

UMKC settles sexual harassment suit for \$1.1 million

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Megan Pinkston-Camp et al. v. UMKC (Warning: Content may offend some readers)

The work environment at a laboratory in UMKC's psychology department was so sexually charged that at least five women left in recent years after nothing was done about it.

Now the University of Missouri-Kansas City has done something, agreeing to pay \$1.1 million to two of those women to settle an explosive lawsuit.

According to the suit, the two psychology professors who headed the lab — C. Keith Haddock and Walker S. Carlos Poston II — created a hostile environment by seeking sexual favors, circulating torture videos and pornography, and physically intimidating female lab students and employees.

But even though the university has agreed to pay what may be the largest amount it has ever shelled out in a sexual harassment case, the two men remain in charge of the lab, although it has been moved from UMKC's psychology department to its medical school.

In fact, not long after the men moved from the psychology department to the medical school in late 2005, they were promoted from associate professors to full professors and given raises — from \$76,707 to \$101,707 in Poston's case and from \$75,876 to \$93,376 in Haddock's case.

In a written statement to *The Kansas City Star*, UMKC said that “the charge of sexual harassment is serious and the University of Missouri-Kansas City remains committed to due process in this matter. In our commitment to providing an appropriate environment, we are re-examining all information that was revealed during the litigation to determine if further action is needed.”

UMKC didn't elaborate on what further action it might take.

“As a matter of procedure,” it said, “UMKC does not comment on litigation.”

The school, however, has expressly denied liability in the case.

The lawsuit was filed a year ago in Jackson County Circuit Court by Linda S. Garavalia, an associate professor in the psychology department, and Megan

Pinkston-Camp, a one-time doctoral student in the department who has since left and now lives in Maryland.

In often graphic terms, the suit described an environment at the lab, then known as the Health Research Group, in which women were groped, fondled, subjected to explicit sexual comments and sexual advances, and generally made to understand that they needed to go along with the professors' behavior if they wanted to advance their careers.

"These were very smart, very educated women," said Kansas City attorney Tammy Horn, who, with her partner Carrie Brous, represented Garavalia and Pinkston-Camp. "They were physically scared and they were scared about their careers. And they had no idea where to go for help."

Haddock, who has a doctorate in clinical psychology from the University of Memphis, and Poston, who has a doctorate in counseling psychology from the University of California-Santa Barbara, work mainly in the areas of obesity epidemiology and tobacco control. Neither returned calls seeking comment.

Haddock was chairman and Poston was associate chairman of UMKC's psychology department before they rotated out in mid-2004. In late 2005, after the plaintiffs complained about their behavior, the men, at their request, were transferred to the medical school, where they were offered tenured faculty positions in the department of informatic medicine.

Both are large revenue generators for the university, mainly in the form of government grants, according to deposition testimony in the case.

The story of Garavalia's and Pinkston-Camp's experiences at the Health Research Group appears to have been as much about their inability to obtain redress from the university as about the inappropriate behavior that took place in the lab.

"Dr. Garavalia watched as multiple women felt they had no choice but to abandon their research efforts, dissertations, theses, grant opportunities, etc. to escape the sexually hostile environment created by Haddock and Poston," Horn said.

In deposition testimony, the current head of UMKC's psychology department, Diane Filion, said that she went to six different people and an outside lawyer seeking help for the women. Eventually, Pinkston-Camp was directed to the head of UMKC's Affirmative Action Office, Darlene Scott-Scurry, who conducted an investigation that some psychology faculty members later called insufficiently thorough.

Scott-Scurry never interviewed Garavalia, for example, or any other member of the psychology faculty besides Haddock and Poston. She spoke to only 11 of the 18 people who Pinkston-Camp told her were familiar with the situation in the lab.

After finishing her investigation, Scott-Scurry wrote to Haddock and Poston that “testimony revealed that certain behaviors were occurring in the laboratory that had no place in a university environment.” But she concluded that there was “insufficient evidence” of a sexually hostile environment.

Scott-Scurry has since left UMKC and taken a similar position at the University of Virginia. She did not respond to requests for comment.

