

THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION



Why Are Scholars Such Snitches?

The university bureaucracy has been hijacked for political grudge matches and personal vendettas.

THE REVIEW | ESSAY

By *Laura Kipnis*

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When I read about the [downfall](#) of the University of Michigan’s president, Mark Schlissel, fired after an anonymous complaint about his consensual though “inappropriate” relationship with a subordinate, my first thought was “What kind of idiot uses his work email for an affair?” Then I recalled that I myself am the kind of idiot who persists in using my university email account for everything, despite pledging at least once a year to tear myself away from this self-destructive habit. Schlissel, *c’est moi*. The next time I get in trouble, will my employer emulate the [classy](#) behavior of the Michigan Board of Regents and release troves of my own embarrassing emails for my enemies to savor and mock?

My next thought: Who was the snitch? I knew none of the players, but my inner Hercule Poirot went right to work, assembling likely suspects in the drawing room of my imagination (betrayed spouse, disappointed paramour, assorted foes and rivals, maligned underlings), cleverly disarming them with my continental charm until the culprit was exposed — most likely by the irrepressible look of creepy satisfaction playing across his or her face. To bring down an apparently much loathed and vastly overpaid university president, even for the stupidest of reasons: what ecstasy!

Among the questions prompted by Schlissel’s termination is whether higher education has, on the whole, become a hotbed of craven snitches. From everything I’ve heard and experienced, the answer is yes.



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First let us pause to consider our terms: Was Schlissel's narc a "snitch" or a "whistle-blower"? Whistle-blowers are generally attempting to topple or thwart the powerful, and Schlissel was certainly powerful. But the reported offense was, in the words of a lawyer I spoke with, "a nothingburger." Let us provisionally define snitching as turning someone in anonymously, for either minor or nonexistent offenses, or pretextually. Also: using institutional mechanisms to kneecap rivals, harass enemies, settle scores and grudges, or advantage oneself. Not to mention squealing on someone for social-media posts and joining online mobs to protest exercises of academic and intellectual freedom.

This last is a variant of the "social-justice snitch," a burgeoning category composed of those who want to defund the police and reform the criminal-justice system but are nevertheless happy to feed the maws of a frequently unprocedural and (many say) racist campus-justice system. There are, to be sure, right-wing students and organizations dedicated to harassing professors whose politics they object to, but that's to be expected. What's not is the so-called campus left failing to notice the degree to which the "carceral turn" in American higher ed — the prosecutorial ethos, the resources reallocated to regulation and punishment — shares a certain cultural logic with the rise of mass incarceration and over-policing in off-campus America. Or that the zeal for policing intellectual borders has certain resonances with the signature tactics of Trumpian America, for which unpoliced borders are equally intolerable. But what care social-justice types about fostering the carceral university if those with suspect politics can be flattened, even — fingers crossed! — expelled, or left unemployed and penurious?

Americans once famously disliked snitches. Witness the parade of Hollywood liberals who refused to stand or applaud when the director Elia Kazan, who'd named names to the House Committee on Un-American Activities in 1952, received an honorary Academy Award in 1999. According to Kazan's autobiography, he named only those who'd already been named or were about to be, and he'd long since come to despise the cultural despotism of the American Communist Party. But he'll still go down in history with "snitch" attached to his name. If only he'd labored in today's academe! He'd be lionized for it.

The carceral campus provides a haven for that formerly reviled personality type, the jailhouse snitch, around whom so many classic prison dramas revolved. *The Big House* (1930) established the category and delivered a message for the ages: Snitches get stitches. When the privileged 24-year-old Kent (Robert Montgomery), in for carelessly killing someone while driving drunk, starts ratting out his fellow inmates, things don't turn out well for him. In the film's moral universe, only snivelers snitch. Or as the seen-it-all warden opines: "Prison does not give a man a yellow streak, but if he has one, it brings it out."

