

THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Faculty

February 10, 2014

Rutgers U. Suspends Noted Anthropologist

By Christopher Shea

Rutgers University has suspended the noted evolutionary theorist Robert L. Trivers from teaching (with pay) and, according to Mr. Trivers, has begun proceedings that could lead to his being suspended without pay. Mr. Trivers had been teaching "Introduction to Social Evolution" and "Human Aggression" but was replaced, after one week this semester, by other instructors, according to the student newspaper *The Daily Targum* and Mr. Trivers himself.

Amy S. Jacobson, a visiting assistant professor and researcher in the anthropology department, confirmed the suspension and said she'd been asked to step in to teach "Human Aggression," which she had taught before. The *Targum* said that the social-evolution course had been taken over by Lee Cronk, a professor of anthropology, who could not be immediately reached for comment.

In an interview with *The Chronicle*, Mr. Trivers reiterated much of what he'd told the *Targum*: that he'd complained to the administration about having to teach "Human Aggression," a subject he says he knows little about, and that he'd explained the predicament to the students who showed up at the first lecture. He said he'd told the class that he'd do the best he could to learn the material along with the students, with the help of Ms. Jacobson, whom he'd asked to give several lectures.

When Rutgers officials informed him of the suspension, he said, they told him that he was effectively refusing to teach the course and inappropriately involving students in the dispute over the assignment.

Neither a spokesman for the university nor the chair of the anthropology department, Douglas H. Blair, would comment on the situation, on the grounds that the matter was a private personnel issue.

Mr. Trivers, who wrote highly influential papers in the early 1970s on subjects like sexual selection and altruism, and has since published such books as *Genes in Conflict: The Biology of Selfish Genetic Elements* (with Austin Burt, Harvard University Press, 2006), has had a contentious few years at Rutgers. In 2012 he was [ordered to stay off the campus](#) for five months after several alleged instances of threatening behavior, principally a heated face-to-face argument with Mr. Cronk. Mr. Trivers has denied that he threatened anyone.

Mr. Trivers and Mr. Cronk had been co-authors, with five other scholars, of an article in *Nature*, in 2005, that founded positive associations between physical symmetry in Jamaican men and dancing ability. Mr. Trivers said that the data in the article were flawed, and he lobbied for it to be retracted. He and Mr. Cronk apparently disagreed about how to handle revisiting the article, which was finally [retracted in November 2013](#). Mr. Trivers said he was still required to avoid Mr. Cronk's office and the surrounding area.

Mr. Trivers said he met with administrators last Thursday to discuss the matter, but declined to comment about the meeting, out of a fear of interfering with his formal discussions with the university, except to strongly deny that he was refusing to teach "Human Aggression."

30 Comments The Chronicle of Higher Education CTS ▾

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 **bpilgrim** · 2 months ago
It sounds like he knows quite a bit about human aggression.
52 ^ | ▾ · Reply · Share ›

 **newsoffice** · 2 months ago
They should suspend him. Why is he complaining to his students and making his "problem" their problem? If he cannot figure out how to teach a course in

his field that is not his area of expertise he shouldn't be teaching at all. Faculty are professionals and need to act that way.

17 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Guest → newsoffice · 2 months ago

It is "professional" to disclose to students the limits of your own expertise. It would be unprofessional to pretend otherwise.

29 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



concernedprof → newsoffice · 2 months ago

If this was a major or master course I would agree but this seems to me to be a sub-field and then there is always the question of how much notice he was given. His "we will learn together" comment seems to indicate little time was given to prep for the course. I agree with minerva9 - it IS professional to let the students know that you are part of the learning curve. I dropped a course once just because the prof was uncomfortable with his grasp of the material - best decision I made that year. Most of the students still in that class struggled and I excelled under a more prepared and qualified instructor the next term.

3 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



laker · 2 months ago

If this is the course:

01:070:310 Human Aggression

3 credits

Course Description: Roots and circumstance of human aggressive behavior. Interplay of phylogenetic and cultural variables. Relevance of ethnological and paleontological data to modern forms of personal violence and warfare. Not open to first-year students. Prerequisite: 01:070:204 or 01:070:212 or permission of instructor.3 credits

I would wonder if the issue is him not teaching the course, or his objecting to teaching undergraduates. A "noted anthropologist" teaching a 300 level undergraduate course might perceive the assignment to be a slap.

