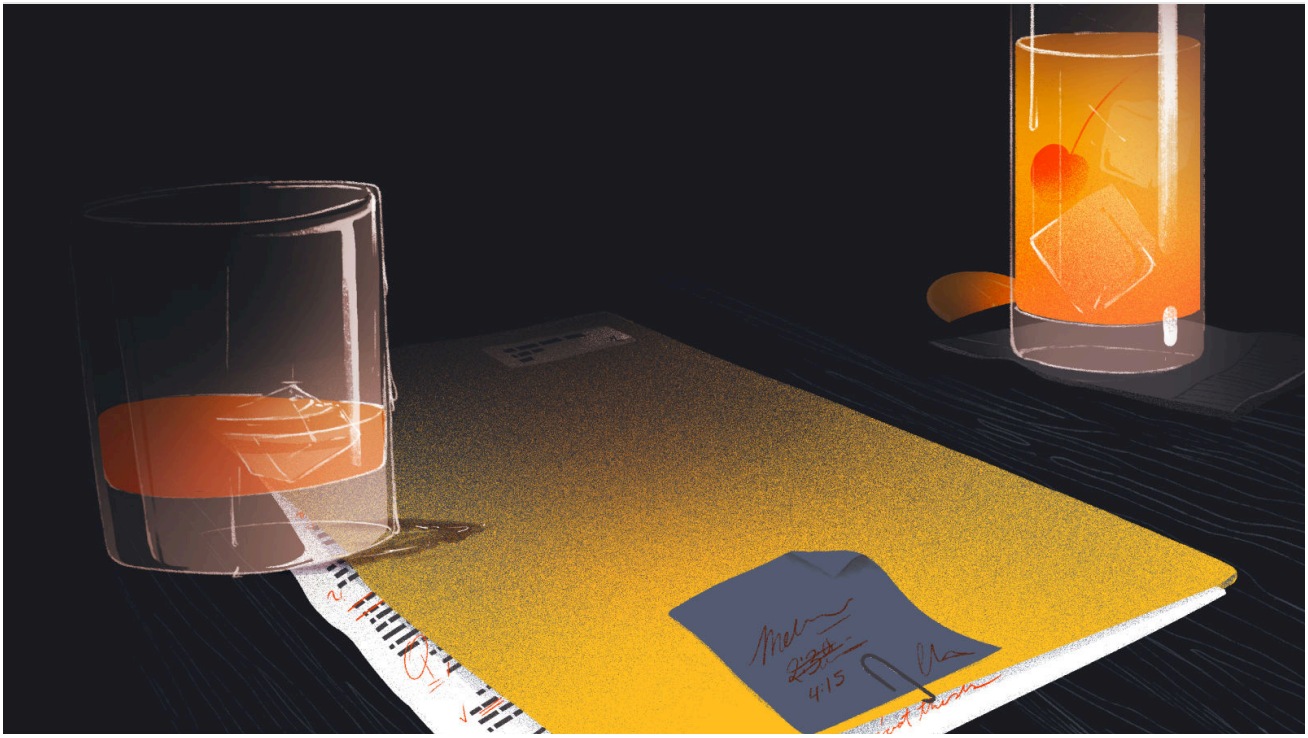

FEATURES

In Academia, Professors Coming On to You Is on the Syllabus

Dan Solomon and Jessica Luther
6/08/18 11:30am

Illustration: Chelsea Beck (GMG)

In the middle of the night on November 11, 2011, Jenn Shapland, a 24-year-old graduate student in the English department at the University of Texas at Austin, received an email from her professor.

“Just a quick, slightly unprofessional note before turning in…” began the message from Coleman Hutchison, a rising professor in the department, then 34 years old, who was on the verge of tenure. “You write like a dream. Consider me quite smitten with your Critical Credo. Thank you, thank you for producing such a thoughtful and engaging piece of writing.”

At first glance, there wasn’t much about the note that was unprofessional—except for the fact that he declared it as such, and that the language used to compliment her writing included words like “smitten” and “like a dream.”