Is this true? Is snitching a function of character, the result of a trait you either possess or don't? Or is it rather that certain institutional contexts, like prisons, incentivize snitching? In higher ed's overfunded, secretive, and ever-expanding punishment infrastructure (hiring for which now vastly outstrips new faculty lines), glutted with vague regulations about everything from romance to comportment to humor, snitching has become a blood sport.

I'll begin with my own encounters with the accusation machinery on my campus, at Northwestern University. I've previously [written in these pages](#) about being the subject of Title IX complaints by two graduate students over an [essay I wrote](#), also in these pages. But it wasn't just me. Accused in conjunction with my case were the president of my university, for possibly

alluding to me in an op-ed on academic freedom, and my intrepid faculty-support person, for speaking at a Faculty Senate meeting on the subject. I later learned that even more charges had been filed against me because of the charges against him. A few years later, when I wrote a book about those experiences, I was [brought up on Title IX complaints](#) again; this time the accusers included four of my fellow faculty members. (On all of this I was eventually cleared; the complaints against the other two were dropped.)

Was Title IX designed to combat the scourge of people publishing things you don't like? Presumably not, but that hasn't impeded more Title IX investigations from being launched on similar grounds, despite how much criticism my university drew for Title IX overreach. I learned about a creative-writing student at a liberal-arts college (a place I myself have been invited to speak at *on free speech*) found guilty of Title IX violations when another student didn't care for something she'd written. I'd love to provide details, but despite having transferred to another college, the student was so terrorized by the experience she doesn't want them made public. Which is exactly what makes this subject both impossible to write about and necessary to publicize. Want to muzzle your enemies? Accuse them of something. Title IX officers are standing by.



They're also more than happy to act on third-party complaints. Along with codes making practically everyone on campus a "mandatory reporter" for suspected Title IX violations, a volunteer army of zealots is hot on the trail. One was the roommate of an undergrad I'll call Ann, who witnessed Ann and her boyfriend of three years having a fight. Ann slapped the boyfriend, and the boyfriend slapped her back. Not stellar behavior on anyone's part, but the roommate told Ann she had 24 hours to report the boyfriend for relationship violence, or she would. Was she jealous? Ann thought that might have had something to do with it.

Against Ann's wishes, the college charged the boyfriend. Why only him? I've written elsewhere (extensively) about the proclivity of Title IX officers to reinforce the gender biases they're supposed to be combating. The boyfriend is currently awaiting a finding, according to his lawyer. (It's also the case that only those with well-off parents can afford lawyers to contest such charges, meaning the outcomes are likely to be entirely unequal. The creative-writing student's parents lacked the financial resources to hire a lawyer.)

Students snitching on fellow students for anything even sex adjacent is also rampant. "Jane Doe," a former student in Sonoma State University's "Depth Psychology" master's-degree program, is suing over Sonoma's mishandling of Title IX complaints brought against her by three other students. The three accused Doe, then 31, of sexually harassing them with a sensual dance she'd done during a movement exercise *in class*. The program, which focuses on Jungian psychology, touts itself as emphasizing the integration of scholarship with "embodied practices." The assignment that day — an 11-person cohort took all classes together — focused on "authentic movement": Students were supposed to gyrate their hips in a circular fashion and "move like snakes." They were also supposed to ignore cultural norms and challenge themselves to move in ways that might be taboo, to not take anything personally, and to "own your own triggers." They were instructed to watch only their own partners, no one else.

One of Doe's classmates — not her partner, and whose eyes should have been elsewhere — emailed the instructor after class to complain that Doe had been masturbating during the dance. Doe's partner chimed in three days later, seconding the complaints. The third complainant hadn't witnessed Doe's alleged masturbation, but just "hearing about her actions alone was triggering and anxiety producing." All three threatened to withdraw from the program if Doe wasn't punished. Doe contends the three deeply disliked her, wanted her gone, and had colluded in their statements.

