



JAVIER TAPIA

v.

MICHAEL RAO, NOAH SIMBLIST & SHAWN BRIXEY

An art professor stoked outrage when he called security on his black colleague. Now, he's suing school officials.

FADEL ALLASSAN
News Editor

A VCU ARTS PROFESSOR WHO called security on a black colleague in October is suing university officials, including President Michael Rao, claiming they have silenced him despite having been cleared of wrongdoing by an internal investigation.

Painting and printmaking professor Javier Tapia was placed on administrative leave less than a month after he called security on Caitlin Cherry, who teaches in the same department. Since then, he has not been allowed any contact with university employees or students, according to a federal complaint filed in December.

The lawsuit states the university is denying Tapia's right to free speech without explanation with a ban that is "breathhtaking in its scope."

In addition to being prohibited from talking to students, the lawsuit says Tapia cannot post comments on social media about President Donald Trump, an exhibition at a Richmond museum, a statement by the Pope, South American politics or anything related to people affiliated with VCU.

"The order hangs like a sword of Damocles over Tapia's First Amendment freedoms," the lawsuit states.

Cherry filed a racial discrimination complaint on the day of the incident. The lawsuit states investigators from Equity and Access Services interviewed witnesses, reviewed documents and visited the site of the incident from Oct. 29 to Nov. 14. While the university didn't publicly share the findings of the investigation, the lawsuit says it did not find evidence Tapia had called security because of Cherry's race. Tapia and Cherry were both told the findings of the investigation.

On Nov. 19, the university put Tapia on administrative leave. It was during this time, the lawsuit states, he had the ban placed on him.

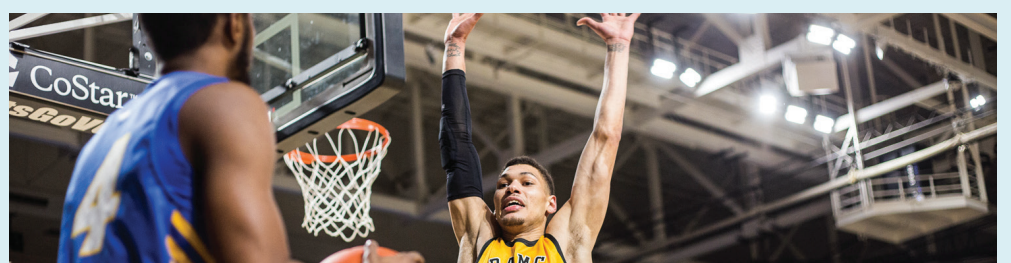
Two of Tapia's classes are now displayed in VCU's course selection system, indicating he may return to teaching in August. Several students in the art department have shared a social media graphic telling students to boycott the classes.

See **LAWSUIT** on page 3

The end of an era

Michael Gilmore looks back on VCU career

Story on page 5



Redshirt-senior Michael Gilmore appeared in all 33 games this season. Photo by Erin Edgerton

LAWUIT

Controversial arts professor could return in fall semester

Continued from front page

Shawn Brixey, the dean of the arts school, and Noah Simblist, chair of the painting and printmaking department, are named as defendants in the lawsuit. A VCUarts spokesperson confirmed Tapia is still employed by the university, but declined further comment.

The fallout from the incident and ensuing lawsuit has shaken the painting and printmaking department, one of the most reputable at VCU. In November, nearly the entire painting and printmaking faculty signed a letter supporting Cherry and stating Tapia had acted in a prejudiced manner.

"It's kind of hard not to be involved in the sense that I am in this department," said senior Randi Behan. "I have not taken actual action, but I have been around all of it."

Many of the department's professors discussed the events in their classrooms and consoled students who felt Tapia's presence produced a toxic environment.

"Even though the investigation said that he did not do anything wrong, the disruption that it caused when it happened — there were students crying," said Luis Vasquez La Roche, a first-year graduate student. "There were students that didn't want to come back, and even his presence in the hallway used to disturb other classes."

Now, students are bracing themselves for Tapia's imminent return. Wansu Kang, a senior who has taken Tapia's class, said she never saw signs that he was racist. Despite this, Kang said, he should not return.

"I don't know why he is coming back here," Kang said. "I just feel like if he is going to come back, he is going to make such unwelcoming environment and awkward feeling."

Some other students said Tapia has showed signs of micro-aggressive behavior in the past. The latest incident has compounded to what students described as the professor's reputation of being insensitive and out of touch.

“

How are we going to tell students of color, how are we gonna tell trans students, how are we gonna tell queer students that they have to take his course to graduate?"

Luis Vasquez La Roche,
a first-year graduate student

"How are we going to tell students of color, how are we gonna tell trans students, how are we gonna tell queer students that they have to take his course to graduate?" Vasquez La Roche said. "This person who doesn't think about their subjectivity whatsoever."

Tapia has been a professor in the Department of Painting and Printmaking since 1988 and was awarded tenure in 1996. The lawsuit states that Tapia "loves his career as an artist and educator and has no intention to retire."

"It has affected everyone just to know that he's coming back," Vasquez La Roche said. "I've seen grads and undergrads crying."

Tapia could not be reached for comment. Cherry, who is named "Professor X" in the lawsuit, was eating breakfast in a room reserved for faculty and graduate students on Oct. 25 when Tapia entered the room. While the lawsuit says the two greeted each other when Tapia entered, Cherry told The Commonwealth Times in November that Tapia did not respond to her greeting. Ten minutes later, a school security officer entered the room and asked Cherry to see her identification.

Cherry said she believed Tapia had called security on her because she is black. The lawsuit says Tapia called security because he thought she was a student.

