How a Harassment Controversy Tore a University Apart

By Katherine Mangan  |  MARCH 11, 2018

ROCHESTER, N.Y.

Inside the University of Rochester’s department of brain and cognitive sciences, a scattering of researchers work behind windows of frosted glass, rarely stepping out to interact with colleagues unless they’re conducting research together. The chill in the hallways of this prestigious department was evident on a recent afternoon as snowflakes swirled outside. Ever since a tenured member of the department, T. Florian Jaeger, was accused and then largely exonerated of violating the university’s sexual-misconduct policies, the department, and indeed, the institution as a whole, has been a bitterly divided place.

Certain points are without dispute. Early in his career at the university, Jaeger partied with students, blurring personal and professional boundaries and engaging in behavior that made some uncomfortable. His actions, which involved raw, unfiltered language and intimate relationships with students, prompted a number of graduate students to steer clear of working with him.
There's widespread disagreement, though, over whether his behavior nearly a decade ago amounted to sexual harassment, as defined at the time, and whether it matters that it might be viewed differently today.

There's also considerable dispute over specific allegations, including that Jaeger left students with the impression that in order to succeed, they had to socialize with him and tolerate a sexually promiscuous environment.

Jaeger is on paid academic leave this semester, continuing research and working with graduate students but not teaching. His status for the fall is uncertain.

Critics from inside and outside the university are demanding that Rochester adopt a tougher response to complaints of harassment. But a report by a law firm hired by the university concluded that Jaeger's behavior didn’t actually rise to that level — at least legally — and that some of the accusations against him were misleading or inaccurate.

So how can Rochester respond in ways that are fair to everyone involved? And when actions on both sides have generated so much mistrust and disagreement, is healing possible?

Jaeger’s accusers, including some current and former faculty members and graduate students, believe he got off on a technicality when the university determined, through two separate investigations and appeals processes, that troubling and unprofessional behavior did not constitute a policy violation. Even the law firm’s outside review, which cost the university $4.5 million, found that some women say they avoided working with the professor because of what they considered his inappropriate comments and behavior.

But faculty members and students who have come to his defense say the complainants have gone too far in describing him publicly as a "sexual predator." His behavior, while offensive, ended years ago, they contend, after it was called to his attention.

The fact that the outside report acknowledged some of the complaints against Jaeger but largely exonerated the university only deepened fractures within the department, giving each side ammunition to use against the other.
What nearly everyone would agree on is that the fallout has had devastating consequences for the department, the university’s reputation, and the students and scholars caught in the cross hairs.

The case serves as an illustration of how much is at stake, and how many lives can be affected, in the battles over sexual harassment being waged at colleges nationwide. It also points to the need to re-evaluate policies and practices that can allow offensive behavior to go unchecked until a law or policy is broken. By then, as Rochester has found, attempts at mediation will very likely face long odds.

As trained mediators sit down with students, faculty members, and staff this month, questions are likely to be raised about justice, fairness, and whether professors who have behaved inappropriately can eventually be reintegrated into campus life.

In August, eight current and former members of Jaeger’s department filed a searing complaint with the U.S. Equal Opportunity Employment Commission, alleging that Jaeger, a prominent scholar of computational psycholinguistics, had created a hostile environment for students and faculty members.

The complaint contends that Jaeger did so by becoming intimately involved with graduate students, talking and joking about sex, harshly criticizing students’ work, and creating what some described as a "cultlike" atmosphere in his lab.

They said he "infiltrated the graduate-student social scene uninvited, coaxing students into ignoring professional boundaries" by saying that he didn’t believe in traditional academic hierarchies and that the university administration had no problem with him being sexually involved with students.

They also said he sent an unwanted photo of his genitalia to a doctoral student he was dating. The outside inquiry found that he did send such a photo to a woman during a period when their relationship was "tumultuous."

EEOC complaints involving sexual misconduct usually remain private to protect the identity of victims, but this one went public, in a big way. A week after it was filed, Mother Jones published an article whose provocative headline set the tone for the outrage that
would soon explode on social media: "She Was a Rising Star at a Major University. Then a Lecherous Professor Made Her Life Hell."

The rising star it referred to was Celeste Kidd, then a 24-year-old graduate student who said Jaeger had invited her to rent a spare room in his apartment and then harassed her by questioning her repeatedly about her sexual history and entering her room without knocking. At one point, Jaeger showed up uninvited to a date she was on and told her friend that Kidd needed to have sex because she was so tightly wound, according to the EEOC complaint.

