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### Here Today, Gone Tomorrow

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To some observers, the case of Thomas Thibeault sounds "Kafkaesque."

Last month, the English professor at East Georgia College was dismissed for an unspecified sexual harassment charge two days after he complained to the administration that the institution's related policy did not contain any protection for those who are falsely accused. Though Thibeault has formally appealed his firing to the University System of Georgia's Board of Regents and requested that the charges against him be specified, the personnel matter has remained at a relative standstill for weeks. In an attempt to pressure the institution into reinstating him, Thibeault has been working with the Foundation for Individual Rights in Higher Education, a group that [widely publicized](#) the case Tuesday and has sent a [condemning letter](#) to East Georgia's administration.

On August 5, during a faculty meeting about the institution's sexual harassment policy, Thibeault protested to Mary Smith, the college's vice president for legal affairs, that the policy in question was "flawed" when she admitted that it did not contain a provision that he said could "protect the accused against complaints which are malicious or ... ridiculous." Wary of the policy, Thibeault believed that Smith was explaining to his colleagues that "feelings of the offended were proof of the offensive nature of the behavior."

Though Smith and all other East Georgia officials did not return calls for comment about incidents relating to Thibeault's case, Thibeault chronicled an anecdote he posed at the faculty meeting to illustrate what he thought might constitute a "ridiculous" complaint.

"Last week two students were talking to me in the hallway after class," Thibeault wrote in [notes of the meeting](#) he provided to FIRE. "One student said that she didn't want to go to a professor's office because he looked down her cleavage. The woman was wearing clothing that was specifically designed to draw attention to her cleavage. She even sported a tattoo on her chest, but I didn't get close enough to read it. The cleavage was also decorated in some sort of sparkly material, glitter or dried barbecue sauce. I couldn't tell. I told the student that she shouldn't complain, if she drew such attention to herself. The other female student then said, and I hope you're not offended by her actual words, 'if you don't want anyone looking at your titties, I'll lend you a T-shirt. I have one in the truck.' The first student then said, 'No. I'm proud of the way I look.' I left the conversation at that point."

According to Thibeault's logic, it would be an unjust accusation for someone to make a sexual harassment complaint about his interaction with these students in this anecdote.

#### Building the Case

The day after the divisive faculty meeting, Adam Kissel, director of FIRE's Individual Rights Defense Program, said a number of Thibeault's colleagues were called into the office of John Black, East Georgia's president. He believes they were brought forth to the administration "in order to help Smith build a case for getting rid of [Thibeault]." Among the items in "Smith's dossier against Thibeault," Kissel said, was a book he had given a faculty colleague entitled, [An Encyclopedia of Ass-Holes, Scumbags, Slimeballs, Sleazoids, Lowlifes, and Jerks etc.](#) Kissel, however, argues that the book has nothing to do with sexual harassment and called this a "mind-blowingly silly example ... of judging a book by its cover."

Thibeault also relayed to *Inside Higher Ed* a story he told a few of his colleagues in the break room at which some may have taken offense.

"Something I said at an academic conference a few years ago could have been construed that way," Thibeault said. "Three years ago, I was reading a paper at an academic film conference about 'Gone with the Wind.' The basic thrust of my argument was that, by the end of the film, the male lead becomes a woman and the lead female becomes a man. Someone in the audience shouted out, 'So, it's all about pussies, right?' And, I said, 'In a way, you're right. It's all about pussy.' I was relating that story to my colleagues and it may have come up here three or four years later."

Thibeault, however, does not believe that either the case of the book or his recollection of this story constitute sexual harassment. He said he has not done anything approaching sexual harassment and noted that he only brought up the concern about the policy to protect others.

"I wasn't thinking of myself question I questioned the policy," Thibeault said. "I realized these procedures could be used at any time to hurt any one of us [faculty]. Also, I've seen other people forced out over false accusations. I didn't speak out because I was trying to watch my donkey or any other part of my body. I'm not ashamed of anything I've said at all. I'm not a sexual harasser."

