

# NEWS IN FOCUS

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JUSTIN TROMBLY/CAMPUS TIMES



Students and others have criticized the University of Rochester's handling of alleged sexual harassment by one of its professors.

POLICY

## Linguist sexual-harassment case sparks protests

*Researchers at the University of Rochester have filed a complaint with the US government.*

BY ALEXANDRA WITZE

A sexual-harassment case in the sciences is rocking the University of Rochester in New York.

Seven current and former faculty members of the brain and cognitive sciences department, and a former graduate student, have filed complaints against the university with the US government. They allege that Florian Jaeger, a linguist and full professor in the department, sexually harassed graduate students and post-docs and created a hostile work environment.

They also allege that the university, which last year investigated the matter and twice cleared Jaeger of wrongdoing, retaliated against the faculty members who lodged the complaint.

The reports involve at least 11 women who have interacted with Jaeger at various points since he arrived in Rochester in 2007. Among other things, the complaints allege that Jaeger had sexual encounters with graduate students, made remarks about the sexual attractiveness of students in front of other faculty members, pressured a female student into sharing a house with him and professionally isolated

students who would not sleep with him.

Since the details became public in an 8 September news article in the magazine *Mother Jones*, University of Rochester administrators have faced protests from students and others on campus. In response, university president Joel Seligman has said Rochester will hire an independent investigator to review claims of retaliation and new allegations included in the latest complaints. The university will also ask an independent evaluator to review its procedures for dealing with claims of harassment and discrimination, and set up ▶

► a commission to explore issues of women and gender in academia.

Jaeger, who works on developing computational frameworks for language production and understanding, will remain off-campus for the rest of the current semester. He declined an interview request from *Nature*.

"This is a very extraordinary case," says Ann Olivarius, a senior partner at the McAllister Olivarius law firm in London who is co-leading the legal case against the university. "It's the first time in all the decades that I've worked in this area that senior faculty combined with junior faculty to make a stand."

The group filed its eight identical complaints — one per complainant — with the US Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) beginning on 30 August. The commission's duties include enforcing federal laws that bar discrimination against employees because of gender. The EEOC will now investigate the complaint — and a response yet to be filed by university administrators — and determine whether discrimination occurred.

Richard Aslin, a developmental psychologist and member of the US National Academy of Sciences, resigned from the university in December in protest over its handling of the Jaeger investigation. Six of the seven other co-authors of the complaint have also left, or plan to leave — most for reasons directly related to the incident.

In a 10 September statement, Seligman wrote that the core allegations "were investigated, appealed and found to be unsubstantiated". But the university response did not go down well with many students. On 12 September, hundreds of them participated in a heated three-hour meeting with Seligman;

the following day, hundreds more turned out to protest in front of the university library.

Jaeger's behaviour came under scrutiny in early 2016, when he allegedly said at several faculty meetings that he saw no problem with faculty members dating students. Aslin and other faculty members began discussing the subject and discovered what they say is a string of sexual predations by Jaeger over the years.

Aslin and Jessica Cantlon, an associate professor in the department, led the formal complaint to the university on behalf of students, arguing that Jaeger had violated its policy against discrimination and harassment. The university investigated and concluded — initially, and again after an appeal — that Jaeger had not violated any university policies.

The complainants say that the investigation did not gather enough information to accurately assess whether Jaeger had violated university policies. The 11 women from whom the group gathered witness statements allege acts by Jaeger that include sending photographs of his genitalia and having loud sex with students within earshot of other students.

"The problem isn't being sexual — the problem is doing that across boundaries that involve power and authority over people," says Elissa Newport, a cognitive psychologist at Georgetown University in Washington DC. As head of the University of Rochester brain and cognitive sciences department from 1998 to 2010, she hired Jaeger there; she is now among the complainants.

After the initial investigation found that Jaeger had not violated any university policies,

one of the complainants filed a separate report alleging that Jaeger had engaged in retaliatory behaviour against her. The university commissioned an external investigator, who found no evidence of retaliation.

In its EEOC filings, the wider group of eight complainants alleges further acts of retaliation. In one instance, they allege, the chair of the department disparaged them in front of the entire department faculty; in another, provost Robert Clark sent a memo to the department's faculty criticizing what he called "rumors" and "misinformation" about the investigation.

The university will now look into these new allegations. "I think it shows that the original investigation was flawed," Cantlon says. "The university's claims and actions don't pass the smell test." (The university says, "We do not believe the original investigation was flawed.")

The complainants now also allege that Rochester administrators searched their university e-mails without their knowledge, a step that Cantlon says was the last straw for her. She is looking for a new job.

Erika Marin-Spiotta, a biogeochemist at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, says that sexual harassment can derail or even end the careers of many researchers. She is leading a US\$1.1-million initiative funded by the US government to help scientists respond to and prevent such harassment. The Rochester case, she notes, is rare in having so many faculty members come forward on behalf of their younger colleagues.

Newport says that she and the other complainants went public because they want the university to reform its processes. "It wasn't meant to be about Florian," she says. "It's meant to be about harassment and retaliation." ■

## MARINE BIOLOGY

# Sharks can live a lot longer than researchers realized

*Errors in past studies could undermine conservation plans.*

BY DANIEL CRESSEY

Many sharks are living much longer than was thought, says a major review of studies on these important and often endangered top predators. This means that many estimates of how threatened species are — and decisions about whether they can be fished safely — could be based on faulty data.

Scientists usually estimate how old sharks are by slicing into their spines and counting

distinctive pairs of bands inside, which are often assumed to show age in the same way as the rings of a tree. But a growing number of cases suggest that the method can be problematic. For example, a 2014 study showed that sand tiger sharks (*Carcharias taurus*), which were thought to live for around two decades, can actually survive for up to twice that (M. S. Passerotti *et al. Mar. Freshwater Res.* **65**, 674–687; 2014).

To investigate the scale of the problem, fisheries researcher Alastair Harry of James Cook

University in Townsville, Australia, reviewed evidence for age underestimation. He reports in *Fish and Fisheries* that of 53 populations of sharks and rays with good data, 30% have probably had their ages underestimated (A. V. Harry *Fish. Fish.* <http://doi.org/cc79>; 2017). "Current evidence points to it being systemic, rather than restricted to a few isolated cases," says Harry. "We really can't ignore it any more."

Growth rings are used to determine age in fish of all kinds. In bony fish, researchers tend to

**CORRECTION**

The picture credit in the news story 'Linguist sexual-harassment case sparks protest' (*Nature* **549**, 315–316; 2017) was incorrect. The image should have been credited to Justin Trombly/Campus Times.