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Faculty

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Prominent Philosopher to Leave U. of Miami in Wake of Misconduct Allegations

By Seth Zweifler

Colin McGinn, a prominent philosopher at the University of Miami, is leaving amid allegations that he sent improper messages to a graduate student, dividing philosophers at his institution and across the country.

Midway through the 2012-13 academic year, Mr. McGinn signed an agreement with the university stating that he will formally depart at the end of December 2013, several faculty members who are close to the philosopher said.

The university declined to confirm Mr. McGinn's job status, citing its policy of not commenting on personnel issues. Mr. McGinn has been on sabbatical for the past several months and would comment only in a brief written statement that acknowledged a dispute between him and the university.

Mr. McGinn, who is known internationally for his work in the philosophy of mind, denies allegations that he behaved improperly. Those allegations were lodged by a female graduate student who has said that the professor sent her a series of sexually explicit e-mail and text messages, starting in the spring-2012 semester.

In his statement, Mr. McGinn wrote: "There is a dispute between me and university officials, in which I maintain that I am right and they are wrong." He also said explicitly that he has never been charged with sexual harassment.

It is unclear what Mr. McGinn might do once he leaves the University of Miami. Now 63, he said that he is considering retiring or moving on to another position. "I find the entire affair tragic and

absurd, and unfortunate for all involved," he said, declining to comment further.

Complaints of sexist remarks and behavior have long plagued the field of philosophy, which has been dominated by men for years. More than 80 percent of full-time faculty members in philosophy are male, compared with just 60 percent for the professoriate as a whole, according to 2003 data compiled by the U.S. Education Department, the latest available.

While allegations of sexual harassment or gender bias are sometimes made by female students who have been working closely with a prominent male faculty member, it is "very rare" for those cases to end with the professor's leaving the institution, said Brian Leiter, a professor and director of the Center for Law, Philosophy, and Human Values at the University of Chicago Law School.

"Frankly, the thing that catches my attention here," Mr. Leiter said, "is that the allegations, as I have heard them, are not particularly serious, compared to other cases I've heard about in which nothing has happened to the faculty member. It's certainly surprising."

Alleged Misconduct

In the Miami case, the female graduate student first approached the university's Office of Equality Administration, which handles harassment-related cases, near the beginning of the fall semester last year. She had previously taken a course with Mr. McGinn in the fall of 2011, and began serving as his research assistant soon after.

The student, who asked to remain anonymous because she is planning to pursue a career in philosophy, said in an e-mail that she began to feel uncomfortable around Mr. McGinn at the start of the spring semester a year ago. Her discomfort hit a high point in April, she wrote, "when he began sending me extremely inappropriate and uncomfortable messages, which continued until the beginning of the summer."

The student declined to share the messages with *The Chronicle*. However, her long-term boyfriend, Benjamin Yelle—a fifth-year

graduate student in the department—described some of the correspondence, including several passages that he said were sexually explicit. Mr. Yelle, along with two professors with whom the student has worked, described one message in which they said Mr. McGinn wrote that he had been thinking about the student while masturbating.

Advocates of Mr. McGinn, however, say that the correspondence may have been misinterpreted when taken out of context.

Edward Erwin, a supporter of Mr. McGinn who is a professor of philosophy at the University of Miami, said Mr. McGinn was working on a book about human evolution and the hand. Part of the reason Mr. McGinn was sending messages that could be interpreted as sexually explicit, Mr. Erwin said, was probably because of communication about that research.

"There was some sexual talk, banter, puns, and jokes made between the two," Mr. Erwin said. "The written records, I believe, show that this was an entirely consensual relationship," he said. And that relationship, he added, was not sexual.

The case made its way to Donna E. Shalala, president of the University of Miami, who had a "strong" personal reaction to the allegations, Mr. Erwin said. Ms. Shalala, who served in President Bill Clinton's administration, has been recognized for her advocacy of women's rights.

A university spokeswoman declined to comment on Ms. Shalala's behalf.

After the university's Office of Equality Administration and the vice provost for faculty affairs conducted an investigation, Mr. McGinn was given the option of agreeing to resign or having an investigation into the allegations against him continue in a public setting, several of the philosopher's colleagues said.

"Colin chose to resign after he learned, or had very good reason to believe, that his tenure was going to be revoked regardless of what he did," Mr. Erwin said. "It's been an unfortunate situation."

In addition to Mr. Erwin's support, Mr. McGinn has won backing from some philosophers at other universities who have written to the University of Miami on his behalf, according to faculty members at Miami.

Losing a Prominent Scholar

When Mr. McGinn joined the University of Miami, in 2006, faculty members applauded the hire as a major step toward improving the philosophy department's national reputation.