Kidd, who is now an assistant professor in the department, said she was afraid that complaining would hurt her career, and that she ended up shifting her academic focus to avoid working with Jaeger. At least 10 other women — the number was raised to 16 in a subsequent lawsuit by the same complainants and one other — saw their careers derailed because of Jaeger’s behavior, the complainants said.

The complainants also said the university retaliated against them by portraying them as untrustworthy and making them "unwelcome in their own department."

Jaeger has denied much of what’s in the EEOC complaint. He has admitted to being immature and unwise in some of his early interactions with graduate students, and says he wished he had known, earlier on, how uncomfortable they were making people.

Those concessions have done little to quiet the complaints over his conduct, which have been relentless ever since the allegations became public knowledge. At one point, some 400 researchers signed an open letter urging students to stay away from Rochester, which it accused of "supporting the predator" while intimidating victims and their advocates.

The law firm’s controversial report, released in January, challenged some of the lawsuit’s more explosive accusations.

It described Jaeger, who moved to the United States from his native Germany when he was in his mid-20s, as a "rock star" in his field, who continued to live a promiscuous lifestyle after finishing his graduate and postgraduate work at Stanford University and the
University of California at San Diego. He started at Rochester in 2007, and the problematic behavior described was mostly between then and in 2011, the report said.

Jaeger had engaged in four consensual sexual relationships with either prospective, current, or former students, according to the findings in the report. Some of the women have objected to being called victims, and all have emphasized that they were willing participants. Such relationships were strongly discouraged but not banned under university policies at the time.

The report concluded that while Jaeger’s interactions with students were "at times reckless, immature and highly unprofessional," he didn’t violate any laws or university policies. It also found no evidence of retaliation against the complainants.

In 2014, university policy was toughened to ban any intimate relationships with undergraduates as well as anyone — including graduate students or postdocs — over whom the professor had academic authority. By the time the tougher harassment policies were put in place, Jaeger’s offensive behavior had largely ended, the report said.

The conflict between what is legally right, and what people might find to be morally or ethically right, would prove to be a major source of tension in the dispute.

Beyond that, the report found that some of the accusations against him, including the complainants’ characterization of him as a "sexual predator," were exaggerated or misleading.

A Rochester alumna who is married to one of Jaeger’s colleagues in the department wrote a column in the campus newspaper about how she felt Jaeger was being unfairly portrayed, saying her own friendly relationship with him had been mischaracterized as involving harassment.

The morning the report was released, Rochester’s president, Joel Seligman, told trustees he would resign at the end of February. No one had seen the report in advance, and so he apparently didn’t know that it would largely support the actions he and the university had taken. His resignation, however, did little to quiet the controversy.
The complainants dismissed the report as "a work of advocacy dressed in the garb of impartiality and independence."

The charge that angers Kidd and the other complainants the most is that they spread unsubstantiated information about Jaeger in order to drum up support for their position.

The university had earlier described the complaints as largely based on hearsay.

"They continue to falsely perpetuate the idea that the women exaggerated or lied — that it’s some kind of hysteria," Kidd told The Chronicle. "That’s terrifying to future victims of sexual harassment."

Asked about the use of the term "sexual predator" to describe Jaeger’s behavior, Kidd said she meant that he "exploited the power he had over his students to put them in situations that made them uncomfortable."

The problem, Kidd said, goes beyond weak sexual-harassment policies when Jaeger’s problematic behavior occurred.

"It was the attitude of the university in investigating them," she said. "There was a clear pattern of trying to find any excuse to make complaints go away."

University officials promoted Jaeger to full professor before the inquiry had finished, which reinforced the perception that the university wasn’t interested in pursuing the matter thoroughly.
As she spoke with a reporter in a campus coffee shop, an undergraduate student approached Kidd and thanked her for speaking out about sexual harassment. Kidd, whose photo appeared alongside that of Jessica Cantlon, another complainant, in recognition of "silence breakers" as *Time* magazine’s people of the year, gets that a lot. Some people in the department, she admits, wish she’d let it go.

"I debated internally what would this do to the department and the university," she said, "but the university is the students, and they had to be my priority."

