

The Next Battle in Higher Ed May Strike at Its Soul: Scholarship

Cases involving Stanford, Harvard and M.I.T. are fueling skepticism over the thoroughness of research — even from the academic world's biggest stars.



By Anemona Hartocollis

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Marc Tessier-Lavigne, president of Stanford, resigned in August after an investigation found serious flaws in studies he had supervised going back decades.

Claudine Gay, president of Harvard, resigned as the new year dawned, under mounting accusations of plagiarism going back to her graduate student days.

Then Neri Oxman, a former star professor at M.I.T., was accused of plagiarizing from Wikipedia, among other sources, in her dissertation. Her husband, the hedge-fund billionaire Bill Ackman, was one of Dr. Gay's most dogged critics. And he has vowed to scour the records of M.I.T.'s faculty, and its president, Sally Kornbluth, for plagiarism.

The attacks on the integrity of higher education have come fast and furious over the last few years. The federal Varsity Blues investigation, in which wealthy parents were accused of using bribery and fraud to secure spots for their children in résumé-building colleges, launched a debate over merit and the admissions game. The affirmative action lawsuit against Harvard exposed how Asian American students must perform at a higher standard to win entry. And the protests over the Israel-Hamas war opened administrators to charges that they tolerated antisemitism on their campuses.

Now the focus has moved into what may be the very soul of higher education: scholarship.



Marc Tessier-Lavigne, the former president of Stanford University. Carolyn Fong for The New York Times

There are differences among the cases — Dr. Tessier-Lavigne and Dr. Gay were the faces of their institutions, while Dr. Oxman is a former faculty member, who was well known in her field of computational design. Defenders of Dr. Gay and Dr. Oxman say that their lifting of words is minor, and that they were not accused of stealing ideas. And unlike Dr. Tessier-Lavigne, they have not had to retract any papers.

But the recent controversies have helped fuel the skepticism that some scholarship is not as rigorous as it purports to be.

“It does strike me that this is a problem of the universities’ own making,” said Ivan Oransky, co-founder of Retraction Watch, which keeps a database of retracted papers now numbering more than 46,000.

“They have tried every which way to avoid acknowledging just how common misconduct is in academia, and what that does is give ammunition to sometimes — let’s face it — bad-faith actors who want to undermine confidence or undermine the reputation of an institution,” Dr. Oransky said.

There is probably more to come. A congressional committee has announced that it would investigate a “hostile takeover” of higher education by “political activists, woke faculty and partisan administrators.”

A cottage industry of checking research papers had already sprung up in the last two decades, including Retraction Watch, the Center for Open Science and Data Colada, a blog dedicated to unmasking research based on bad data.

The number of retracted research papers has grown dramatically over time, to more than 10,000 retractions internationally in 2023, an annual record, according to the journal *Nature*, up from about 400 papers in 2010, when Retraction Watch began its work, Dr. Oransky said.

This may be in part because the scrutiny has intensified, he said. *Nature* also blamed the rise of paper-writing mills.

“What’s different this time is the levels at which this seems to be striking — Harvard and Stanford,” Dr. Oransky said. “These are cataclysmic events.”

Dr. Gay, a professor of government and African and African American studies, asked for a handful of corrections in citation and quotation in her dissertation and scholarly papers. But she stood by her work, and an outside panel cleared her of research misconduct.

A review panel found that Dr. Tessier-Lavigne, a neuroscientist, had not personally engaged in or known about data manipulation but that “there may have been opportunities to improve laboratory oversight and management.” He agreed to retract three papers and correct two more.

Dr. Oxman, a celebrated architect and designer, apologized on social media for some lapses in attribution in her dissertation.

Not everyone thinks academia is rife with deception.

Stephen Voss, an associate professor of political science at the University of Kentucky, said he was dismayed that in their attempts to defend Dr. Gay, some academics had suggested that plagiarism was commonplace within their ranks.

