of the establishment, which is what professors are hired to do.”

But some professors dispute this commentary on academia. They say it takes time to get funding in a crisis situation such as Flint, and many academics already have funds earmarked for other work they can’t just drop.

UM-Flint Professor Marty Kaufman applied in June to the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences for a grant to conduct community-based participatory research to assess and address lead contamination in tap water from Flint’s distribution system, which was installed nearly 100 years ago. A review panel encouraged him to scale back and resubmit his proposal for funding that might come through in September.

In his grant application, Kaufman criticized local leaders, saying Flint was suffering because of aging infrastructure and “very bad decision-making by public officials.”

“I don’t think you can make a blanket statement and say all academics are afraid of doing things that might challenge authority,” Kaufman said in an interview. “It varies on a case-by-case basis. That is not our team’s concern. Our team’s concern is the children of Flint and the people of Flint and getting it right. ... If that destroys my career, so be it.”

Kaufman, the chairman of UM-Flint’s Department of Earth and Resource Science, said Edwards did not approach him to collaborate on Flint’s water crisis.

Laura Sullivan, a mechanical engineering professor at Kettering University in Flint, suspects local experts Edwards reached out to were too busy and had their own research to complete.

“It’s hard for me to believe they wouldn’t join in because of possibly losing state funding,” said Sullivan, who was appointed by Gov. Rick Snyder to the Flint Water Interagency Coordinating Committee.

But even when research grants aren’t at stake, academics can face pressure from government officials.

Funding wasn’t an issue for Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha, an assistant professor of pediatrics in the College of Human Medicine at Michigan State University and director of the pediatric residency program at Hurley Medical Center.

After Hanna-Attisha presented her research showing lead levels had jumped dramatically in children after Flint switched its water source to the Flint River in April 2014, state officials

pushed back hard. She stated previously that she questioned herself after scores of state and federal epidemiologists insisted her research was wrong.

Edwards did not reach out to researchers at any other university, saying there wasn't time when work needed to be done to address a critical public health crises. But after Hanna-Attisha's research, other MSU professors got involved.

"We can sit back and in 10, 15 years ... we can see a community suffering from the cognitive, the behavioral ramifications of this population-wide exposure," Hanna-Attisha said last month. "Or we could do something."

UM also has ramped up efforts to help mitigate the effects of Flint's public health crisis.

Last month, the university gathered more than 140 faculty members on its Flint campus, where it identified infrastructure and technology, policy and government, pediatric and adult health, and education and child development as four areas for researchers to target in UM's response to the water crisis.

During the meeting, Dr. Larry Reynolds, a Flint pediatrician affiliated with Hurley Medical Center, spoke briefly, emphasizing the role of the community in helping to shed light on the water crisis.

"The key message here is that we are in recovery, and we are in a healing phase, and so those things that you can contribute that will promote healing will be most effective," Reynolds said.

Edwards, an unconventional scholar, recently was retained by the city of Flint to oversee water testing done by the state and the federal government. He also is part of Flint Water Interagency Coordinating Committee.

"I have 100 percent respect for all Michigan faculty," Edwards said. "I am eternally optimistic about the future of academia and education, but I am dismayed at the current incentives, pressures and priorities throughout academia.

"We owe it to the public and ourselves to do better."

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Detroit News special writer Jacob Carah contributed.

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