Shapland responded, thanking him for his kindness and addressing the professor as “Dr. Hutchison.” Picking up on Hutchison’s tone—in his follow-up, he told her, “I’m looking forward to seeing you.” Shapland, flattered and hopeful that Hutchison would agree to be her thesis advisor, flirted back. She asked if she could call him “Cole,” to which he replied, “I wish you would. ‘Dr. Hutchison’ makes me worry that I may be called upon to make house calls.”

She told him she knew little of poetry, and asked him to teach her. After that, he began sending her poems. When she made a reference to a question she’d ask him “someday, over drinks,” he encouraged that drink over several emails. After a week, the two did meet—on campus, with another professor, to discuss Shapland’s master’s thesis. The meeting didn’t go well; Shapland described it in an email to Hutchison as “painful/awkward. In about eighteen different ways.” He pushed for a second meeting over drinks. He signed the email, “Yours in awkward ache.”

Shapland attempted to draw a boundary, asking that they meet “on neutral territory” and saying of his request to get a drink that “you’re still my professor for awhile, and grading me and all that, and I’m pretty sure the handbook frowns on it.” Still, the exchanges continued, and the mutually flirty tone resumed. A few days later, they got that drink, and Hutchison kissed her. The relationship was consensual, and it lasted for four months—but reading through their correspondence, one gets the unmistakable sense that Hutchison was the pursuer.

“Here was a compliment I wanted to take to heart. Here was a way out. Here was an avenue to power.”

The university’s Office for Inclusion and Equity got a similar sense after it began investigating Hutchison’s behavior. In the fall of 2017, Shapland published an essay in the literary journal *The Arkansas International* that—without naming Hutchison—described their relationship. The essay was angry, and Shapland says she wrote it as a way to deal with the powerlessness she felt after leaving the university, titling it “Maybe I Just Needed to Kill.” In it, she wrote about the message she received from Hutchison, and what it meant to her as a 24-year-old graduate student, who felt like grad school was a “sham”: “Here was my professor, telling me he was ‘quite smitten’ with an assignment I’d written,” Shapland wrote. “Here was a compliment I wanted to take to heart. Here was a way out. Here was an avenue to power.”

After publication, the university identified Hutchison as the professor in question after multiple students reported behavior from Hutchison that they had either witnessed or had been subjected to. To address the matter, the English department scheduled a town hall meeting in late October for students and faculty to discuss the situation.

Hutchison denied that he pursued Shapland as the OIE investigation unfolded. He told the department chair that he didn’t intend his “unprofessional” email as a “come-on,” even as he acknowledged that, upon reviewing that first note, he could see that perhaps she “had a crush on him” and read it that way.

But Shapland wasn’t the only woman to study under Hutchison who had a story of a flirtation that turned into a sexual relationship. In 2015, Hutchison married another of his students, declaring at his wedding that he loved her “first as a little crush and then, quite suddenly, with the whole of my being.”

After Shapland's essay was published, the English department took steps to address concerns within the community. Splinter spoke to 11 current and former students about his behavior. A number of them identified a pattern: He'd tell a female grad student that he liked her writing, encourage her to meet with him to discuss it, and then begin making sexual advances.

These students often described his behavior as "creepy," even as it was discussed among faculty and students alike that he was being groomed to eventually become chair of the department. He served as graduate adviser beginning in the 2016 school year, which meant that every graduate student —whether or not they had been on the receiving end of these flirty emails, been desired by Hutchison enough to be pursued by him, or had reciprocated his interest—was obligated to talk to him each semester about their courses, their timeline to completion, their funding, and which classes they would teach.

The town hall meeting quickly turned contentious. Almost 50 people were in attendance when department chair Elizabeth Cullingford and professor Gretchen Murphy started by telling the assembly not to "panic" over the allegations. They declined to name names, and insisted that the accusations against the unnamed professor in Shapland's essay occurred under a previous policy—but Cullingford also described the new policy, which went into effect in 2017, as "draconian" due to its prohibition on certain kinds of faculty-student relationships. Cullingford urged students to keep the specifics of the meeting to themselves. When students asked questions, Murphy told them to address those questions specifically to the people involved—including Hutchison, who wasn't in attendance.

