

January 21, 2018

A letter from Graduate Student #9

Dear Members of the UR Faculty Senate,

My name is Judith Degen. I am a former advisee of Florian Jaeger's. I was a member of his lab from 2008 to 2013. I am Graduate Student #9 in the White Report. I am currently an Assistant Professor of Linguistics at Stanford.

I am writing to you to express my utter dismay at the motion to censure Florian on the basis that his actions between 2007 and 2013 meet the standards of Faculty Handbook IV.A.10, **with the presumed intention of facilitating the revocation of his tenure and ultimately firing him.** I am writing you this letter because I fear that in the sea of noise that has been made around this case, the loudest voices have been those of the complainants; while the vast majority of us who have actually worked with Florian, experienced his supportive mentorship, benefitted from his guidance and collegiality, have remained silent. We have done so for a variety of reasons. The fear of being ostracized from our academic community has been debilitating. **We – many of us part of precisely the junior female scientist population that everyone claims to want to protect – have effectively been silenced by the media tactics of the complainants and the Olivarius law firm that represents them.** To stand up to the prevailing “sexual predator” narrative that the EEOC complaint constructed results in name-calling – “victim-blamer”, “victim-shamer”, “brainwashed”, “cult member”. The complainants have ensured that there is no space in the public discourse for a nuanced portrayal and discussion of the situation that the White report makes clear is required.

But enough is enough. Florian has already been through hell. Intimate details of his and his entirely blameless partner's sex life have been laid bare for the world to see; he has been uninvited from speaking events; long-term collaborators have removed his name from papers and cut off further collaboration; he has received death threats; he has been protested by thousands of students; he has been put on academic leave; hundreds of colleagues signed an open letter officially denouncing him as a sexual predator (something that the White report explicitly refutes); everything he has worked for has crumbled. **It is safe to say that Florian has received severe punishment.**

I strongly urge you to consider the reasons for and the consequences of this motion by considering what good can come from this awful situation that has touched so many lives. What are the lessons to be learned? What do we want as an academic community? The answer that I think we can all agree on, regardless of where we stand on Florian's behavior and the university's: **We want to provide the best learning environment possible for students.** This includes fostering a culture that eschews harassment and bullying. This includes having transparent, available, and effective reporting structures in place if such behavior does take place.

How do we do this? Let's consider briefly the outcome of the White report. What did you feel when you read it? *Relief* that things weren't as bad as they seemed in the EEOC complaint?

Disgust that serious offenses were being whitewashed? *Confusion* over details that didn't add up with what you thought you knew from the EEOC complaint? *Anger* that bad things had clearly transpired, yet there was no law that had been violated, no policy even? The complainants themselves appeared to feel the latter very strongly when they said in their recent press conference that "it is not acceptable to say people have behaved offensively and inappropriately to our students, but nobody did anything wrong." So what do we do about this? The current motion suggests the answer is to revoke Florian's tenure and fire him.

I would argue that this is possibly the worst response. It is a purely punitive measure with no potential whatsoever to improve the situation for current students. In fact, his current students, who greatly value Florian as a mentor and want to continue working with him (see White report and letters from students to the Faculty Senate) would be directly and adversely impacted by the censure. If you believe that Florian behaved in morally objectionable ways in the years leading up to 2014, firing him is not going to do anything at all about others who behave(d) similarly and just haven't been outed yet. If you want to avoid resorting to moral turpitude clauses to get rid of members of the community you think are harmful to the students, **think about how to revise university policies so that the sort of behavior Florian engaged in actually constitutes a policy violation.** Everything else is nothing but a superficial gesture, transparently aimed at appeasing the PR machine and to fuel the complainants' quest for a large financial settlement. If the complainants truly cared about students' rights, they would have not appropriated and misrepresented unwilling women's stories without their consent in the EEOC complaint (see Molly Tadin's statement and the WIRED article); they would not have told the many lies documented in the EEOC complaint and exposed by the White report; they would have cooperated with the independent investigation or at least had the decency to discuss the White report's proposed policy revisions. Instead, they called the White report biased and continue to yell their self-righteous platitudes to the world in order to pressure the university to settle with them for the sake of containing any further media debacle.

I for one am sick and tired of the hypocrisy. As someone who was a member of the lab during the relevant time period, as someone who lived with Celeste Kidd for a year right after she moved out of Florian's house, and as someone who has only ever had experiences with the complainants ranging from neutral to extremely negative, I can say with full confidence that **the White report constitutes the most balanced account of the events that I have seen.** Please read it before making any decisions.

Florian's lab during the time I was there was a place where young researchers from diverse backgrounds came together to do exciting work on language. It was an immensely supportive environment in which long-lasting scientific and social connections were made. Florian was always a generous and supportive mentor. He spent countless hours teaching me statistics, discussing language, answering my questions, and giving rapid and detailed feedback on manuscripts. He was also always there for me in times of personal hardship. The parties at his house and the now infamous lab-retreats (that turned out not to involve group nudity or hard drugs after all, see the White report) were wonderful and much appreciated occasions for both social and scientific community-building, which he was under no obligation to provide. His lab, incidentally, was the only language lab at Rochester that included any significant diversity of backgrounds among the students. He was one of the rare fellow Europeans in the department,

who I could bond with over being in a culturally very different place. Without him and the other lab members, who are still among my best friends despite our geographical dispersion, I would have on many occasions during grad school felt extremely alienated, exposed, and alone. **I will always be grateful to Florian for his principled and generous mentorship and friendship.**

It is against this background that **I implore you to choose a constructive forward-looking path** – that will include difficult conversations about policy revisions to extend the range of behaviors we consider unacceptable as a community as well as to increase the transparency of reporting structures – **instead of a purely retributive backward-looking path.** I also urge you to take seriously the White report's finding that Florian has exhibited none of the problematic pre-2014 behavior in recent years, suggesting that he is not only capable of learning but also willing to do so. I would always rather have someone among my ranks who is capable of updating their behavior in response to feedback than someone who just happens to perform the right public gestures.

Please do not support this motion; please choose instead to address the underlying problem.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'J. Degen', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Judith Degen
PhD 2013, UR BCS and Linguistics