

NYU Professor Under Fire for Mask Comments Files Libel Lawsuit

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A NYU professor has filed a lawsuit against a number of his academic colleagues, alleging libel after an uproar of official reaction ensued when one of his students called for his firing based on in-class comments he had made on the utility of masks.

The pleadings, filed in the Supreme Court of the state of New York on November 30, 2020, stated that a letter signed by nineteen of Professor Mark Crispin Miller's academic colleagues included "numerous misstatements of 'fact' maliciously intended to portray plaintiff in a negative light" and intended to "diminish, if not destroy, his professional reputation and standing."

In a modern day rendition of the silencing of Socrates, the furor surrounding Professor Miller began shortly into this semester at New York University. Miller has for many years taught a course on propaganda in the Department of Media, Culture and Communication, in which he discusses current events and historical trends in the light of their propagandist purposes. This semester, he states he had encouraged students to research the scientific utility of masks.

One student took public issue with Miller's mask comments and launched a Twitter campaign against him, stating that he was "spouting dangerous rhetoric that serves to cultivate fear and confusion during a pandemic" and called for his firing.

I hope @nyuniversity, @nyusteinhardt, and @mccNYU agree that this professor should not be trusted with educating and advising students, and I hope they take immediate steps to relieve him of these duties. 8/

– Julia Jackson (@julia_jacks) [September 21, 2020](#)

First, his department chair, Rodney Benson, tweeted his thanks, saying "We as a department have made this a priority, and are discussing next steps."

At that point, the University disseminated a cautionary email to Miller's students, which he states was sent out prior to any conference or consultation as to the veracity of Jackson's claims. According to Miller, Department Chair Benson then pressured him to cancel the propaganda course for next semester.

A month later, [the letter from Miller's colleagues](#), condemning Miller's actions, was sent to Dean Jack Knott and to Provost Katherine Fleming.

And Miller became the subject of a review board hearing.

Professor Miller's political activities and viewpoints have sparked prior attention from NYU. An effort spearheaded by Miller to stop a physical expansion by NYU ended up in court, several years ago. He is also a named plaintiff in a class action suit concerning NYU's mismanagement of the faculty's retirement plans.

Earlier this year, Miller was called in to the Office of Equal Opportunity to explain some comments he had made in articles concerning transgender politics, including [this one](#). Miller

has unequivocally stated that he bears no animus towards transgender individuals and that his comments reflected concerns that the transgender movement had eugenics implications. He was quickly exonerated by the OEO concerning these statements.

Interestingly, the letter from the NYU colleagues to the University tries to resurrect these concerns and states that Miller has engaged in “direct mockery and ridicule of trans individuals” as well as “discrimination” and that he has created “an unsafe learning environment.” While paradoxically stating their support for academic freedom, the signers of this letter, all of whom are academics “...call on Steinhardt and University leadership to publicly support the NYU community and undertake an expedited review, as per the Faculty Handbook and Title IV, of Professor Miller’s intimidation tactics, abuses of authority, aggressions and microaggressions, and explicit hate speech, none of which are excused by academic freedom and First Amendment protections.” Curiously, the letter gives no concrete examples to support these allegations.

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