Kidd’s husband, Steven T. Piantadosi, an assistant professor in the department, said it didn’t have to get to this point. "If he had apologized and genuinely changed, all of this would have gone away. We never would have gone public."

Jaeger said he did apologize, but that that wasn’t enough. "They want me to confess to things I have not done," like pressuring students to sleep with him or requiring them to put up with sexually explicit behavior, he wrote in an email to *The Chronicle*.

"I am deeply sorry about the distress the present situation has caused our department and university, but I will not be bullied into false confessions."

The mistrust and anger that intensified after the release of the law firm’s report has taken a major toll on the department, which has 14 faculty members. Professors are leaving, and graduate students on both sides of the dispute have questioned whether they want to remain in academe.

The sense of collegiality and common purpose that drew many to Rochester has been shattered.

Cantlon, an associate professor in brain and cognitive sciences, said no one should feel good about a finding that someone acted unprofessionally but didn’t violate any policies.

"Do you really want a victory that says you didn’t damage people enough?" she asked. The law firm’s report didn’t provide closure for anyone, she said. "It provided ammunition for people to criticize us and Florian and to engage in a street fight over what should have happened."
While policy improvements are helpful, "you don’t just run over people with a car and say we’re going to drive better now," Cantlon said. "You have to take care of the people who were injured."

As they wait for the lawsuit to move ahead, Kidd and Piantadosi are on the job market. Among the other complainants, Cantlon and her husband, Bradford Mahon, an associate professor, are leaving for Carnegie Mellon University this summer.

Ben Hayden went to the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities after his wife was turned down for a position in the department. He believes it was in retaliation for the couple’s involvement in the complaints about Jaeger, the EEOC complaint says.

Richard N. Aslin, one of the founding members of the department and a former dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, took a position at a laboratory affiliated with Yale University.

The department’s chairman has also been ensnared by the controversy. When Rochester’s Faculty Senate voted last month to censure Jaeger, it also condemned a move by the university counsel’s office to gain access to the complainants’ emails and share them with Gregory C. DeAngelis, the chair.

After the emails landed on his desk, DeAngelis told colleagues, without naming names, that he felt "deceived and manipulated" by those who were spreading misinformation about Jaeger, the law firm’s report said.

Piantadosi said that DeAngelis was essentially calling the complainants liars and that their colleagues began to look at them as untrustworthy gossipmongers.

DeAngelis denied calling anyone liars and said he was just trying to diffuse the hurt and anger all the talk was creating.

Some of Jaeger’s colleagues have urged his critics to keep his behavior in perspective.

"Clearly, we think some of Florian’s behaviors weren’t right and he deserved to get feedback," says Ralf Haefner, an assistant professor in the department. "But we also think he should be given the opportunity to learn from that feedback, and it’s obvious he has,"
he says.

The presence in the department of so many couples who are married or — like Jaeger and his partner, Chigusa Kurumada, an assistant professor — in a committed relationship has heightened the sensitivities and raised the stakes when someone’s job future is uncertain.

In a written statement to The Chronicle and in an appeal to her faculty colleagues, Kurumada described how she became "collateral damage" in what she considered an unjust attack on Jaeger.

"The disagreements were irreparable once it became impossible to have conversations within the department," she wrote in an email. "Whenever you raise questions, you might be attacked. You’re one click away from a horrible backlash."

The situation wouldn’t have devolved to this point, she wrote, "if there had been mediations and facilitations along the way."

When faculty members leave, graduate students and postdocs often pack up and leave with them. Because of all the turmoil he attributes to Jaeger, the department, says Piantadosi, "is falling apart."

Rochester’s interim president, Richard Feldman, says he understands the complainants’ frustration. He hopes the steps the university is taking to improve how complaints are reported and investigated will make people more trusting of the system.

"We’re in trouble if people who bring a case forward think the university’s primary goal is to defend itself and somehow suppress information about misconduct rather than protect its students from misbehavior," Feldman said during a recent interview in his office. "At the same time, we have to make sure those who are accused have a fair hearing."

One of the report’s recommendations that the university is moving ahead with is setting up a dedicated office, apart from the university’s legal office, for handling sexual-misconduct complaints against faculty members.
Feldman also supports the goal of applying more nuanced standards to misconduct so it’s not an all-or-nothing matter of meting out discipline only when laws or policies are broken.

"It’s not enough that our standard be ‘is it legal?’," he said. "It should be, ‘is this the kind of community we want to have?’"

