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Academic Fraud in Undergraduate Physics Teaching at U of MN Duluth (UMD)

2 messages

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To: ekaler@umn.edu, mukasa@umn.edu, poling@umn.edu, brown059@umn.edu, chan@d.umn.edu, Jay Austin <jaustin@d.umn.edu>, president@ric.edu, pmeyer@ric.edu, msullivan@ric.edu, vfrench@d.umn.edu

Dear Chancellors/Presidents Black, Kaler, and Sánchez;
 U of MN Dean Mukasa,
 Dept. Heads/Chairs Austin, Meyer and Poling;
 HR Vice Presidents/Directors Brown and Sullivan; and
 Associate to UMD Vice Chancellor Ms. French

I am a theoretical physicist and currently Associate Professor at National Central University here in Taiwan.

During Fall 2015, I was the sole postdoc at the U of MN Duluth Department of Physics and Astronomy. I was originally slated to teach another upper level course but upon request by my (married) colleagues John Hiller and Sophia Chabysheva, I taught Phys 3033 "Analytical Methods in Physics," a math-for-physics course. I ended up writing a free textbook (see below) for the students so that they did not have to pay the roughly \$200 for the one originally assigned for the class; and so that I could present the topics from my own perspective. In particular, I spent considerable effort teaching the students the abstract formulation of Linear Algebra, which I am fully qualified to state is very important for understanding quantum mechanics and electromagnetism -- core subjects within the undergraduate physics curriculum.

http://www.d.umn.edu/~chuxx302/AnalyticalMethods_YZChu.pdf

Unfortunately, the same colleagues spent Fall 2015 repeatedly misleading my students I was teaching a Mathematical Physics Course at the 8000 (i.e., graduate-)level. (The evidence is attached. At the beginning of Fall 2015 I had naively shown Sophia Chabysheva where to find my lecture notes, transparently answered her questions about class attendance, etc., only to have John Hiller use the information against me later on.) Because they are theoretical physicists themselves, I believe they knew full well they were providing false information to the students. On my end, I did not know about the back-meddling at the time, but -- despite the energy I brought to my in-class teaching -- did soon notice that many students began disengaging from the course. Even one of my top students openly blurted out one day in class "this stuff is too hard," which certainly piqued my suspicion that something/someone was providing validation to students, leading them to feel entitled to dismiss my material as irrelevant for their academic growth. Since John and Sophia are both considerably more senior than I am at UMD, it is fair to state they had abused the students' trust in them. More to the point: they committed very serious academic fraud by providing false information to my students, and quite possibly holding back many of their academic and scientific development.

The anonymous survey I created for the students (see attached) to directly verify what John and Sophia told them, was performed at the end of Spring 2016, i.e., nearly a semester after I taught the course. You should know that one of the students had, in fact, falsified John and Sophia's statements quite directly:

"... After getting through the course, I am extremely grateful to Dr Chu for having put in the extra effort in order to teach us a quality Analytical Methods course. *The topics discussed have come up numerous times in my other undergraduate courses*, and I owe my increased GPA to Dr Chu. ..."

(The emphasis is mine.) Another consolation for me came at the end of Fall 2015, where one of my students (who was double majoring in math and physics) provided the following unsolicited feedback:

"Thanks for a great semester. While the class was not easy by an [sic] means, it did push me. The linear algebra portion was particularly interesting. It was rigorous enough that three of us were allowed to register for advanced linear algebra (5000 level) as opposed to the 4000 level linear algebra class that's required by the mathematics degree."

Today, I am writing to you for two primary purposes.

1. I wish to obtain a clear and unequivocal statement from the University of Minnesota, that it is scientifically and academically fraudulent for faculty to provide false information to students, particularly when it has serious potential to hold back their academic development. As a show of academic and scientific integrity, John Hiller and Sophia Chabysheva should really be compelled to reach out to my former students to apologize. Humanity currently does not know how else to formulate quantum mechanics other than framing it as abstract Linear Algebraic systems. Hence, to tell the students I am teaching Mathematical Physics at the 8000/PhD-level is

not just a "different opinion" -- as my then-Department Head Marc Seigar had asserted to summarily dismiss my concerns -- but it is scientifically false.

2. I wish to file a formal power harassment complaint against former Dean Joshua Hamilton, former Department Head and current Associate Dean Marc Seigar, and (to a significantly lesser degree) UMD HR Director Karna Kurtz. Despite the value I have tried to bring to the education of UMD students, Joshua Hamilton and Marc Seigar played key roles in setting up a hostile work environment for me -- this I believe is a direct violation of U of MN policies. Much more crucially, though: through their actions, all three of them have clearly condoned the fraudulent actions by John and Sophia, and have chosen to punish me instead. As I am no longer employed by U of MN (nor at RIC), and given 3 of them are in positions of power, I suspect no disciplinary action will be taken against them. However, I hope there is enough integrity left in the system that the appropriate leadership hold serious conversation(s) with them regarding their professional conduct; and that this formal complaint will, at the very least, make it into their personnel files -- if such a tool for accountability still applies for them.