4 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



drangie → laker · 2 months ago

If he does "perceive it to be a slap," then he has no business teaching there. No one is "above" teaching undergraduates.

24 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



dlws8607 → laker · 2 months ago

I love Internet mind readers. Do you have any evidence to support your supposition of his motives? Of course, you have a fan to support your baseless supposition (drangie).

3 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



concernedprof → dlws8607 · 2 months ago

You may want to reread his post: "I wonder" & "might perceive" indicate personal & public conjecture NOT "mind reading." Those seem to be plausible scenarios.

2 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



skeptomycin · 2 months ago

To all the bashers: Prof. Trivers is a genius of truly great accomplishments, though he may be eccentric. Unfortunately, in the present-day culture of administrative mediocrity and political correctness he is not fitting the emerging obedient faculty model.

17 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›

**jmecenas** → skeptomycin · 2 months ago

I took a 200 level class with Bob Trivers when I was an undergrad at UC Santa Cruz 20 years ago. I had no clue who he was - just wanted to satisfy a gen ed requirement with a class on social evolution and (what else?) sex. To this day I think of that class as a highlight of my undergrad years. Trivers never acted like it was a burden to teach undergrads or that we were beneath his efforts. In fact, he presented himself to us as just "Bob." Only afterward did I learn he was "Bob" - noted evolutionary theorist.

19 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›

**BemusedObserver2** → skeptomycin · 2 months ago

It's not clear that taxpayers should be obliged to support the eccentricities of the genius set.

3 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›

**dlws8607** → BemusedObserver2 · 2 months ago

Do you feel the same way about taxpayers supporting the entitlements for coaches?

26 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›

**dashwood** · 2 months ago

If someone asked me to teach a course outside of my area of expertise, rest assured that I would tell the students in the class exactly what Mr. Trivers told his students--that this is not my area of expertise, that I was being required by my department to teach the course, and that I would do my best to learn the material, to use my knowledge in other areas, and to use my teaching skills to do the best that I could with the course. Sharing with students that I don't have expertise in a given subject matter is not insubordinate or "effectively refusing to teach the course." Rather, it would be natural for a professor placed in this situation to ask students for their patience as he/she navigates this material with them.

The fact that Rutgers appears to be (over)reacting to these specific facts in the article suggests that there is something else going on here. Obviously there is the contentious relationship between Mr. Shivers and Mr. Cronk, and there appears to be a dispute over whether Mr. Shivers acted inappropriately in an argument with Mr. Cronk. Is there something to be read between the lines to suggest that Rutgers has concluded that Mr. Shivers is a problem and is using this episode with the human aggression class to encourage Mr. Shivers to end his association with the university? Having a professor tell students what Mr. Shivers told his students would not seem to rise to the level of being an offense warranting a suspension and further investigation.

36 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›

**Guest** → dashwood · 2 months ago

I read it exactly the same way. I see no evidence of unprofessional conduct on Trivers' part, and suspect the administration is out to get him.

11 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›

**11152886** → dashwood · 2 months ago

Most of us have been required to teach undergraduates courses that were not our areas of expertise at one time or another, for one reason or another. While I might mention to students the course was not my area of expertise, I would not put myself down by telling students I "would do my best". Of course I would do my best, I was an excellent teacher and that is what I was paid to do. We don't live in a perfect teaching world, at least I didn't. So, I worked to stay at least two steps ahead of the course material as it was offered, successfully, I might add and learned a lot, along with my students. In addition, I considered it a privilege, as a senior faculty member, to continue teaching at least one introductory course each year, one in which I knew the students would

receive an outstanding understanding of the basics.

12 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



dashwood → 11152886 · 2 months ago

I rarely find that faculty members at R1 universities have to teach courses outside of their areas of expertise. I would expect that at smaller liberal arts colleges or in departments with only three or four faculty members, but at a major R1 like Rutgers it would be highly unusual for a faculty member to be put into this situation. Sometimes it is necessary, I suppose--e.g., when a faculty colleague is ill, when a full course is vacated by a faculty departure, etc. However, in my experience it is rare at R1 universities for faculty members to be put into a course outside of their area of expertise.

