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At College, a High Standard on Divorce

By CATRIN EINHORN
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WHEATON, Ill. — Of all the reasons a beloved professor could be leaving the college where he has taught for the last 20 years, the one for Kent Gramm's departure is peculiar: He is getting divorced, the college demands an explanation, and he refuses to give one.



Al Podgorski/Chicago Sun-Times

Kent Gramm, a professor at Wheaton College, a Christian school where divorces must comply with biblical standards.

So Dr. Gramm is packing up his office at Wheaton College, an evangelical Christian liberal arts school where everyone signs an agreement to uphold certain biblical standards of behavior, and divorce for reasons other than adultery and abandonment is grounds for firing. Rather than be fired, Dr. Gramm, a professor of English and creative writing, has resigned effective the end of this semester.

"Why are college administrators better able to judge my divorce than I am?" Dr. Gramm, who has been married for 34 years, asked in an interview. "If I had thought this was the wrong thing to do, I wouldn't have done it."

Dr. Gramm's departure has prompted hand-wringing, a petition drive by students on his behalf and deep reflection

on this peaceful campus about 20 miles west of Chicago, where visitors are welcomed by the towering pillars of the [Billy Graham](#) Center, named for the evangelist and 1943 Wheaton alumnus. Wheaton students vow not to smoke or drink on campus, and until

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2003, they had to promise not to dance. (Now they can do so, but only if it is not “immodest.”)

College officials say, and students seem to agree, that it is appropriate to require members of their voluntary religious community to adhere to Christian standards of behavior. The controversy here is over what to do when the messiness of life gets in the way.

College officials say their rules on employee divorce mirror those laid out in the Bible, sanctioning it only in cases of adultery or abandonment. It is unclear whether Dr. Gramm’s reasons for divorce would have allowed him to stay because he refuses to discuss any details. His wife, Lynelle, declined to comment.

College officials said they had made no attempt to contact Dr. Gramm’s wife. They said they typically did not contact the spouses of divorcing employees or verify the employees’ versions of events; rather, they are concerned with the emotional and moral disposition of the employees themselves.

Dr. Gramm rejects the idea that a spouse must accuse his partner of wrongdoing to be allowed to stay after a divorce. He questions why the judgment of college administrators matters more than the word of a valued, longtime employee. “God won’t fire anyone because of their marital status, politics, theology or sexual preference,” Dr. Gramm said.

“I’m accepting the policy as it applies to me because I knew it was in place and I don’t expect anyone to make any exceptions,” he said. “But in the long run I think the policy is not a good one, because in a sense it’s saying that Wheaton’s standards are higher than God’s. That’s an upside-down world.”

But college officials say because professors are models for the students, it is especially incumbent on them to abide by moral codes.

“Marriage matters to God,” said Wheaton’s provost, Stanton L. Jones. “Marriage and divorce are moral issues; they’re not simply matters of lifestyle choice.”

The conflict is not a new one. Dr. Gramm’s departure has thrown into relief a longstanding tension in religious communities like this one: When should those who break the rules be punished, and when should they be forgiven? As students grapple with these questions, they use words like “redemption” and “grace.”

“It’s a perennial issue,” said Winnifred Sullivan, director of the Law and Religion Program

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at the State University of New York at Buffalo.

“Ever since the crucifixion and Easter,” Dr. Sullivan said, “Christians have been trying to figure out how to have a Christian community.”

While Wheaton College does not keep hard numbers, Dr. Jones said, it employs dozens of divorced faculty and staff members who are allowed to join or remain at the school because the circumstances of their divorces complied with biblical standards. In his 12 years as provost, Dr. Jones recalled only one professor who was fired because of a divorce.

And in 2005, Joshua Hochschild, a professor of philosophy, lost his job at Wheaton because he converted to Catholicism.

Distressed by Dr. Gramm’s departure, some students are trying to change the divorce rule. Reid Comstock, 19, a freshman, helped start a petition drive that has gathered about 400 signatures asking for Dr. Gramm, whom he calls his favorite professor, to be reinstated.

“We’re fighting for him because he has chosen not to fight for himself,” Mr. Comstock said.

Some other students are in full support of college officials.

“There’s a trend these days to just take what our culture deems as acceptable — rampant divorce rates, living with people,” said Kevin Meehleis McClure, 20, a junior. “We have to stay committed to Scriptures.”

The current divorce rates weigh heavily on Dr. Gramm as well, prompting him, he said, to tell his students why he was leaving.

“I want them to know that God does not desert you when life suddenly gets real on you,” Dr. Gramm said. “And I want them to know that you can be a responsible, reasonable and decent person and not be able to work out a marriage with another responsible, reasonable and decent person.”

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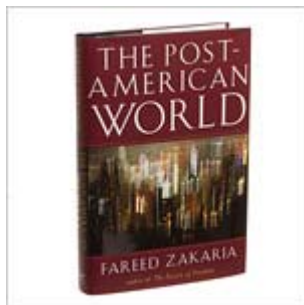
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