During Fall 2015 itself, I had applied for an UMD-internal EVCAA grant, to help me polish my lecture notes over the following summer (2016). At the time I was not expecting to teach Analytical Methods again the following year, but thought I could at least post it on arXiv.org (the physics pre-print server). Marc Seigar was then on the EVCAA committee, I believe. Even though I did not get the grant, Seigar did kindly proceed to put me on schedule to teach it again Fall 2016. I distinctly remembering Marc coming to my office to let me know; and on my part, I -- out of deference for John Hiller, who had first taught the course two years prior -- asked if this arrangement would be OK with Hiller himself.

I began strongly suspecting John and Sophia's back-meddling of my course only towards the end of Fall 2015 itself, after hearing from graduate students that Sophia had been gossiping about my course behind my back. (Mid-semester or so, I was also told John Hiller complained about my course at a faculty meeting -- being a postdoc I was not present -- and even all the way up to then-Dean Joshua Hamilton, but I did not think that John and Sophia would actually be misleading my students in real time.) It was too late for me to do anything about it; by then, only 2 of my 13 students were paying any attention. But I did tell myself I would be upfront with my students the following year. Without naming names I would tell them they might be misinformed by other faculty, and reassure them the material was going to be challenging but prove very important for understanding the fundamental mathematical principles behind, for instance, quantum mechanics. Needless to say, I never got the chance to do so.

Mid Spring 2016 (i.e., the following semester) Marc Seigar held a meeting with Vitaly Vanchurin and I. (Vanchurin was the physics faculty who hired me, and was considered my research supervisor.) Seigar stated he just held my annual performance evaluation meeting with then-Dean Joshua Hamilton, where both my teaching and publication rate were criticized. As a result, Marc went on to remove me from teaching Analytical Methods during Fall 2016. It was then I stated my strong suspicion that John and Sophia had back-meddled with my course, leading to very poor teaching evaluations. During a one-on-one meeting with Seigar later on, Marc confirmed that John Hiller had indeed brought his complaints about me, regarding both teaching and publication rate, all the way to Joshua Hamilton himself. (Something along the lines of "Yeah... he heard about it," when I asked Marc whether John had indeed spoken to Joshua. Seigar's body language, demeanor and hesitation both during the post-evaluation Chu-Seigar-Vanchurin meeting and that one-on-one meeting raised many suspicions on my end, but at the time I did not want to read too much into it.)

However, Seigar began denying these events took place once I started putting them down in print. Prompted by the above-mentioned pressure from Hamilton-Seigar, I wrote to my former students at the end of Spring 2016 to ask them for help, to verify my suspicion that they were misled. (The result is the attached anonymous survey.) Armed with the concrete evidence, I wrote a formal e-mail complaint to Marc Seigar, copying the letter to both Vitaly Vanchurin and UMD Human Resources' Mary Cameron. (At the time, Karna Kurtz was not yet UMD HR Director.) I never received a reply from Seigar addressing any of the substantive issues I raised. Later on, Marc said he "spent hours talking to everyone involved", but in actuality Marc Seigar had never discussed with me the details of my complaints. On the other hand, Marc found it quite necessary to lie -- excuse me, "clarify" -- that Joshua Hamilton never pressured him to remove me from teaching Phys 3033, nor did Hiller speak to Hamilton about me. Seigar did state he would try to arrange a meeting with "everyone involved" but instead went on to arrange a meeting with John, Sophia and Vitaly; deliberately leaving me out quite possibly so that I would be isolated, politically speaking. (The official reason why the meeting did not take place with me involved, according to Marc Seigar, was because John Hiller thought it was not worth his time.) Right after my complaint, Seigar, Vanchurin and I did have a brief meeting where Marc asked Vitaly quite rhetorically "Isn't it just a difference in opinion?" [between John and I regarding how to teach Analytical Methods]; and went on to reveal he was not able to access the anonymous survey I had asked the students to fill. In retrospect, it ought to have been clear to me then, that Marc had already decided to dismiss my letter without bothering to assimilate the concrete evidence I had gathered. Furthermore, throughout this episode Seigar would talk past me on several occasions, phrasing it as either a "conflict resolution" issue or a "physics curriculum" issue, so that he could avoid the actual fraud I was pointing to.