Sonoma State took 15 months to investigate the case, hence Doe's lawsuit. (The case was dismissed and is now on appeal. According to Doe's co-counsel Lara Bazelon, there's a small chance it will go to the Supreme Court.) During those 15 months, Doe was effectively expelled: banned from classes, thus unable to finish her degree. After she was finally found innocent of lewdness, her relentless accusers hired their own lawyer to appeal the ruling (unsuccessfully). The chancellor's office affirmed that no reasonable person would have regarded the alleged conduct as sexual harassment, but what snitch worth the time of day is a reasonable person?

Not only do Title IX bureaucracies lack mechanisms for weeding out off-the-wall complaints; they apparently have no interest in doing so. Anyone who's disliked by anyone is a sitting duck. And even if your target is eventually cleared, so what? The process itself is the punishment.

Back to me. Twice exonerated on Title IX allegations, I recently found myself once again ensnared by investigative clutches, this time over my latest book, *Love in the Time of Contagion*. My crime? Before I started writing, I posted online an anonymous Google survey asking people how their relationships were faring, whether their ideas about love had changed during the pandemic, and other questions in this vein. I got around 200 responses, often thoughtful and eloquent — people seemed glad for the opportunity to reflect on what they'd been through. Then came an email from my university's "Institutional Review Board" office. Guess what? Some Stasi acolyte had submitted an anonymous complaint about my little survey: I'd engaged in "human-subject research" without approval. (By the way, it turns out there's a webpage *soliciting* complaints about faculty and staff members, just to make things more convenient for anonymous snitches.)

Now the IRB people wanted me to get their retrospective permission for a survey I'd already completed, and then planned to supervise how I used the results — if they approved the survey in the first place. Given my extreme amateurishness at this kind of thing, their approval seemed doubtful.




HE DID

I HEARD

SHE SAID

HE DID



As an essayist with fine-arts degrees who teaches in a film department, I had only the vaguest idea of what an IRB is. If you too are in the dark: It's a review process for scientific and social-scientific research involving human beings. Journalists are exempt, as are people doing oral history or making documentaries. I explained that my type of writing — subjective, frequently ironic — wasn't under their jurisdiction, and I had no idea how I'd use the survey results. I suggested that someone was using the IRB office to harass me because of other things I'd written. Or so I inferred, since at my second Title IX investigation, over my book *Unwanted Advances*, one of the charges was my not getting IRB permission. The team of out-of-town lawyers hired by the university to torment me (at substantial hourly rates, presumably) waved that one away, saying my sort of writing didn't require such permission. That was how I first learned what an IRB is.

I imagined the current snitch's glee, savoring the idea that I was, once again, wriggling helplessly under the bureaucracy's thumb. The IRB functionary wasn't interested in what the complainant's motives might have been, and insisted I proceed as her supplicant. I responded with some snippy remarks about the territoriality of the sciences — had they somehow declared ownership of the survey method? Over question-asking itself? Why should they get to force me to speak their language? And wasn't this a rather colonial attitude toward the humanities, precisely the sort of marauding, as I understood it, that IRB offices had been invented to curtail?

I had no idea what would happen if I refused to comply. I did glance at the forms the IRB people wanted me to fill out, which were mostly scientific gibberish, but I couldn't bring myself to open the 57-page manual they'd instructed me to read first. The only question I could confidently answer was whether I was collecting biospecimens. No, not intentionally.

We went back and forth for two weeks until she finally backed off. The office had concluded my work didn't come under its purview. How many hours I had spent on all this I can't say. The whole thing was trivial, but also galling. I comforted myself with the old (possibly apocryphal) Algerian proverb: "The man without enemies is a donkey."