“I viewed some of these defenses of Claudine as being false confessions to misbehavior that actually is not taking place at the level her defenders wanted to suggest,” Dr. Voss said. “The ‘it goes on all the time’ argument.”

Dr. Gay is accused of copying, with only light paraphrasing, two passages from Dr. Voss’s work in her dissertation.

Dr. Voss said he was not troubled by it, since he had been her teaching fellow at Harvard, helping to teach her quantitative analysis, and later her colleague in the same lab. “It would have been quite natural for her to borrow ideas from me,” he said. “The Claudine Gay story is just going to force everybody to be a little more careful about citations.”

The internet and software like Turnitin, which targets academic publishing and research, may make it easier to detect plagiarism. And plagiarism watchers are waiting to see what the future of artificial intelligence will bring — more plagiarism or better detection?

But until now, that software has been used more against students than against professors and administrators.

Many scholars are worried that attacks on research will be used by politicians, donors and even other scholars as a pretext to go after their ideological enemies.

“A broad suspicion toward intellectuals and academics is a rich vein in American culture, and recent events have supported it,” Dr. Voss said.

Mr. Ackman, head of the hedge fund Pershing Square Capital Management, was a vocal critic of Dr. Gay’s leadership at Harvard, from her handling of antisemitism on campus to her support for diversity, equity and inclusion policies. The accusations of plagiarism against her became part of his attack.

After Dr. Gay announced that she would resign from her presidency but remain on the faculty, Mr. Ackman posted on X: “There would be nothing wrong with her staying on the faculty if she didn’t have serious plagiarism issues. Students are forced to withdraw for much less.”

Mr. Ackman declined to comment for this article.

It’s this kind of attack that concerns Jonathan Bailey, a copyright and plagiarism consultant who also runs the website Plagiarism Today. “There’s a lot of worry that the heat has been turned up and the people who are doing the evaluations don’t necessarily have academic research or journalistic integrity in mind,” he said.

Just as new accusations dribbled out against Dr. Gay until the day before she resigned, they have continued against Dr. Oxman. On Thursday, Retraction Watch posted a blog item saying that her thesis lifted about 100 words without quotation or citation from an article published in *Physics World* in 2000. The blog said it learned of the overlap from Steve Haake, a sports engineer who wrote the original article.

“I have never intentionally presented someone else’s words or ideas as my own,” Dr. Oxman said in a statement emailed through a spokesman for her husband on Friday, the day after the Retraction Watch item appeared. “In the process of writing a 330-page dissertation, I missed a couple of footnotes and some quotation marks. Had A.I. software been available in 2009, I could have avoided these errors. The mistakes are simply a function of my humanity.”

Even so, the attacks on academic integrity are sure to continue. “While President Gay’s resignation is welcome news, the problems at Harvard are much larger than one leader, and the committee’s oversight will continue,” said Representative Virginia Foxx, a North Carolina Republican, who heads the House Education and the Workforce Committee, after Dr. Gay’s resignation on Jan. 2.



Representative Virginia Foxx promises to continue her investigation into higher education. Elizabeth D. Herman for The New York Times

There was a similar crisis of confidence in universities in the 1980s, as questions were raised about plagiarism and fabricated data in scientific research, including at Harvard. Al Gore, then a Democratic representative of Tennessee, and Representative John Dingell Jr., a Michigan Democrat, among others, held oversight hearings.

Academics argued that research misconduct was rare, and politicians contended it was underreported, according to a history published by federal agencies. Many of those testifying minimized the problem or said that criminalizing scientific fraud would create a climate of fear that would impede research.

In the current dispute, Harvard responded through a defamation lawyer when The New York Post first raised accusations of plagiarism against Dr. Gay. Mr. Ackman, writing on X, has invoked lawyers and demanded that Business Insider — which first reported the plagiarism accusations against Dr. Oxman — “suspend” its stories.

“I don’t want to say history is repeating itself, but there are shades of that,” Dr. Oransky said. Neither side, he predicted, is likely to back down. “These are really high stakes.”

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