



Careers

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In the Hot Seat

Singled out by state lawmakers as expendable, a sociologist defends her research and teaching on sexuality

By MINDY STOMBLER

I AM A SOCIOLOGIST. I'm a sociologist who happens to teach and conduct research on sexuality. I wasn't trained to work on that topic, but here in the sociology department at Georgia State University, we have a running joke that Selma Alston, our office manager, practically makes us all into sexuality experts by slotting us in to teach one of the many "Sexuality and Society" sections that we routinely have to fill in our department.

And honestly, after teaching that class for several years and eventually publishing a text/reader for the course, I indeed became a "sex expert." Thanks, Selma.

Professors who teach sexuality classes, especially the large ones, are no strangers to controversy. And for some reason, when our students complain about course topics, they always seem to bypass the department chair or the dean and go straight to the news media.

However I was surprised in February by the media attention that my research and teaching attracted. Three academics—me, Kirk Elifson, a professor of sociology at Georgia State, and Robert Hill, an associate professor of education at the University of Georgia—were "singled out" by two members of the Georgia House of Representatives as being expendable in Georgia's budget crisis.

The news media quickly reported our respec-

tive salaries as items that were strike-worthy from the state's budget.

How did the controversy begin? In an admirable effort to promote itself, Georgia State passed out copies of its "experts guide" to legislators. The guide is designed to help journalists who need to contact academics for quick quotes or

insights. Our names and areas of expertise are listed. I had learned from past experience that listing "sexuality" in the guide encour-

aged too many calls on topics with which I was unfamiliar. So, given that I was conducting a project on oral sex and had read the literature, I listed "oral sex" as one of the topics on which I could offer comment. Kirk Elifson listed "male prostitution."

The trouble started when a couple of members of the Georgia House mistook the experts guide as a listing of university courses. They hit the news media and the floor of the House, decrying the existence of courses on oral sex, male prostitution, and queer theory, and threatening our jobs. The State of Georgia, they argued, could not afford "oral sex experts," for example, when it was undergoing severe budget cuts.

Administrators at Georgia State were justifiably concerned about how the furor would affect the overall budget for our institution and even for the University System of Georgia (our chancellor

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is working hard to avoid furloughing employees). No pressure.

Of course the news media loved this story and initially reported we were teaching courses in oral sex and that the university was paying for, in my case, an “oral sex expert.”

While I am not embarrassed to be known as an “oral sex expert” (when you teach sexuality to college students, eventually little embarrasses you), and the label provided lots of fun and fodder for my friends and colleagues, I was surprised by how quickly the fact that I was a sociologist (hired as a generalist) who taught and did research in a variety of areas was so quickly reduced to this one titillating label. I was also surprised that it took repeated testimony and contact with reporters to impress upon them that I was neither teaching “how to” courses in oral sex nor hired due to my expertise in oral sex. (And I have a CNN headline T-shirt to prove it: “Oral sex, prostitution classes disputed.”)

Kirk Elifson and I (along with our department chair, Donald Reitzes) were called to testify in front of the higher-education committees of both the Georgia House and the Senate. We clarified that we were not teaching courses on oral sex or male prostitution. We then discussed the importance of our research on those topics, and how it benefited the public. For me that involved talking about current patterns and interpretations of oral sex, increased rates of oral sex, and the public-health risks of unprotected oral sex.

Both our testimony and news interviews went well (the headline in *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* read: “GSU Sex Experts Wow Georgia Legislators”). Editorials around the state supported us, and the local Atlanta press began reporting the story accurately (particularly the *Journal-Constitution* and *Southern Voice*). It seemed we were out of the hot seat and could begin recovery (and get back to work!).

Enter CNN.

CNN decided to pick up the story after we thought the controversy was over, and it produced a report that implied, once again, that we were teaching oral-sex courses at Georgia State. The report did not include the university’s official statement but did include a close-up of my name, my photo, and the introductory sentence from video of my testimony. CNN’s coverage ignored the existing facts already in print and was insulting to Georgia State, its professors, and its students.

The controversy has calmed down for me—my name is only occasionally used

We all wondered how to respond to inaccuracies in the news media and in the legislature without fanning the flames.

nowadays as a punching bag on conservative talk radio. However, the legislators who were concerned about my research are now questioning the validity of public financing of academic courses on queer theory as well as of health-promotion workshops (the kind offered in dorms, sororities, and fraternities) that focus on safe sex. It’s unclear how that will play out.