Has anyone stopped to ask whether this is actually what we want the world to look like? Take, for instance, the complaints about gendered-speech missteps that are lately swelling the allegation coffers and occupying the swarms of bureaucrats and deanlets on call to aid every manner of snitch. Title IX offices have become the go-to for reporting pronoun errors or faculty members who accidentally misgender students (even when it involves reading a name off a roster, in one case I know of). Or for using a trans author's pre-transition name on a syllabus, even when the book in question was published under that name: An older queer art-history professor at Pennsylvania State was turned in by younger queer students for doing just that a few years ago. The phrase "It's generational" is often heard about this surge of accusation, a cliché meant to reconcile the apparent contradiction of gender-nonconforming progressives deploying the campus carceral apparatus to enforce their ideas of progressivism and queerness.

N-word violations are now a snitch's paradise on earth.

The lawyer Samantha Harris, who often defends speech-infraction cases, told me that N-word violations are also now a snitch's paradise on earth. There are still, it seems, occasional old-school types (often leftists) who persist in thinking that there's a distinction between quoting James Baldwin or Martin Luther King Jr. in full and hurling an epithet. The college-admissions consultant Hanna Stotland, who specializes in "crisis management," told me that the snitching impulse is taking hold among

younger and younger students. She used to have two such cases a year; she's had 20 in the last two years. N-word offenses are a cottage industry here too. High schoolers squirrel away incriminating texts, or videos of friends at age 15 singing along with rap lyrics, then forward them to admissions committees when the friend (or frenemy, rather) gets an athletic scholarship or is admitted to an Ivy. Colleges are so quick to act on the intel, says Stotland, that they'll sometimes retract an offer without even giving the accused student a chance to respond.

Of course, race is treacherous territory for anyone at the moment, as demonstrated by the lawsuit brought by Timothy Jackson, a professor of music theory, against his employer, the University of North Texas. Jackson formerly headed the Center for Schenkerian Studies, which piqued my interest because it sounds like something from a lost academic novel by Nabokov. I admit to not having heard of Heinrich Schenker, a Galician-born Austrian Jew who developed an influential system of music theory and died in 1935. His widow was murdered in Theresienstadt; a number of his Jewish students also perished in the camps. Schenker too would probably have been killed if he'd lived longer.

The trouble started in 2019, when Philip Ewell, a Hunter College professor, delivered a plenary address at the Society for Music Theory called "Music Theory's White Racial Frame." In that talk, Ewell, who is Black, condemned Schenker as an "ardent" and "zealous" racist, and indicted music theory as a whole for ignoring Schenker's racism "in order to keep in place racialized systems that benefit whites and whiteness." (A [version of the paper](#) is available online.) Not only had Schenker's biological racism "infected and become integral to the white racial frame of music theory," Ewell said, but the scholars who established Schenker studies in the United States had gone to great lengths to "whitewash" Schenker, conspiring to conceal his "racial supremacist views."

Among the questions Ewell's paper raises — while nowhere mentioning that Schenker was Jewish — is whether Schenker's musical theories themselves are logically dependent on what Ewell alleges is Schenker's white supremacism. Ewell thinks yes: "As with the inequality of races, Schenker believed in the inequality of tones."

After discussions among its editorial staff, the *Journal of Schenkerian Studies*, which is published by the University of North Texas and was edited by Jackson, issued a call for responses to Ewell's address. Though a third of the responses were pro-Ewell, Jackson's was decidedly critical. He argued that "Schenker's Jewishness complicates any simplistic reduction of 'whiteness' to a monolithic concept." He also argued that Ewell had cherry-picked and misread quotations, which he cited in the original German, pointing out nuances he felt Ewell had overlooked. Schenker, Jackson argued, had experienced racism firsthand, and the reception of Schenkerism — tacitly regarded as "Jewish" music theory — was itself complicated by the anti-Semitism of the postwar American academy, which, after all, still had quotas on Jewish admissions. Jackson asked whether "anti-Semitism may implicitly, if not explicitly, underlie attacks on Schenker's legacy now, just as it has in the past." He also pointed out that Ewell's "scapegoating" of Schenker and the Schenkerians was taking place in the "much broader context of Black anti-Semitism" in the United States, where Jews are "blamed for every conceivable ill."



