

LOCAL / L.A. Now

# UCLA community protests a professor's punishment for sex harassment: \$3,000 fine and a semester off



Students and other members of the UCLA community gather on the Westwood campus to protest the university's handling of sexual harassment complaints made against history professor Gabriel Piterberg.

(Luis Sinco / Los Angeles Times)



By **Teresa Watanabe** · Contact Reporter

MARCH 2, 2016, 12:49 PM

**U**CLA students, faculty and alumni are escalating their complaints against the university over its decision to allow a prominent history professor accused of sexual harassment to return to campus with what they regard as inadequate sanctions.

A rally is scheduled Wednesday to protest the decision involving [Gabriel Piterberg](#), a Mideast specialist who joined the UCLA faculty in 1999. Two female graduate students have accused Piterberg of

repeatedly harassing them over many years by making sexual comments, pressing himself against their bodies and forcing his tongue into their mouths.

The students, Nefertiti Takla and Kristen Glasgow, have [filed](#) a federal lawsuit against the UC regents for failing to take sufficient action regarding their complaints.

UCLA launched an internal investigation and quietly settled with Piterberg in 2014. But the sanctions were not revealed to faculty members until January, more than a year later.

Piterberg paid a \$3,000 fine, was suspended without pay for one quarter and attended sexual harassment training. He is barred for three years from holding one-on-one meetings in his office unless the door is open and the meeting takes place between 9 a.m. and 5 p.m., according to terms of the settlement provided by the women's attorney.

The sanctions also bar Piterberg from engaging in "romantic" or "inappropriate" relationships with students, which already are prohibited. Any future allegations will be reviewed in an expedited disciplinary process, according to the settlement.

The lawsuit filed by the two women says Pamela Thomason, UCLA's former Title IX coordinator, told Glasgow that Piterberg had admitted to the "basic facts" but denied his actions were coercive. However, UCLA has not provided details about the type of conduct the professor is said to have admitted.

Piterberg did not respond to requests for comment. He is on sabbatical in Europe and is scheduled to return to campus in July.

The university's settlement with Piterberg has been sharply criticized by Takla and Glasgow, as well as by other graduate students, history department faculty and UCLA alumni now teaching at other universities. Some of these critics pointed out that Piterberg took his suspension in the spring of 2015 while he served as a fellow at the European University Institute in Italy — a move that lessened the impact of the sanctions.

Many of his colleagues said Piterberg's return to Westwood this summer would create a dysfunctional work environment. In a letter to UCLA Chancellor Gene Block and other campus officials, 28 history faculty members said that Piterberg's return would make students feel unsafe and that the restrictions on his conduct would increase their workloads.

"His actions were not only deeply injurious to the specific parties involved, but have poisoned the academic community," according to the Feb. 18 letter. "Piterberg's public presence on campus will signal that an effective climate of tolerance for harassment persists at UCLA."

In a separate protest letter, more than 65 graduate students criticized the secrecy surrounding the case and said Piterberg had lost the trust and confidence of faculty, students and staff.

“By allowing him to return ... the administration is perpetuating the unsafe and hostile climate of our department,” that letter said.

Born in Argentina and raised in Israel, Piterberg is an expert on the history of the Ottoman Empire and the Mediterranean in the early modern period. He also teaches about colonialism, Zionism, Israel and Palestine and served as director of the Center for Middle Eastern Studies until he was removed from the post as part of his sanctions.

UCLA declined to comment on the growing campus backlash related to Piterberg. But spokesman Ricardo Vazquez said administrators have taken several steps to strengthen protections for students, including hiring a new Title IX coordinator and more staff to handle complaints of sexual assault and other bias; establishing a new office of equity, diversity and inclusion; and bringing in a confidential advocate to support students who have experienced sexual violence or harassment.

“The university vigorously disputes allegations made in the lawsuit and will respond in due course,” Vazquez said in a statement.

Takla and Glasgow also declined to comment on the protests. But their attorney, Michael Porcello, said the women were gratified by the support.

The best way to resolve the situation is for the university to cut its ties to the professor, Porcello said.

"Piterberg's continued presence on campus poses an ongoing threat to those students and faculty given past complaints of harassment against him by members of the UCLA community," he said.

**[Join the conversation on Facebook >>](#)**

**For more education news, follow me [@TeresaWatanabe](#).**

## **MORE FROM EDUCATION**

**[Three norovirus cases confirmed at UC Berkeley](#)**

**[How a security upgrade makes it harder to apply for financial aid this year](#)**

**[Indio area high school students asked to stop wearing anti-gay symbols 'for now'](#)**

**This article is related to:** [Colleges and Universities](#), [Education](#), [Sexual Misconduct](#), [UCLA](#)