

June 13, 2021

Statement in Support of ODU Survivors of Sexual Misconduct, Assault, and Harassment

As members of the Old Dominion University community, we write to express our alarm about ODU's handling of sexual assault and harassment allegations, especially its statement attacking the credibility of our colleague, Dr. Bridget Anderson. We, as faculty, students, and staff, wish the public to know that the official statement released by ODU does not represent the beliefs of the community. We therefore also write to express our support of Dr. Anderson and our other students and colleagues who have been failed by the institution in its response to sexual violence.

On June 10, 2021, The Virginian Pilot published a story about Blake Bailey (see link to article at bottom), a nationally disgraced former creative writing professor, and his predatory behavior at Old Dominion. In the response to the investigation, John M. Bredehoft from the firm Kaufman & Canoles, P.C. wrote ODU's official response to Dr. Anderson's and the other women's stories. We address the issues of ODU's current official statement in response to the allegations, below:

*The statement describes an incident of sexual assault as "consensual" and even "sought-after" by Dr. Anderson. The statement does not provide any evidence to how it can definitively claim the encounter was consensual or sought after. This description places the blame on Dr. Anderson for the assault and calls her credibility into question by suggesting that she is the sexual aggressor in the story. The statement fully deploys the "she-asked-for-it" trope of victim blaming; it is difficult to imagine how anyone at ODU will feel comfortable coming forward in the future.

*In the article, Elizabeth Argento explains how Bailey touched her, flirted with her, probed her for details on her sex life, and sat suggestively in a private meeting in his office. The statement dismisses Ms. Argento's claims as "denigrat[ing] and delimit[ing] the critical social problem of sexual abuse." Ms. Argento's story does not denigrate or delimit sexual abuse; rather, it shines light on how faculty can abuse their power to groom students for sexual predation in both subtle and overt ways. The statement suggests that crossing boundaries physically and professionally with graduate students is permissible as long as there is no concrete assault or recorded sexually explicit correspondence, which is a problematic and dangerous stance to take.

*The statement describes Dr. Anderson, a woman with a minoritized accent, as "complaining loudly and at length on a number of topics." We are aghast that the university would so casually frame Dr. Anderson as a nagging woman, a stereotype used again and again to dismiss women who bravely come forward with legitimate complaints of misconduct.

*The statement casts doubt on Dr. Anderson's account by noting that the assault occurred years ago, stating, "it beggars belief that an attempted rape of a faculty member by another faculty member would remain unreported for more than half a decade." First, Dr. Anderson did report the assault to her department chair in Spring 2010, just days after the assault occurred. Second, this sentence beggars belief that qualified legal professionals could write such a sentence in 2021. National stories about serial abusers like Jerry Sandusky, Bill Cosby, Harvey Weinstein, the Catholic Archdiocese of Boston have forced us to recognize that powerful men are capable of sexual violence and that institutions are capable of silencing survivors for years and even decades to protect the abusers. Time lapsed between the assault and the public reckoning is not an indication of its believability. The statement authors' lack of understanding of this is an additional indication of their obtuseness and the ineptitude of legal dissimulation in light of the gravity of sexual assault and victim-blaming.

*The statement identifies other faculty members with PhDs using their title (Dean Wilson) or honorific (Dr. Heller) while neglecting to use the honorific Dr. for Dr. Anderson, a celebrated scholar and teacher. We believe victims of sexual assault regardless of their educational achievements or titles. That said, we see the decision to use titles for other members of the department and not Dr. Anderson as a disrespectful and cheap attempt to further undercut Dr. Anderson's credibility.

In response to several women's accusations of sexual misconduct, the statement went out of its way to discredit and even insult the women, using centuries-old tropes designed to silence women. We imagine that ODU community members, especially those in more vulnerable positions, such as graduate assistants, students, adjunct instructors, non-tenure-track faculty, and staff, will be even more reluctant to report other instances of sexual misconduct at ODU. Still, despite the attacks on the credibility and character of our friends and colleagues and fear of retaliation from our institution, we refuse to be silent.

We the undersigned are in solidarity with Bridget Anderson, Liz Argento, Tara Burke, Valerie Clark, and the unnamed women in the investigation. We believe survivors.

We want to work at an institution that prioritizes safety, honors survivor stories, and investigates accusations thoroughly and ethically. Therefore, we demand that ODU leadership:

1. issue an apology to Dr. Anderson, Liz Argento, and the unnamed women who were disparaged by ODU's official statement published in the Virginian Pilot on June 10, 2021
2. terminate the university's partnership with the firm Kaufman & Canoles, P.C. and seek legal counsel that better exemplifies the values of ODU's mission statement
3. investigate accusations against Bailey thoroughly and with the utmost care and support for the survivors
4. propose a detailed plan of action written with the input of women and other gender minorities at every rank at ODU on how to make amends to past victims of sexual misconduct at ODU and to ensure the support of future victims who come forward.

(If you would like to add your name to the letter, please include whatever information you feel comfortable including below. Given the blatant disregard for the lived experiences, safety, and reputations of ODU faculty, staff, and students, we understand that not all of our colleagues feel safe adding their names to this letter even though they fully support it. We will update the signatures at the end of each day.)

Link to article: <https://www.pilotonline.com/news/vp-nw-bailey-odu-20210610-cuzrop4ibrh55daovoqk43rluy-htmlstory.html>

Signed,

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