In an interview in his home 10 minutes from campus, Jaeger seemed alternately weary and exasperated as he described feeling publicly vilified and unwelcome at the university. Speaking engagements have been rescinded, and plans to publish and promote his students’ work delayed. He’s been flooded with emails calling him a predator and castigated by colleagues around the world.

When he tried to meet a student in an off-campus coffee shop to go over her research, the barista approached him, asked if he was Florian Jaeger, and said he wasn’t welcome there.

Asked about complaints that he had offended people with "sexualized" language, Jaeger said he was sorry his behavior when he first arrived at Rochester kept some in the department from working with him. He said that he turned over thousands of chat messages and emails to investigators and fewer than 10 had content considered sexualized.

Renting a room to a graduate student, Jaeger said, "was a questionable decision, but far, far away from being a rapist or a predator."

Jaeger said he reached out to individual complainants in the summer of 2016, wanting to understand how his words or actions had offended people. He said he asked to meet with them after the university had completed its investigation, but that they didn’t respond or declined.

"I had no idea what I was being accused of because I had not been shown the allegations," he said.
Kidd said the complainants were told they wouldn’t be allowed to discuss how she and the other alleged victims were affected because those matters had to remain confidential. They insist he hasn’t owned up to his mistakes or the damage they say he’s caused.

Jaeger said he’s apologized publicly and privately to students, faculty members in his department, and the broader university, as well as to women with whom he was intimately involved. "There are behaviors in my past I’m not proud of that I would now avoid," he said. "Part of being human is making mistakes. I’ve tried my best to learn from mine," he said. "My apologies were sincere."

Some of Jaeger’s students and advisees say they’ve suffered a backlash because of their association with him.

During an emotional two-hour discussion in their lab, a half dozen of them expressed their frustrations over having to fend off questions about their department, delay funding applications, and having to reconcile the picture that was publicly being painted about their adviser with the professor their work largely depends on.

Andrés Buxó-Lugo, a postdoc working with Jaeger, said he was "furious" when he learned about his adviser’s earlier behavior by reading the EEOC complaint. Putting grant applications on hold "seemed like the strategic thing to do," he said.

"By the time I realized things were a lot more complicated than they appeared in the complaint, it was frustrating to look back and think that I might have wasted opportunities," he said.

Jaeger told his students they could pursue their research under other advisers at Rochester or elsewhere and that he would continue to provide funding for them.

Changing advisers can be disruptive, several of his advisees told The Chronicle, and besides, they value his expertise and guidance.

Wednesday Bushong, a doctoral student, said the EEOC complaint paints an unfair portrait of the lab. Even though it involved interactions that happened before they arrived, someone reading the complaint might assume the lab is still a hostile work
environment where students are powerless, she said.

"What angers me more than anything is that so many people, especially women, are painted as people with no agency who are either brainwashed or sexually harassed into silence," she said. "We’re like these victims that need to be protected and nothing we say can be trusted."

When the EEOC complaint came out, "I read the whole thing in a horrified trance," Bushong said. "For the first couple of months, I pretty much believed everything."

But as some of the people characterized as victims objected that their experiences were mischaracterized, her feelings became more complicated.

"I’m going to a conference, and I suspect it’s going to be awkward. I’ve co-authored with Florian and, at the conference, I wonder if people will want to talk to me about Florian when I want to talk about science."

Because of the furor over Jaeger, the third year of her doctoral study, she said, "has been set on fire."

While Jaeger has given his students permission to take his name off any papers they co-authored, and some have taken him up on it, Bushong says it’s frustrating to even have to consider that. "Florian is a big part of my work," she said. "I would not feel right taking that credit away from him. In science, you don’t just get to decide who gets credit for the work."

One student who graduated years ago told a different story. Laurel Issen, who was a doctoral student in Jaeger’s department from 2006 to 2013, wrote in the campus newspaper that she found the atmosphere "toxic and damaging to my mental health."

She said she avoided working with Jaeger because of his "constant sexual innuendos, pressure to have intimate and sexual relationships with students, power plays, and other unprofessional behavior."
A harassment controversy tore a university apart, as Rochester struggles to move ahead, questions are being raised about how things went so wrong and what changes could help prevent similar crises. The difficulties the university has faced in persuading the complainants that its efforts are sincere show how hard it can be to heal wounds when trust is lacking.