At least one psychology department member, associate professor Kathy Goggin, was alarmed enough by the harassment allegations to inform the Missouri State Committee of Psychologists — the state agency responsible for overseeing the practice of psychology in Missouri — of the complaints.

“I became involved when asked to assist students and junior faculty to leave Drs. Haddock and Poston’s laboratory following what they perceived to be inappropriate behavior while under Drs. Haddock and Poston’s supervision,” she wrote the committee.

Goggin went on to say that she had “no personal knowledge of the most serious of these complaints” and was therefore not filing a formal complaint. But she said she expected a formal complaint to be filed by the women.

Goggin could not be reached for comment.

Pinkston-Camp, who worked at the lab from August 2003 to June 2005, acknowledged that she eventually submitted to Poston’s advances and had physical contact with him, though not sexual intercourse, on three occasions. But in an occasionally emotional telephone interview last week, she said she felt obliged to do so because of his power to make or break her career.

“He was my supervisor,” she said. “He was the one I depended on for my research career, for everything.”

The last straw, she said, came when Poston scheduled a conference trip for the two of them in May 2005 and booked adjoining rooms at the conference hotel before, during and after the conference.

She said she remained at the lab for a while longer because she didn’t know where to turn and was too scared for her physical safety to leave.

“They talked all the time about killing people, about hurting people, about how you look sexually, about their sexual preferences,” Pinkston-Camp said. “They’d bring up porn images on the computer screen to share with you.”

Pinkston-Camp and Garavalia said that they were subjected to choke holds by the professors, supposedly in “good fun,” and that the men circulated torture videos showing animals being dismembered.

Horn and Brous, the women’s attorneys, said that Haddock and Poston had created a “cult environment” in which they used their power and threats of violence to control and dominate women in the lab.

The cult, as Garavalia and Pinkston-Camp described it in the suit, extended to two other members of the lab — both of them women — who were involved in consensual relationships with Haddock and allegedly received special treatment as a result.

Garavalia, who worked in the lab from January 2004 to February 2005 and recently received the dean’s outstanding teaching award, said she was never overtly propositioned by Haddock or Poston.

But she said she was told by them that she needed to be more of a “team player” and saw them kissing and massaging other women in the lab, grabbing women from behind in choke holds, and referring to female students as “sluts.”

“There was a lot of pressure to conform,” she said. “ ... There were no demands at first. And then slowly things escalated and there were these expectations.”

In sworn statements provided in the lawsuit, three other female students — their names were redacted for privacy reasons — backed up Garavalia’s and Pinkston-Camp’s allegations, describing an environment rife with graphic sexual banter and intimidating behavior.

“I heard Dr. Haddock say that he would kill someone if he needed to, he knew how to take care of killing people and he knew people who could kill people,” one of the women said in her sworn statement.

“I saw a video on Dr. Haddock’s computer of a fight between at least two people and one of the fighter’s eyeballs was hanging out of his head. Dr. Haddock was calling other lab employees to view the violent video.”

Garavalia and Pinkston-Camp said they repeatedly tried to bring the situation at the lab to the university’s attention. But they said they either didn’t know where to turn or ran into bureaucratic obstacles.

Filion, the psychology department head who tried to help the women, testified that she didn't know the university had an Equal Opportunity/Affirmative Action Office.

It was only last year that University of Missouri administrators got around to announcing a policy prohibiting "amorous relationships" between university employees and students or between supervisors and subordinates. Administrators said the policy was needed to maintain a professional atmosphere on the campuses.

The settlements with Pinkston-Camp and Garavalia call for the university to pay each woman \$82,107 in lost wages and \$246,322 in damages for emotional distress. Their attorneys are to get \$443,141.

Meanwhile, Haddock and Poston remain in charge of the lab. In fact, after they were interviewed by Scott-Scurry, the two were allowed to submit their own plan to ensure that sexual harassment didn't occur in the lab.

"What's sad to this day is that if someone has a sexual harassment complaint, I'd have to tell them, 'You'd better call (my attorneys) Tammy and Carrie,' because I don't know what to tell them," Garavalia said.