Cherry declined to comment. The event prompted outrage among students and an apology from the arts department in an email to students. It came amid a string of instances of white people calling authorities on black people doing ordinary activities, like holding a barbecue in a public park. Many of the incidents have gone viral on social media.

Professor receives \$1.4 million grant for research on explosions

NAOMI GHAHRAI
Contributing Writer

The Department of Defense awarded \$1.4 million to a VCU professor to expand her research on bombs — more specifically, the processes that start the chain reaction leading to detonation.

Using laser beams, chemistry professor Katharine Moore Tibbetts and her team of graduate students are looking at how bonds break before an explosive reaction happens. In February, they published a research article in the *Journal of Physical Chemistry* on the bond-breaking of 2-Nitrotoluene — a simpler version of TNT, which is an explosive molecule known as trinitrotoluene.

To capture the initial processes of the bond-breaking in the femtosecond, which is a quadrillionth of a second, scale, Tibbetts created a "camera" with two lasers. The molecule is shot with laser one, which is the start of the frame. Laser two — which represents the end of the frame — is then shot at the molecule. Tibbetts controls the time delay between laser one and two, allowing her to deduce what happened to the molecule in that small snapshot of time.

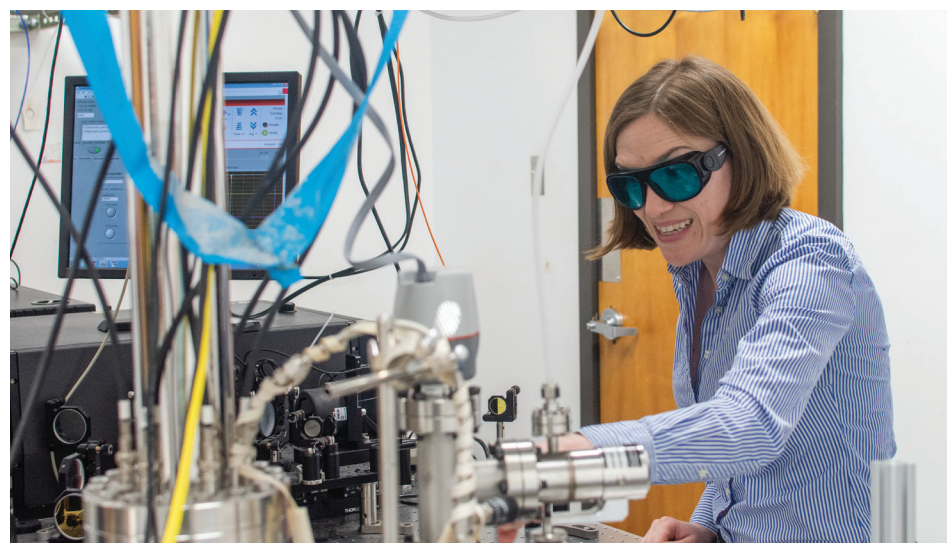
Research on explosives in computational chemistry — a branch of chemistry that uses computer simulation to solve chemical problems — has predicted which chemical bond in an explosive molecule will break and the amount of energy needed to break that bond. Moreover, many studies demonstrate "how explosives explode" or "what makes a good explosive," but there is limited research on the very

first processes of explosions, which are essential to understanding the start of the chain reaction leading to detonation.

Compared to other recent studies, Tibbetts uses laser pulses that are 10 times faster, allowing her to observe the moment before the chemical bonds break.

Tibbetts' received \$1 million of the total grant money from the Army Research Office Early Career Award for Scientists and Engineers. Another \$335,000 came from the Defense University Research Instrumentation Program. Tibbetts said she plans to buy new equipment with the money.

"Currently, everything we are doing in our experiment is in the gas phase. This grant will help us work on other compounds that cannot evaporate," said Derrick Ampadu-Boateng, a fourth-year chemistry graduate student working in Tibbetts' laboratory.



Katherine Moore Tibbetts is a professor in the chemistry department.
Photo by Raelyn Fines

VCU programs ranked nationally

MARY MCLEAN
Contributing Writer

VCU has 19 graduate programs ranked in the top 50 in the country, according to the latest rankings by U.S. News & World Report. Three of those programs rose in the rankings from last year.

VCU's graduate sculpture program placed at No. 1, above Yale University and the Maryland Institute College of Art. The School of Education rose six spots to No. 20, the largest increase of any school in the top 50. The School of Social Work and the Wilder School of Government and Public Affairs each climbed five spots to No. 25 and No. 39, respectively.

The graduate program for Nurse Anesthesia was No. 1, while fine arts placed at No. 2. VCU was ranked 157th among national universities, tied with seven other schools, including Oklahoma State University and the University of Rhode Island.

A full list of VCU's graduate school rankings is available at U.S. News & World Report.

STUDENTS ENROLLED

31,076

STUDENT-FACULTY RATIO

18:1

FULL-TIME FACULTY

2,501

ALUMNI

193,724

VCU GRADUATE SCHOOLS AND PROGRAMS RANKED IN TOP 50

- 1st: Fine Arts, Sculpture
- 1st: Nurse Anesthesia
- 2nd: Fine Arts
- 3rd: Education, Online
- 3rd: Fine Arts, Glass
- 4th: Rehabilitation Counseling
- 5th: Health Care Management
- 7th: Fine Arts, Graphic Design
- 7th: Fine Arts, Painting/Drawing
- 9th: Fine Arts, Ceramics
- 10th: Fine Arts, Printmaking
- 17th: Occupational Therapy
- 17th: Pharmacy
- 20th: Best Education Schools
- 20th: Nuclear Engineering
- 20th: Physical Therapy
- 25th: Social Work
- 39th: Public Affairs
- 44th: Best Nursing Schools, Doctor of Nursing Practice
- 48th: Engineering, Online