The systemwide effort it calls "Cultivating a Culture of Respect" includes an extensive re-evaluation of its policies and practices for dealing with faculty misconduct. A dozen steps recommended by the outside report are spelled out on the effort’s website, and progress is posted as changes are made.

The recommendations include clarifying the rights of both accusers and accused, beefing up supports for both sides through the complaint process, and improving and expanding training to avoid sexual harassment.

Finding the right balance between confidentiality and openness is one of the key challenges. Some of the damage to the department might have been lessened, the law firm’s report suggested, if confidentiality requirements had been clearer.

As the investigations into Jaeger wore on, one of the biggest headaches everyone faced was knowing what they were and weren’t allowed to talk about.

The department chair, DeAngelis, said his inability to discuss the steps he took after hearing complaints about Jaeger’s behavior led to the impression that he wasn’t taking them seriously enough.

In 2016, DeAngelis issued a formal reprimand of Jaeger’s earlier behavior and ordered him to complete training on respectful workplace behavior. He also created a committee to examine issues of sexual harassment and other offensive workplace behavior.
DeAngelis supports the goal of creating a system for hearing complaints before they become career-jeopardizing harassment allegations, and of offering a range of disciplinary responses.

"Our objective is to recognize these problems early," he says.

Policies, he says, "can’t just be this black and white legalistic stuff, where you’re either innocent or guilty in the eyes of the law, and if you’re innocent, nothing happens. We need a more fine-tuned approach."

What happened at Rochester, he says, is that the sexual-harassment policy in place when Jaeger’s conduct occurred allowed behaviors that many considered unethical or immoral.

Frustrated, faculty members took justice into their own hands, DeAngelis says. But he’s optimistic that the exhaustive process the university is going through now to re-evaluate its policies will pay off.

"In the end," DeAngelis says, "I think we’re going to be one of the best places in the country for dealing with these issues."

The university is hoping to create a place where sensitive discussions are possible through an effort led by Skidmore College’s Project on Restorative Justice.

The goal is to have circles of students, faculty, and staff members talking about how the crisis in the department has affected them and what it will take for them to feel better.

Project facilitators interviewed individual members of the department last week, and about 20 faculty members, students, and staff from the department attended an information session on Wednesday. The mediated discussions will start later this month.

David R. Karp, a professor of sociology at Skidmore who leads the restorative-justice project, says it can help everyone feel more comfortable having someone who’s been exiled from a community return.
"In our society, we're very good at labeling and ostracizing people," he says, "but we don't have a good process for reintegration."

Beth Olivares, dean for diversity in arts, sciences, and engineering at Rochester, invited Karp's group. She agrees that more healing is needed before Jaeger returns to the department’s offices.

Whether it follows a student suspension, a faculty leave, or a prison term, "When someone in the community has committed an offense but paid their dues, the community has to figure out how to reintegrate that person," she says.

"This situation has impacted almost everyone on campus in one way or another," she says. "There are layers of healing that we have to go through."

Jaeger, Kurumada, and graduate students on both sides of the debate have said they plan to participate, Olivares said. Plaintiffs contacted by The Chronicle were less enthusiastic. In an email, Cantlon wrote that the university hasn’t made any effort to provide justice to the alleged victims of harassment or retaliation.

"There’s been no accountability at the university for the harm caused to women, and they’ve made no effort to give people back the educational and career opportunities they lost," Cantlon wrote. The restorative-justice program seems like another university effort to "restore Jaeger."

Piantadosi said that unless the people whose lives were allegedly derailed by Jaeger and who are no longer at the university are included in the conversations, he doesn’t consider it restorative justice. They want both the university and Jaeger to fully acknowledge that careers were derailed because of his actions. They want Jaeger to apologize directly to the women who complained. And in the lawsuit, they’re seeking financial compensation for the costs of moving, setting up new labs, and hiring lawyers to press their case.

In addition, their lawyer says, the plaintiffs are demanding compensation for the harm to their careers and reputations, as well as pain and suffering "due to being retaliated against and for being called liars and untrustworthy by their superiors." They also want
compensation for people who allegedly had to endure a hostile work environment. Oral arguments are set for late April.

Karp hopes that the heated rhetoric that has accompanied the legal dispute will cool off as people sit down face to face. "Usually that kind of language indicates that people feel like they haven’t been heard," he says. "When you feel you haven’t been heard, you get louder."

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