You could argue that Jackson was just being as polemical as Ewell, who'd denounced the Jewish Schenker as a proto-Nazi (his prose has "Nazi implications") who admired Hitler, but you'd better not argue it these days. All hell broke loose on social media. Ewell's defenders in music-theory departments around the country signed petitions denouncing the journal and calling for Jackson to be fired. (Some younger scholars and grad students reported to Jackson feeling pressured to join the condemnations.) According to Jackson's lawsuit, he was also accused of saying "fascist shit" for having written that resources needed to be devoted to increasing the small number of Black music-theory students, since few grow up in homes where classical music is appreciated. Ewell called the published responses to his paper "dehumanization," saying he wouldn't read them, although he was also angry about not being asked to respond. "They were incensed by my Blackness challenging their whiteness," he told the student paper at North Texas.

The graduate-student editor of the journal, who'd himself initially been skeptical about some of Ewell's arguments — he'd called them “naïve” and “implicitly anti-Semitic” — quickly posted a lengthy and self-lacerating *mea culpa* on Facebook in which he revealed that he'd set up a secret meeting with his department chair six months earlier. He had, he said, gone to the chair “as a whistle-blower” to report that Jackson was “woefully ignorant about politically correct discourse and race relations.” It's a sad document, reeking of professional fear and (according to the correspondence chain in Jackson's affidavit) dissembling. Meanwhile, grad students at the university were on Twitter denouncing Jackson and circulating more petitions demanding that everyone associated with the journal be investigated for past bigotry; seventeen of Jackson's UNT colleagues signed it.

The university swiftly announced that an ad hoc committee would be convened to investigate. Its members found Jackson guilty of bullying the grad-student editor into publishing views he disagreed with, and the journal guilty of editorial mismanagement (although, Jackson said, the editorial practices followed were the same as they'd always been). Jackson was removed from the journal, and its funding was cut. More troubling to him was that he felt false and defamatory statements, including by the grad student, had been the basis for the decision, which he thought was basically pretextual — the real issue was his critique of Ewell or, more precisely, the controversy it caused.

The lesson here is not only that universities won't stand up for faculty members who get mobbed for unpopular viewpoints. It's that they'll pile on the reputational wreckage, constitutionally protected speech be damned. Jackson's lawyer, Michael Thad Allen, thinks universities now care less about being sued than they fear standing up to social-media temper tantrums. UNT's motion to dismiss Jackson's lawsuit was just denied, and the case is proceeding to discovery. We'll see what the courts think.

Veering from the accepted narratives about race can imperil a career, but what's the accepted narrative? The year before Ewell delivered his paper, my partner, a sometimes-intemperate history professor with an apartment in Harlem, became exasperated (when is he not!) about a bunch of noisy white children, possibly the offspring of tourists, overrunning a neighborhood restaurant and creating a ruckus among the mostly Black customers. He posted a satirical mini-rant on Facebook about these future Masters of the Universe, culminating with the pronouncement “I now officially hate white people, and for god's sake I am a white people [sic].” He thought the humor was self-evident.

Nope. Soon came the dreaded email from the “Office of Employment Equity” on his campus telling him he'd been anonymously reported. He was being charged with discrimination, harassment, and “reverse racism.” Which, he argued at his hearing, doesn't exist: Racism is about power, not hatred, in his view. The history experts at OEE overrode him, pronouncing him guilty as charged, notwithstanding that it was apparently white supremacists who'd gotten wind of his post and filed the complaints (all of which, OEE admitted, came from off campus). Those white supremacists also spent the next year harassing him — he got at least 300 emails accusing him of being a race traitor and worse. Tucker Carlson kept calling. After his appeal was turned down by the associate vice president for human resources, lawyers got involved. The Foundation for Individual Rights in Education publicized the case. The president of the university intervened and told the OEE officials to reconsider. Reluctantly, they did, but universities also have plenty of creative ways to punish employees who create bad publicity.