I can’t deny that the three weeks in which I was front-page news were highly stressful. Something new developed each day to distract me from my job. I quickly grew to know the devoted members of our university-relations team, who seemed to face new developments each day that often required a response. We all wondered how to respond to inaccuracies in the news media and in the legislature without fanning the flames. We searched for ways to describe our research in 10-second sound bites without confusing the public, providing ammunition for our critics, or destroying our integrity.

Just before my first meeting with reporters, a beloved senior colleague pulled me aside in the mailroom and shared ideas he thought were essential for dealing with the news media. He e-mailed me a full, single-spaced page of ideas that included brilliant references to Einstein, linguistic theory, and the human capacity to think—I was able to integrate about one sentence of it into my testimony and none of it into the news conference.

Following the CNN story, especially, my e-mail account was flooded with hundreds and hundreds of messages from

around the country from citizens, colleagues, and students (past and present), all of whom wanted to show their support.

I was also dumb enough to check the coverage of the controversy in the blogosphere, and I must say that some of the commentary was quite upsetting, sinking to levels I had not anticipated. (Hello, hate groups.)

One thing is certain: I received the unqualified support of my colleagues and administration, all the way up to the chancellor of the University System of Georgia. The external-affairs office at Georgia State worked tirelessly to communicate with, and educate, legislators on our behalf. And our university-relations office labored to explain the importance of our research to news outlets. My chair was an unrelenting advocate. My colleagues cheered me on. And the students were wonderfully supportive and itching to act.

I received phone calls of support from the American Sociological Association

and the National Sexuality Resource Center (it covered the controversy in its online publication and gathered thousands of signatures on a supportive petition). It was also gratifying that, while a couple of lawmakers attacked the value of our work, many more championed our efforts, expressing on the record that they felt our contributions were important. Rep. Karla Drenner, in particular, stood on the floor of the House and passionately defended academic freedom.

While I definitely lost three weeks of work, and my son probably lost three weeks of quality mothering, I leave the experience feeling proud of our response.

I wish we could have argued about... the use of science for science’s sake, but it was clear that we needed to connect our research more clearly to “the public good” (one senator asked, for example, why he has to close the VA hospital in his district while state dollars are used to pay “oral sex experts”). I wish I had been allowed to engage one-on-one with conservative commentators. Ultimately I wish that all of the members of my legislature knew the inherent value of a diverse range of research and course topics (even the potentially controversial ones) and the value of a liberal-arts education.

But we are the teachers, and it is our responsibility to step off the campus and educate the public on the value of what we produce. Providing testimony was the most empowering part of this experience—to be given a chance to speak, to inform, to teach.

My interest in the research topic of oral sex began in the classroom, during a discussion, as students pulled in different cultural messages to debate about power and oral sex. And it was in the classroom, once again, where I was able to wrap up this controversy. It played out, coincidentally, as I was covering the topic of “challenges with conducting sexuality research” in my “Sexuality and Society” course. This semester, I was able to provide students with a first-hand account of some of the political challenges of such research. Now that’s a teachable moment.

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will they really begin to learn: a lesson not so much in pessimism, but in quietude before the yawning gulf. I sometimes wonder, in fact, if we might not both be better off, my students and I, if we spent a semester in silence thinking collectively on a subject and only rising to speak when the spirit moved us, Quaker style.

I remain open-minded. What if my students are right? What if the readings are too long or too boring or don’t make

sense? What if they know something I don’t, such as the fact that this English class truly *isn’t* going to help them all that much in life, and that such requirements nowadays are ridiculous and retrograde?

When all the world is abuzz with digital twitterings, it may be that the humanities requirement is a dead and rotting carcass that we tiptoe around, neglecting to bury at our peril.

I am perfectly prepared to accept the proposition that the most effective teachers have studied these questions and ar-

rived at appropriate responses. I suspect that they have attended conferences, refined their techniques, and deployed their forces. They are able to see each student with fresh eyes, and they welcome the challenges of life in the classroom. I admire—no, I envy—they. But it is a rare and distant land in which they live, difficult to reach.

Russell Smith is the pseudonym of an associate professor of English at a small, liberal-arts institution in the East.

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