### The Dismissal

Two days after the faculty meeting, Thibeault was called into Black's office for the meeting at which he was fired; Smith was also present. In [a letter detailing the events of the meeting](#), Thibeault writes that he was told by Black that he "was a divisive force in the college at a time when the college needed unity." Further, he notes that Black demanded his resignation by 11:30 a.m. that morning or his "long history of sexual harassment would be made public" and he would be fired. In particular, he notes that Black said he "long history of sexual harassment which includes smutty jokes, foul language, obscenities, and innuendo."

Still, despite protestations from Thibeault that the charges against him be enumerated, Black and Smith refused, noting that the campus police chief would be there to escort him from the premises if he did not vacate by the given time. Given his options, Thibeault refused to sign his resignation and had to be removed from the campus.

Days later, Thibeault received a [letter](#) from Black, noting that since he had failed to resign by the given deadline that the "dismissal proceedings" had begun, and "a faculty committee has been appointed to conduct an informal inquiry." During this time, Thibeault had still not been informed of the specific charges against him and was still banned from campus. Kissel said that he believes Black sent this letter to attempt "to justify Thibeault's firing after the fact" once he realized "he had fired Thibeault without due process mandated by Georgia's Board of Regents."

Finally, August 25, Black sent [another letter](#) to Thibeault, informing him that "the committee's finding was that there is sufficient evidence to support your suspension," not calling it a "firing." Black also writes that Thibeault was to be dismissed for sexual harassment and that he could request a hearing to protest the move. Three days later, Thibeault sent a [letter](#) requesting a hearing and a copy of the charges against him. Weeks later, he has still yet to hear a response from the college and his charges remain unidentified.

Thibeault maintains that he was dismissed for retaliatory reasons.

"All I know is that I was fired because I opened my mouth," he said. "Black told me I was 'a divisive force in the college when we needed unity,' as we're going through the reaccreditation process right now. Unity, in this case, means not speaking out against the administration. In my mind, this is retaliation because I stood up for my self and the rest of the faculty."

Even before speaking out at the faculty meeting last month, Thibeault said, he has been critical of the administration. Last year, he filed a grievance over what he thought was an unfair performance review. Also last year, he filed an Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) complaint against the college for allegedly denying him tenure because he was not an U.S. citizen; Thibeault was born in Canada and grew up in Northern Ireland but immigrated to the United States several years ago with his wife, who is a U.S. citizen. He said, however, that his EEOC complaint became moot after he and a group of full-time, non-tenure faculty members were granted blanket tenure-track status. He believes these other run-ins with the administration might have also provoked them to retaliate.

### The Fallout

Despite this very public case, Thibeault still has many supporters among his students and colleagues. Tyler Yeomans, a second year at East Georgia majoring in biology, has created a [Facebook group](#) and organized a letter writing campaign among students and faculty to get Thibeault reinstated. Yeomans said he only found out about Thibeault's dismissal when the professor's name had been dropped from an online class listing days before he was slated to start teaching that class. As Yeomans was fond of Thibeault

and had taken many of his classes in the past, he was upset to hear that he would not be teaching this semester and decided to find out why.

"I ran into Mr. Thibeault in town, and he told me he was being fired because of some sexual harassment allegations," Yeomans said. "When I heard that, I didn't believe it. He's a big name at our college and well respected among faculty and students. I believe him. He is such a great teacher. I learned more from his classes than I've learned from any other teacher's. I don't want to see him lose his job, and I don't want anyone to lose out on the opportunity to have such a great professor."

Asked to handle all media requests by East Georgia, John Vanchella, spokesman for the University System of Georgia, said it had no comment on the Thibeault case because it was an "ongoing investigation." He further noted that there was "a lot of inaccurate information out there" about this case, but did not wish to pinpoint any specific inaccuracies. Vanchella would only note that there would be a hearing held at East Georgia before the University System of Georgia's Board of Regents soon, but that a date had not yet been set.

— **David Moltz**

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