The irony is that my partner was just a bit early to the party — following the summer of 2020, practically everyone was announcing publicly that they hated white people. It turns out you can be on the “right side of history” at the wrong time. Or maybe the whole “right side of history” thing is a narcissistic delusion. Rest assured, today's moral grandstanders will be tomorrow's thought criminals.

Observe, in all of those scenarios, the bureaucratic mission creep, the territory grabs, the encroachment on the intellectual life of the university. My IRB pals wanted to supervise the humanities; the writing student's Title IX investigator wanted to adjudicate creative

Owriting; my partner's OEE functionaries believed they could override a historian — who's studied, taught, and published on race for decades — about what defines racism. What they ought to do instead is to figure out how to prevent their offices from being hijacked for political grudge matches and personal vendettas. For example: Social-media posts don't *have* to be treated as causes for action. *Stop acting on them, and maybe people will stop reporting them.*

After I went public about my own Title IX case, my inbox was flooded with stories about people snitched on for the most bizarre and trivial crap. A grad student had been anonymously reported for sexual harassment because he'd played the words "juicy" and "Girl Scout" during a word game at a party, then snickered. They were on the cards he'd drawn! After being let off with a warning, he speculated that the tattler was someone after his spot when summer teaching assignments were handed out. And indeed, resource competition did often figure as possible subtexts in a lot of the stories I heard.

One professor who contacted me — I'll call him Dave — was someone prominent in his field who'd been teaching for close to 30 years. A few years earlier, Dave had gotten into an argument with the graduate-program director in his department during a committee meeting over grad funding. He thought she was trying to prevent one of his students from being nominated for a national grant in order to promote one of her own students instead. Yelling commenced, and the department chair (a woman) told them both to leave the room. In their absence the committee voted to nominate Dave's student for the grant, which she eventually received.

A self-described complainer, Dave complained about the grad director the next day at a faculty meeting. The chair became indignant, adjourned the meeting, then went to the Title IX office to report that Dave had been inappropriately hostile to female colleagues and that his complaints had amounted to sexual harassment. The Title IX director (a man) told her that nothing she'd described was sexual harassment, and unless she had other evidence of misconduct, his office couldn't investigate.

A few months later, Dave got word from the academic senate that a formal grievance had been filed against him by *five* female professors. The associate vice chancellor, a woman, presented the university's case against Dave on behalf of the complainants. In addition to the faculty-meeting outburst, there were now reports that he'd engaged in "unwanted physical contact" with female faculty members and graduate students by kissing them on the cheek or giving them hello hugs at department parties. The grad students weren't pressing charges, but had been enlisted to testify against him.

In addition, there was testimony about Dave's custom of offering pieces of chocolate muffins to staff members. The campus bakery made really good, really large chocolate muffins that Dave loved, but he couldn't eat a whole one. On those mid-afternoons when he was in his office and feeling hungry, he'd go to the bakery, buy one, and divide it into quarters, taking one quarter for himself and offering the remaining three quarters to the office or library staff (which included both men and women). Sometimes people turned him down, but usually not.

A couple of the professor's accusers claimed that offering muffins to the female staff constituted a form of "inappropriate" and "sexually suggestive" behavior.

A couple of his professor-accusers now claimed that offering muffins to the female staff constituted a form of "inappropriate" and "sexually suggestive" behavior. When asked how offering a muffin could be construed as inappropriate, one claimed that a chocolate muffin is a surrogate form of "fecal matter" and that Dave had been essentially telling the staff to "eat my shit."

Additionally, one accuser, a feminist theorist, insisted that he'd offered the staff pieces of muffin with his saliva on them, looming over them as they sat at their desks; that he'd "forced" them to eat the muffin pieces in front of him; and that the entire process had

been a form of sadistic bullying intended to assert his position as a powerful male. When pressed, this accuser admitted that she'd never herself personally seen Dave offer muffins to any members of the staff.