It was only towards the end of July 2016 -- i.e., after getting ignored by my own Department Head and nearly a year after John and Sophia committed academic fraud -- did I feel I was left with no choice. I took matters into my own hands, and confronted John and Sophia directly, writing a harsh e-mail to both of them. For professional transparency, I even copied the e-mails to both Marc Seigar and Karna Kurtz. This was the only time I received a reply from Marc Seigar that came close to addressing the fraud itself: he said John merely had a "difference in opinion" with me regarding how to teach the course, and "there was nothing more than that". Furthermore, Seigar

took the chance to chastise me, stating this was not the first time I've sent out e-mails "during the early hours of the morning" -- how this is of any relevance, I do not know -- and as my "mentor" he tells me I need to "learn to move on". While Marc Seigar had all the room in the world to ignore my serious evidence-based allegations (my formal complaint e-mail was sent out 3 months earlier); after my direct confrontation of John and Sophia, he went to HR and within the next day wrote a formal cease-and-desist letter to shut me up.

My question for Karna Kurtz is, as HR Director -- isn't it part of her job to carefully and independently figure out what actually happened? Or, is she also simply part of the same political system? By encouraging the issuing of cease-and-desist letters without checking her facts carefully, I'm afraid she has abused her own powers and created a chilling effect on people who wish to seek proper treatment of perpetrators of academic fraud. (Otherwise, I want to emphasize, it is Joshua Hamilton and Marc Seigar that I wish to primarily lodge my power harassment complaints against.)

Whatever happened to the Marc Seigar of Fall 2015, whom I believe had recognized my teaching effort, and had kindly placed me to teach Analytical Methods again Fall 2016?

During the same Spring 2016, Joshua Hamilton had tried to get me fired by the end of 2016, despite the very first line of my offer letter stating my complete term was to last till end May 2017. The official excuse was that the College had serious budget problems. I tried to negotiate in good faith, but after Hamilton appeared to be stonewalling, I had no choice but threatened to sue him. (As an international scholar, getting fired prematurely is not a laughing matter on many fronts.) Fortunately, the postdoc association based in the Twin Cities campus pointed me to Julie Showers at the Office of Conflict Resolution. She helped me out; and my job was re-instated, but not without Joshua Hamilton removing me from all teaching duties during the academic year 2016-2017. Why? As Marc Seigar told me in person, because he (Hamilton) "did not want to deal" with me.

Conveniently, Marc also used my removal from teaching to state it is no longer my business to raise issues regarding the physics curriculum. Additionally, during the time while I was still fighting to keep my job, Marc Seigar once gleefully remarked to Vitaly Vanchurin, that if I were fired soon Seigar would not have to deal with my complaints of academic fraud. It also turned out the performance evaluation meeting Seigar had held with Hamilton, which led to the Chu-Seigar-Vanchurin meeting delineated above, was actually not part of protocol. Instead, my performance review had to be written by Seigar -- he then made sure to take the opportunity to write a scathing report on me: from criticizing my e-mails to the Dean to stating my teaching needed improvement, etc.

As I understood it, half of my salary during my first two years at UMD, i.e., Fall 2014-Spring 2016, came from teaching. If Joshua Hamilton managed to find other means of funding my position, let me to pose the question: does that not put to lie the claim that the College had such severe budget issues that I had to be fired in the first place? Moreover, if indeed the College ended up spending more money on me just so that Joshua Hamilton did not have to deal with me: is that not financial fraud? Namely, given that U of MN is a public school, I wish to ask quite pointedly: has Joshua Hamilton wasted tax payers' money and put the College in more debt just to satisfy his own vindictive nature?

I did not know it at the time -- but all these events made much more sense to me afterwards, when I saw Marc Seigar promoted to Associate Dean, i.e., Hamilton's right hand man, at the beginning of Fall 2016. I believe it is reasonable to postulate, given how vindictive Joshua Hamilton appears to be, that Marc Seigar felt very strongly the need to align himself with his upcoming boss, so as to secure his own climbing of the social ladder -- even at the expense of upholding high standards of professional conduct as well as academic and scientific integrity.

Please allow me to finish on a more personal note.

Academia in the United States enjoys paying lip service towards the notion of "diversity". I have Moebius Syndrome, a one-in-100,000-births-rare disability. As a result, my appearance is affected; my speech is considerably slurred; and I cannot communicate through facial expressions. Despite that, I have not allowed it to hold me back from showing tremendous enthusiasm towards teaching/mentoring both undergraduate and graduate students. Here at UMD, in addition to my effort teaching Analytical Methods, I regularly receive positive feedback for my discussion sections -- for instance, during the end of my final semester of teaching here (i.e., Spring 2016), one of my students made sure to thank me, in person, for "giving a damn". (While I very much appreciated the gratitude, his comments reinforced my worry regarding the academic culture here at UMD, something that both Hamilton and Seigar did not help at all to improve.) Furthermore, within the theoretical physics group lead by Vanchurin, I have consistently taken time away from my own research to co-mentor a number of his graduate students, one of whom has recently been admitted into a PhD program in Canada. Research-wise, I have written a number of single-author papers on gravitational wave physics while at UMD; and also helped find exact analytic solutions to a class of theories constructed by Vitaly Vanchurin and his former MS Thesis student Daniel Schubring.