The Office for Inclusion and Equity, in finding that Hutchison had violated department policies, identified four additional complainants beyond Shapland (the details of the other incidents are redacted in the copy of the investigation obtained by Splinter). But among the students Splinter talked to, another common thread developed: They were reluctant to speak on the record not just because they were concerned with their own career

advancement (many of them had left the department or academia entirely), but because they personally liked Hutchison's wife and didn't want to cause her undue distress. She was, after all, one of them.

In academia, crossing boundaries and exploiting power dynamics usually doesn't raise any flags at all.

Even before Shapland published her essay and the formal complaints came in, everyone familiar with the situation knew that Hutchison had married another of his students. In a different world, that might have served as a red flag regarding whether he saw his female students as potential sexual partners, rather than as young scholars who'd come to the university to prepare for the rigors of the academy. But it didn't. This is academia, "A place where deep and lasting collegial bonds are formed, where mentors and protégés can become close friends and where young lives are transformed by a galvanic encounter with knowledge and their own latent capabilities," as Laura Miller wrote in a 2015 essay for the *New Republic*, which questioned if "erotic longing between professors and students" was "unavoidable."

By early June, the investigation had come to something of a conclusion, one that left current and former graduate students unsatisfied and Shapland feeling "gaslighted." One person familiar with the situation told Splinter, "The department are doing what any institution does when one of its favored members violates the rules—they're circling the wagons and minimizing the problem." Still, something had shifted, albeit incompletely. In academia, crossing boundaries and exploiting power dynamics—the stuff that has gotten important men fired, ostracized, and otherwise removed from their positions in other industries—usually doesn't raise any flags at all. But it's starting to.

The problem of sexual harassment in higher education isn't a new one. One of the first major stories the *New York Times* ever published on the subject of sexual harassment, in 1977, focused on a lawsuit filed by multiple women against male professors at Yale University. Even in that article, the *Times* reported that "the university admits to occasional 'isolated' complaints about the sexual conduct of faculty members. 'It's not a new thing,' a Yale spokesman said, but it is also 'not a major problem.'"

Forty years later, activists and journalists are challenging the latter statement. Since last fall, there have been a slew of pieces questioning whether the academy is prepared to deal with its own problems with sexual assault and harassment. In the *Atlantic* last October, Caroline Fredrickson asked: "When will the 'Harvey effect' reach academia?" In Vox in December, Anna North told the story of a University of Southern California doctoral student who found that "her university's response to her harassment report was insufficient," and noted "she's not alone." In February, two reporters for *The Chronicle of Higher Education* wrote about the way Harvard handled a sexual harassment charge in 1981, and asked if that treatment "[kept] other women from coming forward for decades." As recently as May 10, *The Washington Post* published a story about "academia's #MeToo moment."

But sexual overtures from professors toward students are also firmly entrenched. Karen Kelsky, an author and former tenured professor who left academia, created an anonymous Google Doc in December, where people could share their own stories of sexual assault and harassment in the academy. By May, more than 2,400 people had contributed to the crowdsourced document. Stories date back as far as 1962 at institutions large and small in every conceivable department. It's not a secret that academia has problems it doesn't want to address.

Despite the recent coverage, not everyone in academia is convinced there is a problem at all. For years, academics—men and women, liberals and conservatives—have argued that close relationships between professors and students are not just appropriate, but essential to the institution's

environment. These defenses can come off as self-serious and insular, like they're intended to speak specifically to other academics and not the world at large.

Academia is, by its nature, both hierarchical and created to protect people who are inside of the institution.