The hearing went on for two weeks.

A senate committee cleared Dave of sexual harassment but found him guilty of disruptive behavior. My question is why the unhinged and obviously pretextual sexual-harassment accusations didn't discredit the accusers. Instead, the panel recommended that Dave be censured, undergo anger-management training, and have his salary docked 10 percent for a year. The chancellor (a man) followed those recommendations, except he docked Dave's salary for two years. Then Dave's dean imposed additional sanctions, though this was entirely unprocedural: His office would be moved out of his department to another building, he was not to attend faculty meetings or meet with grad students, and other humiliations. The dean and university lawyers claimed the added strictures weren't technically "disciplinary actions" because they weren't listed as disciplinary actions in the faculty handbook. Dave's lawyer pointed out that public flogging wasn't listed among the disciplinary actions either, but if Dave were to be flogged, it would obviously still be a form of punishment. Dave filed another grievance. At the point we were in touch, this had been going on for more than three years and Dave had spent more than \$40,000 in legal fees.

Dave struck me as funny and self-aware. Was he also especially disruptive, or just someone who spoke his mind more than was politic? Or was the real problem — as Dave suspected — that certain colleagues simply resented him as excessively productive and one of the more popular teachers in the department, based on enrollments and evaluations? Were the rather extreme punishments meted out deserved, or due to his having unwisely locked horns with his preceding dean (who'd become a vice chancellor) and also, unfortunately, his current dean?

When I began writing this piece, I wanted to reconnect with Dave to see what had happened with his appeal. Googling his name, I learned he'd died the year after we spoke, after battling a serious illness. Had he spent the last year of his life, I wondered, still being hounded by his colleagues? According to his obituary, the campus flag was lowered to half-staff in his memory.

As standards for behavior become narrower and more restrictive, some of those caught in the cross hairs and subject to punishment, lawyers tell me, are the socially maladroit. Some may have Asperger's or be otherwise "on the spectrum," as we now say, treated as blameworthy because of "off" vibes or impediments in reading social cues.

Combing through a batch of heavily redacted complaints against my university — these were appeals of Title IX decisions that had been filed with the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights over the last decade, and obtained by a colleague via an open-records request — I came across more than a few examples of harassment charges over such matters as a "creepy stare." One case involved a graduate student who, as a dismayed friend wrote in a character testimonial, had an "intense personal style" that was being unfairly transformed into evidence of something sexually untoward. A faculty member wrote to say that other grad students were biased against the alleged starrer. Other letters testified that the intense gaze wasn't sexual; it was just his personality. But since everyone in the department knew about the allegations, when the starrer merely asked a question at a colloquium nowadays, negative inferences circulated about his mental health and character, compounding the bias. (These were, by the way, clinical psychology students.) The dean stood by his guilty finding, and the OCR appears to have placed the appeal in the circular file.

Not long ago I received a wrenching email from the mother of a former graduate student I'd interviewed and written about in *Unwanted Advances*. He'd been swept up in the same accusation-fest on my campus that I had. In fact he'd been reported on, he told me, by some of the same people who'd gone after me (friends, he'd once thought), and been, perhaps, collateral damage in the events I was relating. The charges involved his having made drunken passes (six months apart) at two women in his circle, and being,

they felt, in various ways invasive. As a result he was put on disciplinary probation, and his funding was cut; he'd needed \$100,000 in loans to get through his final year in the program. He felt thrown under the bus by his adviser, who'd recruited then abandoned him, and ostracized by others in the program. (He'd been too depressed to contest the accusations, a decision he later regretted; some of the details were false or exaggerated, he said, but he hadn't known his department would be informed about them.) He'd obviously been having difficulties at the time and acting in desperate ways, as the dean's sanctions letter makes clear: His "dynamic emotional states," which moved very quickly from sadness to anger, were "perceived as coercive or intimidating" by those he interacted with. Might there have been a way to deal with this person more compassionately? No, the university was far more interested in punishing than helping him.