"He was a prolific and well-known scholar, and we were all excited to hire him here," said Amie Thomasson, the only tenured female professor at the University of Miami whose sole appointment is in the philosophy department. "It did a lot for our departmental ranking."

(At least one other female tenured professor at the university holds a dual appointment in philosophy, according to an online faculty list.)

The university's philosophy department was ranked 44th in the country in 2004 by the Philosophical Gourmet Report, which is edited by Mr. Leiter, of the University of Chicago. In 2011, the most-recent version of the ranking, the department placed 31st.

"If he's leaving, I wouldn't be surprised if the department dropped out of the top 40," Mr. Leiter said. "He was their star-power attraction."

Mr. McGinn received the John Locke Prize at the University of Oxford in 1973—a prestigious honor in philosophy—and has worked at the University of London, the University of Oxford, and Rutgers University. Over the past few years, some colleagues say that the focus of Mr. McGinn's work has shifted noticeably, moving increasingly away from traditional philosophy and taking on more of a public-intellectual role. Some of his recent works include a book on the meaning of disgust and another called *Mindfucking: A Critique of Mental Manipulation* (Acumen Publishing/McGill-Queen's University Press, 2008).

Some graduate students were drawn to the University of Miami

because of Mr. McGinn's reputation. Philipp Schwind, a fifth-year graduate student in the philosophy department, said Mr. McGinn's presence was a "major reason" behind his decision to enroll. Before the allegations of misconduct surfaced, Mr. McGinn had served on Mr. Schwind's dissertation committee. He has since been removed.

"I can't understand why the university forced him to stop working with graduate students who have nothing to do with this case," Mr. Schwind said. "There's no reason for the university to have taken these drastic steps when this particular situation involves just one student."

Mr. McGinn was removed from at least one other dissertation committee, Mr. Schwind added, and he was replaced as the professor for a course on the philosophy of mind and language that he had been assigned to teach this spring.

For all of the accolades Mr. McGinn has brought to Miami, some faculty members believe that he crossed a line in his messages to the graduate student.

Ms. Thomasson, who has been in touch with the student throughout the case, said she had read through a number of e-mails the student brought to her and found them to contain sexual content that could not be considered simply an academic discussion of sexuality. "I read enough to see that they had explicitly sexual content," she said.

Ms. Thomasson added that the case at Miami underscores the discouraging climate for many women in philosophy today.

"The situation of this student isn't isolated; there are plenty of similar stories at other departments," she said. "It's situations like this that draw some female students out of the field, which is a real tragedy."

Comments

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Real-time updating is **paused**. (Resume)


 **dsarma** 4 hours ago

Perhaps Colin ought to have a conversation with Geoffrey F. Miller!

 **dollar** 3 hours ago


It amazes me that (1) the Chronicle gives such prominence to these kind of naughty stories, and (2) that salacious stories like this are always behind the paywall, and that (3) I paid a subscription primarily to get access to them.

9 people liked this.


 **profmomofl** 1 hour ago

"Sexual banter, puns, and jokes" are never appropriate between a faculty member and student (even if its a "consensual relationship"), especially if that faculty member is supervising the student. When you send an e-mail to a student, it's always good to keep in mind that it may be shown to other faculty members and administrators, so don't write anything you would feel uncomfortable having others read!

7 people liked this.

 **11173183** 55 minutes ago

"Jerk juice" seems to be flowing in academic waters these days. This article and the one regarding the professor at NYU who tweeted that fat PhD candidates were not disciplined enough to complete a dissertation because they could not "curb their carbs", caused me to shudder with disgust.

 **tyler91913** 48 minutes ago

"The student, who asked to remain anonymous because she is planning to pursue a career in philosophy, . . . However, her long-term boyfriend, Benjamin Yelle—a fifth-year graduate student in the department. . . ."

Smooth move, CHE.

5 people liked this.

LIKE

REPLY



jcoopern 18 minutes ago

It may be worth considering whether this doctoral student is adequately prepared in philosophical reasoning if this comment is accurate:

"I can't understand why the university forced him to stop working with graduate students who have nothing to do with this case," Mr. Schwind said. "There's no reason for the university to have taken these drastic steps when this particular situation involves just one student."

His comment demonstrates a failure to understand the core ethical components of this situation. The University's reaction pivots on their sense of the conduct of the professor not the complaint of "just one student" -- who may well be the canary in the coal mine.

If the conduct of this "highly esteemed" professor is as claimed, then the University's lack of confidence in his ability to perform his duties creates an ethical obligation to remove him from all of his University interactions to prevent harm going forward. The University's decision does not negate any of the professor's historic contributions to philosophy.

2 people liked this.

LIKE

REPLY