

NEWS

MU prof has been denied due process

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We, all colleagues and friends of Professor Greg Engel of the University of Missouri, provide this response to the Jan. 9 editorial authored by Hank Waters titled “Tenure: The strange case of Greg Engel.” We feel compelled to respond because we are concerned that Waters has expressed opinions about Engel’s personality and professional conduct without knowing the full situation. We do agree that the actions taken by Engel’s department chair are unusual, even unprecedented.

As previously reported in the Tribune, Engel secured a \$2 million grant from the U.S. Office of Naval Research with the assistance of Sen. Kit Bond’s office. Engel developed an extremely innovative design for an electromagnetic launcher. The original idea goes back to French inventor Louis Octave Fauchon-Villeplee, who obtained a patent in 1919. Since that time, the Navy has spent substantial resources trying to make this launcher work, and the fact that in 2011 there is still no working device attests to the extraordinary technical difficulties. The university should be taking great pride in the fact that a member of its faculty has been recognized — and rewarded — for his innovation.

Instead, after the grant was awarded, some administrators accused Engel of mishandling the project and replaced him as principal investigator for the grant. This unprecedented action started the cascade of turmoil in the Department of Electrical and Computer Engineering (ECE). The very foundation of a university is premised on the sanctity of one’s intellectual creativity. It is inconceivable to us, knowing how much work, creative energy and risk goes into procuring a multimillion-dollar grant, that the faculty member would then mishandle a research project. Engel’s response to his removal as principal investigator was *not* insubordination, but rather a reasonable and responsible attempt to protect his intellectual property and his research, consistent with widely recognized principles of academic freedom.

Shortly after Engel publicly complained of his removal from the grant, his department chair filed a charge of faculty irresponsibility (“FI”) against him on May 10. We do not think the timing coincidental. The processing of this charge was delayed by the administration despite repeated requests by Engel that it proceed in accordance with the timelines set forth in the university’s official regulations and that no unwarranted delays occur (the relevant faculty committee selection process is starting only now). Then, on Dec. 17, faculty from the ECE Department, led by a professor who holds an administrative position in the department and reports to the chair in that capacity, filed a second FI charge. Eighteen out of 24 ECE faculty members signed this document. It seems plausible to us that the circumstances surrounding the allegations in these two charges of faculty irresponsibility might have been magnified by some administrators’ goal of removing Engel and thus removing attention to the capture of his research ideas and funds.

Waters wrote, “With such an outpouring from peers, the Engel case seems about as well documented as any is likely to be. In private industry, he would be gone by now. In higher education, his employment status remains in limbo.”

That statement seems to have been based mainly on this second charge. The fact, however, is that the case is not well documented at all, and no educational institution (and we would like to think private industry, too) of any merit would act on the basis of allegations alone to terminate the appointment of a long-serving (and distinguished) member of its faculty. First, this second FI charge contains errors of fact, one noted by the Tribune article, which apparently none of the 18 signatories verified for accuracy. The credibility of all the charges, therefore, is suspect on this basis alone. We remain firmly of the view that the university has the responsibility to handle the charges through full and fair adherence to the applicable processes, both in letter and spirit, before reaching any conclusions.

“Such an outpouring from peers,” who signed the FI charge under these circumstances, should be viewed with a healthy degree of skepticism, and it can be no basis for any action. Only the facts should count, and a careful, thoughtful and balanced assessment is essential in a hearing of record before a committee of faculty peers who have had no prior involvement in the case. Second, we wish to emphasize that Engel was awarded a prestigious professorship by the College of Engineering in 2004, and he has held it since then. As recently as Aug. 11, 2008, the dean of the College of Engineering said to Engel, “It is my pleasure to inform you that you will continue to receive a professorship for the 2008-2009 academic year in recognition of your professional accomplishments.... This professorship, besides certainly being an honor, has an associated ... annual salary augmentation. Professorship appointments are for a period of three years.” Further, in the past, the annual evaluations of Professor Engel have been consistently positive in all areas, including the one for calendar year 2009. As recently as March 2010, Engel was nominated by his department chair for a distinguished teaching award. Clearly this is not the record of a man who has a belligerent, irritating personality and who persistently goes about mistreating students and alienating faculty colleagues and therefore should be dismissed.

Finally, we want to comment on the use of resources. First, as a result of the removal of Engel as principal investigator, we are no longer sure whether the \$2 million will, in fact, be awarded to the university and, if awarded, whether the grant will elicit the best results the university is capable of providing. We are concerned, however, that without Engel’s leadership of the project, the results provided might fail to nurture and build upon our strengths as a great university. Second, the burden is on those who have filed these charges to prove them; it is a heavy burden. The process will consume precious university resources at a time when such resources are already limited. Though we disagree with the editorial, we do agree that the case is indeed strange, and, in fact, is getting stranger by the day. The strange case of Professor Engel should be resolved quickly, transparently, fairly and efficiently. The academic reputations of Professor Engel and this great institution depend on it.

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