Moreover, even if teaching a course outside of his expertise is what is expected and required of Mr. Trivers, what did he do in response? He told the students that it wasn't his area of expertise and asked their indulgence, and even if he told students that he was teaching the course over his own objections that does not reach the level of an offense requiring a suspension. If I were chair or dean overseeing Mr. Trivers, I might be irritated by his comments but would not take any action. Based only on the facts presented in this story, it would appear that Rutgers overreacted in suspending Mr. Trivers.

However, I suspect that the facts presented here do not tell the whole story and that Rutgers is using this episode as an excuse to put pressure on Mr. Trivers to leave his faculty position or else toe the line.

17 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



MChag12 → dashwood · 2 months ago

It's Trivers, and my guess is that the University has been trying to get him to retire for about 15 years now. How old is he? 85? Older? It would also not surprise me if Trivers has been acting up. I admit that I do in no way consider him in the Genius category, but respecting your older faculty should be a requirement. Unless, of course, he has just gotten too hard to handle, and it sounds like that may be the case.

1 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



beveridge → MChag12 · 2 months ago

He is 70. But it looks like the retraction is what really upset the anthropology department

5 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



dashwood → MChag12 · 2 months ago

Not knowing Mr. Trivers, and cannot judge if he has been a problem as a faculty member and whether or not the Rutgers administration is justified in trying to force him out for other sins. But it seems that the specific facts of this specific case do not support a decision to suspend him.

5 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



lontraman · 2 months ago

Having met the man...this is not surprising in the least.

1 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



profmomof1 · 2 months ago

I wonder if in this department asking faculty to teach outside their areas of expertise is usual; if not, and he's being singled out, then that would seem to be harassment (in the hopes he'll leave). If it's not necessary, than asking people to teach on topics they know little about is not doing the students any

favours. Preparing lectures and discussions on any topic is not that difficult, just time consuming; but it's hard to answer student questions when you don't know much more than they do about a topic. Also odd is that it sounds like there was a "student informant" in the class to report back to the chair what the prof said. I've worked in a department at one time where the chair asked students to "spy on" and tell her what professors said so that she could get back at him or her. Very unpleasant environment for faculty and for students!

6 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Marc DePree · 2 months ago

More often than not, we learn what happens after administrators and faculty are put under oath.

Here's one of many examples from usmnews.net's archives of how a Q&A unfolds when an attorney catches a witness lying.

The following is the actual sworn testimony of Alvin J. Williams, then-Interim Dean, College of Business, University of Southern Mississippi, taken on June 4, 2008, in the case, DePree v. University of Southern Mississippi. (Q. is DePree's attorney's question directed to Williams; A. is Williams' response):

Williams' letter requesting then-President Martha Saunders to fire DePree insisted that DePree's website "adds to fear and intimidation."

Q. Why are they [you and faculty] afraid of the website [usmnews]? ...It's the fear of the disclosure –

A. Of their conversations, their private conversations.

Q. That's the fear of

see more

2 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Guest → **Marc DePree** · 2 months ago

Been there, done that, caught the admins lying under oath in deposition, collected the settlement money, moved on to a better job. I agree that there is very little accountability for admins in higher ed.

3 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



happyprof → **Marc DePree** · 2 months ago

This article isn't about USM. Did you notice?

^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Marc DePree → **happyprof** · 2 months ago

Is that you, again, Harold? Stop hiding, act like a man, and join us in the light of day.

Marc

^ | v · Reply · Share ›



bemsha · 2 months ago

Trivers wrote an entire book debunking the Cronk, et al study, called "The Anatomy of a Fraud." This is a field (evolutionary psychology) much prone to bullshit. I suspect others in the field weren't happy about his whistle-blowing activity, and his unprofessional approach to the course probably didn't help his case.

3 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



chron7 → **bemsha** · 2 months ago

Was it really an unprofessional approach? Or was it an honest admission?

2 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



zincwarrior · 2 months ago



I'm confused. He's ordered to teach a class he is not knowledgeable in, then we he tells the class he's not knowledgeable but "we'll work through it together" he gets suspended?
Whats wrong with this picture?

8 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



inama · 2 months ago

Another dumpster fire.

^ | v · Reply · Share ›



px7_mq9 · 2 months ago

It's a 300-level course, not an introduction to the discipline. Students have a right to be taught by an expert, and also to be told when they aren't getting one. (I am in no position to comment on other matters related to this issue.)

2 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›

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