
No New Job for Sabatini

After a week of protests over news that New York University was weighing a faculty job for scholar who resigned from MIT over sexual misconduct findings, NYU and Dr. David Sabatini part ways.

By [Colleen Flaherty \(/users/colleen-flaherty\)](/users/colleen-flaherty) // May 4, 2022

Biologist Dr. David Sabatini won't be joining the faculty at New York University's Grossman School of Medicine after all.

The medical school said in a [statement \(https://twitter.com/nyugrossman/status/1521492775778369539/photo/1\)](https://twitter.com/nyugrossman/status/1521492775778369539/photo/1) Tuesday that after "careful and thorough consideration that included the perspectives of many stakeholders, both Dr. David Sabatini and NYU Grossman School of Medicine have reached the conclusion that it will not be possible for him to become a member of our faculty."

In a separate statement, Dr. Sabatini asserted that he'd withdrawn his name from consideration for an NYU post, following the "false, distorted, and preposterous allegations about me" that had "intensified in the press and on social media in the wake of reports last week that New York University Langone Health was considering hiring me."

Dr. Sabatini continued, "I understand the enormous pressure this has placed on NYU Langone Health and do not want to distract from its important mission."

Hundreds of NYU students, researchers, faculty members and alumni [walked out of their labs and offices last Wednesday \(https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2022/04/28/hundreds-protest-possible-appointment-biologist-nyu\)](https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2022/04/28/hundreds-protest-possible-appointment-biologist-nyu) after news leaked that NYU's medical school was seriously considering hiring Dr. Sabatini, even though he'd been pushed out of three concurrent academic posts—including his professorship at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology—over sexual misconduct findings.

MIT has said that Dr. Sabatini "behaved in ways incompatible with the responsibilities of faculty membership," including by engaging "in a sexual relationship with a person over whom he held a career-influencing role." Dr. Sabatini also failed to disclose the relationship or take steps to mitigate his influence over the other person's career, as MIT policy requires, his former employer said.

Dr. Sabatini denies any wrongdoing and—in an ongoing lawsuit against MIT's Whitehead Institute and his primary accuser—says he was the victim of a sham investigation driven by his jilted former lover's desire to

“destroy” him.

MIT officials first began looking into Dr. Sabatini last spring, after a general survey about the Whitehead Institute’s climate flagged issues within his lab. MIT, Whitehead and Howard Hughes Medical Institute all looked into Dr. Sabatini and came to similar conclusions about his conduct. Whitehead placed him on leave before he resigned from the institute last summer. Hughes fired him. MIT moved to revoke his tenure before he resigned from his professorship without trying to appeal this spring.

NYU’s medical school has cited Dr. Sabatini’s negative characterization of MIT’s investigation to defend its interest in him, saying it wanted to do its own vetting based on “facts and evidence.” The school said this even as the case remained a live legal issue: beyond Dr. Sabatini’s own lawsuit, his primary accuser—a former trainee—countersued him last year. She alleges that the relationship was never consensual and he’d coerced her into sex (the first time, she says, Dr. Sabatini invited her to his hotel room at a scientific meeting to talk about science but then initiated sex, and told her have sex or “get out” when she resisted).

The former trainee’s lawsuit further alleges that Dr. Sabatini’s lab was a highly sexualized place where all women knew they had to either play along or be excluded. According to the lawsuit, Dr. Sabatini asked multiple women in the lab which male colleagues they would “fuck,” encouraged women to have sex with a visiting “Catholic virgin” scientist, and told one woman he wanted to study the length of pubic hair (Dr. Sabatini does cancer research). He also allegedly excluded a devout Christian postdoctoral researcher from a lab retreat because she was “not fun” and would “ruin everything,” even as he offered to pay for a female undergraduate’s change of flight and hotel room so that she could attend one of his talks abroad (the lawsuit says she declined).

‘A Really Eye-Opening Week’

Even after the NYU walkout, the medical school continued to promote Dr. Sabatini to trainees and faculty members. In one confidential Zoom event last week that was billed as a listening session, administrators said they don’t police mentor-mentee sexual relationships and that consensual relationship policies are about protecting women from claims that their successes were built on favoritism (and not primarily about protecting mentees from sexual harassment), according to a recording of the event and accounts from those present. Administrators also suggested that NYU had hired other professors with controversial pasts. (Despite the comments about not policing relationships, NYU does have [a policy \(https://www.nyu.edu/about/policies-guidelines-compliance/policies-and-guidelines/policy-on-consensual-intimate-relationships.html\)](https://www.nyu.edu/about/policies-guidelines-compliance/policies-and-guidelines/policy-on-consensual-intimate-relationships.html), prohibiting relationships between managers and supervisors, including those between faculty members and graduate students in the same discipline or academic program.)

NYU also used a [Twitter account \(https://twitter.com/NYULHresponds\)](https://twitter.com/NYULHresponds), called NYU Langone Health Responds, created in a January—long before the news about Dr. Sabatini was leaked—exclusively to respond to the backlash against his candidacy.

One trainee who attended the Zoom meeting, who did not want to be identified by name, said, “It was a really eye-opening week for us, just knowing that there are men like this who are wildly successful in science who get away with harassing their trainees. And it’s just always been a part of the scientific community, and it will continue to be that way for a while.”

Other trainees and faculty members at the medical school described feeling a mix of relief and resentment at the news of Dr. Sabatini’s candidacy ending.

Rebecca Grande, a Ph.D. candidate in immunology, said, “There had been plans by students, brainstorming, trying to think of how we would continue to protest this hire, even if it were to occur. So it was nice to know that we wouldn’t have to do any of that.” At the same time, Grande continued, “We don’t understand why there was a push to hire him in the first place.”

Melissa Cooper, a postdoctoral and neuroscience fellow, said that the Sabatini controversy “should force us to consider the way our current student and trainee protections operate. Both while I was a collegiate athlete, and now in academia, I have repeatedly seen people that abused their power at one institution merely get passed along to another. Thankfully that wasn’t the case this time, but it very nearly was. If we keep passing offenders along, what protection do these institutions actually provide?”

Cooper said she and her colleagues are “certainly asking for more trainee involvement in recruitment” going forward—with an elected postdoc and a graduate student on each hiring committee. They’re also asking for clarification on the university’s relationship policy.

Arthur Caplan, a professor of medical ethics at NYU, declined an interview but said, “I am hugely happy with the decision not to pursue Sabatini, and I think the administration heard and was attentive to enormous faculty and student concern about considering him.”

The medical school referred questions about the case to its Tuesday statement on Dr. Sabatini, which says, “Our overreaching mission at NYU Grossman School of Medicine is advancing science and medicine to save lives. That is what compelled us to give careful reflection to hiring Dr. Sabatini after he initially reached out to us. In the course of our due diligence, we heard voices of support from many dozens of Dr. Sabatini’s colleagues, lab alumni and peers who described their first-hand experiences working with him. But we also heard clearly the deep concern from our own faculty, staff and trainees.”

The statement concludes, “Our thorough review and deliberate approach was essential for us to make an independent evaluation consistent with our own institutional priorities. We appreciate and respect the input we received from so many people in this process.”

Dr. Sabatini’s statement says, “I deeply respect NYU Langone Health’s mission and appreciate the support from individuals who took the time to learn the facts. I remain steadfast in believing that the truth will ultimately emerge and that I will eventually be vindicated and able to return to my research.”

Read more by [Colleen Flaherty \(/users/colleen-flaherty/\)](/users/colleen-flaherty/)

Copyright Inside Higher Ed | insidehighered.com