His mother was now writing me to say her son was dead. She thought I'd want to know. The cause of death proved to be "the toxic effects of bromazolam," a designer drug you can get on the internet. She wrote that she thought her son had actually died "because of the toxic effects of a higher-education program that caused him nothing but pain and heartbreak." He'd been totally crushed during the worst of it, especially by having been turned against by people he'd thought of as friends and mentors. The "quasi-legal administrative processes" their son had been through, his father wrote, had ruined their lives.

His parents had both long thought their son was "on the spectrum," but he'd never been formally diagnosed. He was awkward at times, and often fuzzy on people's expectations, his father said, adding, "His lack of insight into other people's feelings and motives very likely contributed to his Title IX problems." When we'd met, a few years after the sanctions, he seemed bitter and a little broken. Lives can be destroyed in such casually vicious ways.

These are a mere smattering of the hundreds of stories I've heard. There are obviously thousands more that people are too ashamed or cowed to disclose. I'm no psychic, but I can predict what will happen when this essay is published. My inbox will be flooded with cases of specious and horrific overblown accusations, sent by people who've been warned that if they talk about what they've been through, even when accused of verifiably false stuff, they'll be punished — charged with "retaliation," then face expulsion or job loss. These effective gag orders mean that administrators will get to keep operating with no public scrutiny, turning ostensibly liberal institutions into cell blocks.

My plan is to feature this new crop of stories in a regular column, or maybe a website, dedicated to the Academic Snitch of the Week. Hey, I know — if we run low on cases, we'll solicit anonymous reports. Warning: We will be naming names. Of the snitches.

Put down the phone, please don't report me. I'm joking. I swear.

We welcome your thoughts and questions about this article. Please [email the editors](#) or [submit a letter](#) for publication.

OPINION

COMMENTARY

Laura Kipnis

Laura Kipnis is the author, most recently, of *Love in the Time of Contagion: A Diagnosis*. Her previous book was *Unwanted Advances: Sexual Paranoia Comes to Campus*.

TRENDING ARTICLES

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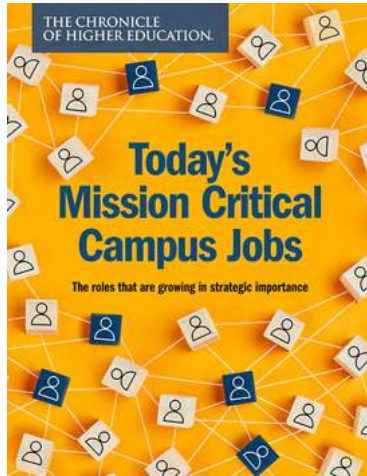
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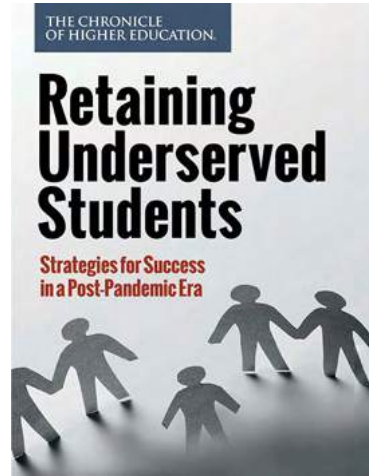
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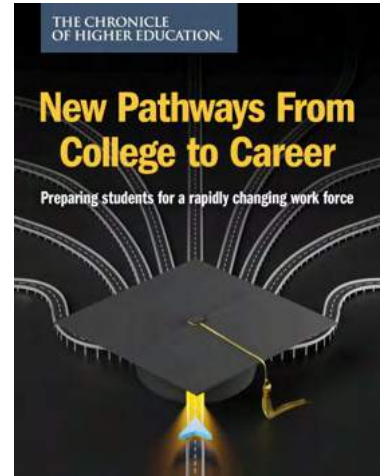
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