In 2001, *Harper's* published an essay by Cristina Nehring called "The Higher Yearning: Bringing Eros Back to Academe," in which she argued that "teacher-student chemistry is what sparks much of the best work that goes on at universities, today as always," and "the university campus on which the erotic impulse between teachers and students is criminalized is the campus on which the pedagogical enterprise is deflated." Six years later, UCLA professor Paul R. Abramson published a book called *Romance in the Ivory Tower: The Rights and Liberty of Conscience*, arguing within its pages that a university policy that prohibits professors from dating their students "tramples the very nature of freedom itself."

Those arguments predate some of the more recent discourse around sexual harassment in professional settings, but there's an enduring notion that academia is a special, rarified place where sexual relationships with unequal power dynamics, recognized as inappropriate elsewhere, are vital to its very function. It's how you end up hearing words like "draconian" to describe a policy that prevents professors from having romantic relationships or sexual interactions with undergrads or with grad students they personally teach or supervise.

The general structure of the academy is the same now as it was in 1977, in 2001, and in 2007. It is, by its nature, both hierarchical and created to protect people who are inside of the institution. Professors wield enormous power over grad students' future success. An endorsement from a professor with stature can open doors to tenure-track jobs, substantial funding for projects, and publishing opportunities.

Power is “very often is one-sided in favor of the professors,” says Hala Herbly, a former graduate student in the English department at UT. Herbly graduated with her Ph.D. in 2013, and while she knows little about the specifics surrounding Hutchison’s case, she spent years in the academy. Part of her dissertation focused on the professionalization of the field of literary criticism. “A lot of times, young people in their early 20s entering this really rigorous field, with no connections and no network, have to depend really heavily on their senior peers and their professors to introduce them to that network.”

In any given cohort, there are unlikely to be enough career-advancement opportunities to go around, which means that students can find themselves playing an ongoing game of musical chairs, all seeking ways to get the limited attention of their professors. When an important person in the department offers that attention—no matter what form it takes—students are primed to take it.

Herbly says graduate students end up giving away their labor, “doing favors for professors, like housesitting and dogsitting, copy editing their papers.” It’s not uncommon to find qualified academics volunteering to do things that teenagers make $7 an hour to do, and feeling honored to have the privilege.

“Lots of people—professors *and* grad students—like to think of training in the academy as functioning to an apprenticeship model,” Herbly says. But there are key differences between that model and academia: “Historically, apprentices were essentially adopted into the master’s family. Obviously no tenured-track professor is going to offer to house a grad student rent-free, but thinking of academic training in this way allows people to justify the intimacy between professors and students—and it justifies paying grad students and adjuncts less.”

All of this is of great benefit to the people at the top. They enjoy the rewards of free labor, the prestige of having their attention sought after, and the thrill of being a figure of mystery and intrigue among young, attractive students who’d perhaps otherwise be unlikely to indulge sexual thoughts about a middle-aged professor (and they likely participated in that same system on

their way up in the hierarchy). So to them, the idea that there should be rules about whether they're allowed to ask a grown, consenting adult to babysit—or more crucially, to get a drink, or to go home together after an evening out—probably *does* feel draconian.

Hutchison's department chair wanted people to know that she found policies like the one that Hutchison violated to be "extremely strict," "ferocious," and "draconian."

It's also very hard to punish professors, by design. Tenure is the backbone of the academy; a protection for professors, so that they can teach and publish on unpopular or politically charged topics without the threat of being fired. A *Wall Street Journal* report from June 6 noted that, rather than fire an accused professor in April 2017, the University of Wisconsin issued instructions "not to meet alone with, advise or mentor female students, staff or junior faculty." That December, those instructions were modified so that the professor could not mentor men, either; he retired in May.

In many ways, tenure is worth defending: As the number of tenured jobs dwindle, the employment market in academia threatens to become a race to the bottom, where career professors are replaced by adjunct faculty hungry for work, in order to keep up with student loans and chasing jobs that are on the verge of extinction. But protecting tenure for righteous reasons means unwittingly upholding a system that also protects predators. When professors are found to have done harm or to have violated policy, consequences for those actions can be hard to mete out, especially if the university wants to fire the professor. That process is built to be long and difficult; it's easier to pressure professors to resign and move on to other positions at other universities, as Tyler Kingkade reported at length at BuzzFeed in August of last year.

