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Northwestern to investigate controversial sex demonstration

By Jodi S. Cohen and Lisa Black, Tribune reporters

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Northwestern University, fielding a torrent of criticism after a professor allowed students to view a live sex demonstration after his Human Sexuality class, is now grappling over the long cherished tenets of academic freedom and its boundaries.

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The university initially supported the actions of psychology professor J. Michael Bailey, saying in a statement released Wednesday that, "the university supports the efforts of its faculty to further the advancement of knowledge." But by Thursday morning, Northwestern President Morton Schapiro announced that the school would investigate amid an unfolding scandal.

Schapiro said he is "troubled and disappointed" by the live sex toy demonstration in a campus auditorium last week, and that it was not in keeping with Northwestern's mission.

On Monday more than 100 students watched the optional after-class demonstration, during which a woman got undressed, lay down on a towel and allowed her fiance to penetrate her with a device that looks like a machine-powered saw with a phallic object instead of a blade. The demonstration followed a discussion about kinky sex and female orgasm.

"I have directed that we investigate fully the specifics of this incident, and also clarify what constitutes appropriate pedagogy, both in this instance and in the future," Schapiro said in a prepared statement. "Many members of the Northwestern community are disturbed by what took place on our campus. So am I."

At issue is whether the demonstration is protected by the long-standing principle of academic freedom that allows faculty to teach controversial subjects — from religious views to denial of the Holocaust. Questions center on whether the demonstration offered any educational value.

In a prepared statement Wednesday, Bailey acknowledged hesitating before allowing the couple to perform the sex act. He said that he decided to say yes after realizing his "inability to come up with a legitimate reason why students should not be able to watch such a demonstration."

Bailey, in the syllabus for the Human Sexuality course that ends with a final exam next week, noted that the class would be "skewed toward controversial and unusual aspects of sexuality."

But Lance Gravlee, who teaches a human sexuality course at the University of Florida, said Bailey crossed

the line of what could be considered pure academic pursuit.

"This case is so far on the other side of the line that it doesn't strike me as difficult to figure that out," Gravlee said. "I can't imagine, I just can't imagine doing something like this in a classroom.

"I don't think that an act like this could be justified by principles of academic freedom," he continued.

Gravlee said he tried to suspend judgment and think about whether it could have been an educational experience. The people involved in the demonstration said they were trying to disprove misconceptions about female orgasm.

"In my own teachings I have discussed myths and misconceptions about female orgasm. You can do that and stop well short of bringing it into the classroom," he said. "They would have a hard time convincing me that this was an appropriate way to challenge misconceptions."

Sarah Lowe, 19, a sophomore communications major, said she witnessed the demonstration and was not disturbed by it. But she said she was glad that it took place in an auditorium, rather than a smaller classroom, which would have been too close and awkward.

She said that the warnings could have been more explicit, as she didn't really understand what she was about to see until the woman began removing all her clothes except for her bra.

"I was basically interested to see how it works," Lowe said. "There wasn't anybody who was angry or expressed disgust. They asked questions about the lives of the presenters. It was very informational, I feel, about the sexual diversity that exists."

She said that lectures given earlier in the semester dealt with animals, evolution and mating before moving on to human topics. More recently, the lectures focused on human sexual behavior, "good and bad."

This quarter, 567 students had registered for Bailey's class; all were required to take a prerequisite psychology course. In addition to the class, Bailey hosts after-class lectures, such as the one last week, and student attendance is optional.

The university provides Bailey with extra funds to pay for costs associated with the after-class activities. Ken Melvoin-Berg, a speaker on kinky sex who brought the couple to class, said he expected to get paid \$300 to \$500. The couple who demonstrated the device were not paid, Melvoin-Berg said.

Deirdre McCloskey, a UIC professor who has criticized Bailey in the past, said he aims for shock over substance.

"He is prepared to use people in any way to show how cool he is," said McCloskey, a transsexual who criticized Bailey's 2003 book, "The Man Who Would Be Queen: The Science of Gender-Bending and Transsexualism."

Bailey's class syllabus lists the book as required reading.

Rachel Durchslag, executive director for the Chicago Alliance Against Sexual Exploitation, said that the demonstration could have traumatized students, especially if they had experienced sexual assault or abuse.

"We're relieved that the students apparently received some warning about the graphic nature of what they were about to see," Durchslag said. "It's worth investigating, however, if the value of what was learned was

really worth risking that level of trauma."

Vanessa Frost, who has two children in Evanston public schools, sent Schapiro an e-mail with the subject: "I will not be sending my children to Northwestern."

She wrote: "Northwestern USED to be internationally known for high-caliber curriculum and not this low-class depravity."

Defining academic freedom and its boundaries is usually left to faculty members, said Greg Scholtz, a director at the American Association of University Professors.

The organization defines academic freedom as the freedom to teach, conduct research, address institutional policy and speak on broader social, economic and political interests.

He declined to weigh in on the Northwestern controversy, but said "if a question arises as to the fitness of a faculty member, that question should be reviewed by his faculty peers."

"Academic freedom does not protect professional misconduct and incompetence in teaching research," Scholtz said. "The question is, who is to determine whether something is of a nature of misconduct or incompetence?"

But Lowe doesn't see the need for Northwestern to investigate.

"Personally, I feel that the less it's talked about the sooner it will go away," she said. "It doesn't really merit an investigation."

And student Natalie Houchins said there was educational value.

"We all learned some things," she said. "We learned about kinky sex culture, reasons they do it. We learned how these instruments work."

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