Despite the value I have brought to UMD's academic community -- and through no fault of my own -- I have been threatened with premature and illegitimate termination; received scathing performance reviews in retaliation for pushing back; had my teaching opportunities revoked; was told by my then-Department Head that the Dean of my College does not want to deal with me; had my detailed evidence-based assertions that colleagues had misled my students summarily dismissed by a Department Head who was more intent on talking past me -- calling himself my "mentor" only so that he could gas light me -- and who is more interested in telling me I needed to learn to "move on".

While the very persons who committed serious academic fraud, i.e., John R. Hiller and Sophia Chabysheva, and who helped sabotage my Analytical Methods course, were instead assigned to teach it during Fall 2016. (By Fall 2016, we had at least 3 other theoretical physicists in the Department, not including me, who could have taught the class: allowing the perpetrators of academic fraud to teach the very same course is a fine example of how perverted the reward structure is within academia.)

Now, is this a decent -- let alone professional -- manner to treat disabled members of your academic community who are trying to challenge students to grow intellectually?

Finally, I am fully aware that Vitaly Vanchurin, with his abrasive style of interacting with others, has stepped on both Hamilton's and Hiller's toes quite badly. There is a distinct possibility that I was -- as then the lowest ranking member of the Department and as Vanchurin's postdoc -- being treated as political cannon fodder for their conflict. (In fact, I was the sole postdoc left: if I am understanding correctly, my other 2 colleagues hired by Vanchurin left after their first year at UMD due, to a significant extent, to political conflict with Joshua Hamilton.) Let me state in the clearest terms possible, this is precisely why I am filing this complaint. I don't know about you all, but I firmly believe science education ought to be a far higher calling than the petty but damaging politics that I am witnessing here. As leaders of your academic institutions: please, I urge you all to set the right tone; ensure that reward/incentive structures promote the highest standards of professional conduct; and keep politics out of the scientific integrity of the information and rigorous training we need to provide to our next generation.

Yours respectfully,
Yi-Zen Chu

P.S. I have also written about this fraud on my blog:

<https://strugglesinphysics.wordpress.com/2017/10/11/academic-fraud-at-the-university-of-minnesota-duluth/>



AnonymousFeedbackForUMDAAnalyticalMethodsFall2015.pdf
91K

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Mon, Oct 30, 2017 at 11:44 PM

To: jhamilton@ric.edu, Marc Seigar <mssseigar@d.umn.edu>

Cc: ekaler@umn.edu, mukasa@umn.edu, poling@umn.edu, brown059@umn.edu, Lendley Black <chan@d.umn.edu>, Jay Austin <jayustin@d.umn.edu>, president@ric.edu, pmeyer@ric.edu, msullivan@ric.edu, Vickery French <vfrench@d.umn.edu>

Josh and Marc

I'm not one who likes to do things behind people's backs, so I am writing to let both of you know: I've attempted to file a formal power harassment complaint against both of you with the U of MN system and with RIC.

Unfortunately, given how academia works, I suspect you will not be subject to any level of scrutiny. So, do allow me to address both of you directly.

Both of you have displayed an appalling lack of scientific and professional integrity, and your behavior is an excellent example of what can go wrong in academia. With your unchecked power, you have set up a perverted incentive structure within your institutions, where people (such as I) with a passion for science education can work hard to challenge undergraduate students to grow intellectually; mentor graduate students despite knowing they will receive no return for their investment; all the while trying to mind their own business -- and yet be threatened with illegitimate early termination, be removed from teaching duties because the Dean "does not want to deal" them; and have their detailed evidence-based complaints regarding academic fraud summarily dismissed by a Dept Head who was more interested in climbing the social ladder. Whereas, the very people who committed serious academic fraud -- the testimonies from students clearly indicated John Hiller and Sophia Chabysheva misinformed my students -- faced protection and zero negative consequences.

In academia we enjoy throwing around the word "mentor". This is particularly the case for Marc: you have called yourself my "mentor" several times. As an example of your excellent mentorship I'd like to invite both you, Josh and Marc, to direct your students (if you still have any) to my blog post regarding my experiences at UMD:

<https://strugglesinphysics.wordpress.com/2017/10/11/academic-fraud-at-the-university-of-minnesota-duluth/>

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11/22/2017

Gmail - Academic Fraud in Undergraduate Physics Teaching at U of MN Duluth (UMD)



AnonymousFeedbackForUMDAnalyticalMethodsFall2015.pdf

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