The conversation about these dynamics often remains localized to universities—and even in specific departments within those universities. In some of these cases, a specific professor or bad actor may have received discipline, but there's no indication that anything is changing in a big-picture sense. Department chairs maintain a great deal of discretion in addressing these situations, without the public scrutiny given to celebrities or government officials.

At UT, that means that the Office for Inclusion and Equity found "sufficient evidence" that Cole Hutchison violated the school's consensual relationship policy and its sexual misconduct policy (as well as a third policy that, in the copy of the report obtained by Splinter, was redacted). Yet his ultimate fate was only determined by the provost after "thorough, at-length discussions and consultations with the respective deans, department chairs, and the University's legal affairs team." According to multiple sources familiar with the situation, Hutchison's department chair wanted people to know that she found policies like the one that Hutchison violated to be "extremely strict," "ferocious," and "draconian."

It didn't take long for the chair of UT's English department, Liz Cullingford, to realize that she'd underestimated how many students were invested in the Hutchison case. The small room she had booked quickly overflowed, and after more than 50 students showed up, they had to move to a larger space.

Hutchison, who was on previously-scheduled leave, didn't attend. Students were upset that Cullingford described the policy that students wanted to see enforced in disparaging terms. They were disappointed that she declined to address the substance of their concerns—because, she said, she might later be a witness in the investigation, and if the investigation found that he violated the rules, she could serve as a judge. When asked how students could get facts about what happened, Cullingford told them to ask the people involved.

Afterward, a grad student speaking on Cullingford's behalf, messaged a Listserv to say that "Liz is aware that that meeting was not a success and very regretful about how she handled it."

Even though Hutchison was found to have violated multiple policies over the past several years, in multiple cases involving at least five students, the next step of the process was vague. He's no longer the graduate adviser, a role he stepped down from after Shapland's piece was published. After the university provost's decision on June 5, department chair Liz Cullingford sent a letter to the department's current graduate students (Shapland was not separately informed of the decision), in which she first noted that "Professor Hutchison was cleared of accusations of sexual harassment," before going on to write that "investigators found sufficient evidence that he violated University policy by not reporting a consensual relationship, and by making some inappropriate comments to graduate students."

The provost, she informed them, had reprimanded and sanctioned the professor, who "has apologized and expressed his deep regret," and will be returning to campus in the fall—although he wouldn't be teaching graduate classes immediately, or handling administrative duties. (It's unclear if he'll be teaching undergrads.)

Hutchison was in some ways only doing what academia encourages professors to do—to use his power within a hierarchical structure to view his students as resources, whether for transcription, babysitting, or sex.

Upon being emailed a copy of Cullingford's note, Shapland wrote back, "What did he apologize and express deep regret about, and to whom?" And wondered, "Will he be reinstated as a graduate instructor after a new crop arrives?" Hutchison answered both questions in an apology letter attached to Cullingford's note, which was addressed to "colleagues" for making people

uncomfortable and explained that he'd "take a break from the graduate classroom" for the time being. "I want to thank my friends and family for their steadfast support during such a difficult time," he wrote. "I also want to apologize to everyone in our community for my part in this most unpleasant situation."

In an email to students in May, Gretchen Murphy, the professor who stepped in for Hutchison as interim graduate adviser, stressed that the department wouldn't withhold funding from students who raised questions about harassment following Shapland's essay. Because the faculty is grateful for the "painful revelation"—and because UT doesn't allow retaliation—students would not be punished if "they are seen next year to be snubbing or not subbing Cole Hutchison." But they'll have to make the decision about how to interact with him, because he's still going to be there.

"I do expect that Cole will be returning to our department as faculty, and we are all going to have to figure out a way to interact as a community where he is a member," Murphy wrote. She explained that Cullingford had anxiety about hosting a party for the department at the beginning of the year. "It might beg questions of how to interact with Cole in public," Murphy inferred from the chair's hesitance—but, she informed the students, "avoiding parties is not a way forward."

Hutchison never responded to requests for an interview, even after the apology letter to his department, while Cullingford and Murphy both declined. Shilpa Bakre, speaking on behalf of the university, sent the following statement:

> The university is committed to upholding its core values, and takes all accusations of misconduct and policy violations seriously. Fostering an environment of safety for our students and faculty and staff is of paramount importance. Thus, the university follows up on accusations of misconduct and allegations of policy violations, using established procedures, through the university's Title IX Office and the Office for Inclusion and Equity. In the interest of transparency, procedures for handling complaints are posted online and described in detail at http://equity.utexas.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Revised-Procedure-and-Practice-Guide-5-2016.pdf. The university generally cannot comment on specific personnel matters or discuss ongoing investigations.

If avoiding parties isn't the way forward—and it obviously isn't—what is? Murphy's email focuses largely on the narrow topic of funding, as if she understood that most of the concerns among students in the department to be about what they'd stood to gain by sleeping with Cole Hutchison, or what resources they stood to lose by rejecting his advances. (The university told students at the town hall meeting in the fall that they'd set up a "department climate task force" to address concerns. When that task force released its findings in May, it too was focused on transparency in funding.) That sort of thing may have been a concern, but it doesn't seem to be at the heart of what troubled students about Hutchison's behavior.

Hutchison, of course, was in some ways only doing what academia encourages professors to do—to use his power within a hierarchical structure to view his students as resources, whether for transcription, babysitting, or sex. That's ultimately a bigger philosophical question than whether students could sleep their way to better funding, or if they risked opportunities by rejecting a professor who sent them flirtatious emails. Whether a professor's sexual interest affected their funding is a finite issue, which is probably why the UT English department wants to focus on it. But if the systems in place at the department meant that professors like Hutchison could diminish their students' potential as intellectuals and academics—and if that system closed doors for people like Jenn Shapland while Cole Hutchison is expected back in the fall—that's messier and harder to answer.

In other industries, those messy questions are getting answers. The consequences in entertainment, in media, and the restaurant industry have been made clear in recent months: Many men, who cross lines, abuse authority, and otherwise inflict themselves on women over who they have power, have been dethroned. In academia, though, myths around meritocracy and the academy's own enlightenment have insulated it from that kind of reckoning. Kelly Baker, author of *Sexism Ed: Essays on Gender and Labor in Academia,* told Pacific Standard in April that that higher education treated those things as "a feature of the system, not a bug."

"In the academy is the assumption that somehow the ivory tower is detached from the common prejudices and biases of the 'real' world," she said. "When this assumption is paired with the belief that academia is a meritocracy, gender bias and harassment don't appear as bias and harassment, but rather as stories about how women can't hack it."

Either way, the result is often the same.

These days, Shapland is living in New Mexico. She's not entirely removed from academia—she teaches creative writing at a small college in Santa Fe as an adjunct professor—and won a 2017 Pushcart Prize for nonfiction, with her first book due in 2019 from Tin House Books. But it's not the career she envisioned when she entered UT as a grad student, or even the career she might have pursued after completing her Ph.D.

"I was on the academic job market my last year of graduate school, and I had the opportunity to—after I finished my Ph.D.—to stay on. I actually had been planning to stay on as a post-doc in the English department at UT, and at the time I didn't really understand why, but I knew I didn't want to stay," Shapland says. If she had, Hutchison would have been her direct supervisor—which, despite giving her an opportunity to enter the job market for a tenure-track job or a visiting professorship opportunity, she declined. "It's possible that, had I felt more comfortable in the department itself, I would've stayed on [and] tried to pursue a tenure-track position," Shapland says. "Instead, it was very clear to me by the spring of 2016 that I just wanted to get as far away from that department as possible."

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