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About 30 students and Columbia residents marched from the Islamic Center of Central Missouri to Hill Hall on Friday to protest the possible hiring of retired military psychologist Dr. Larry C. James in connection to controversial and allegedly abusive interrogation methods at U.S. detention centers.

James worked for the U.S. military at the Guantanamo Bay and Abu Ghraib detention centers, in Cuba and Iraq, respectively. He is one of two finalist candidates to fill the position of division executive director with the MU College of Education. Dr. Matthew Burns, a researcher with the University of Minnesota, is the other candidate being considered.

Daniel Clay, the dean of the College of Education, said the search committee was aware of the allegations and will continue to interview James in the hiring process. The information provided by the individuals who came forward is appreciated and the search will continue to be open and transparent, he said. In a statement at a press conference Friday, Clay said the decision will be made in early March.

James will speak and answer questions from faculty and the public at an open forum at 3 p.m. Tuesday in the Reynolds Alumni Center.

Years of service

James served as chief psychologist at Guantanamo Bay in 2003 and director of the Joint Interrogation and Debriefing Center in 2004. From 2007 to 2008, James headed the Guantanamo Behavioral Science Consultation Team, a group of mental health professionals whose job it was to advise on and participate in the interrogations.

In 2008, James published a memoir titled "Fixing Hell: An Army Psychologist Confronts Abu Ghraib." In his book, James said he was sent by the Army "to clean up the abuses" at Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib.

James currently serves as the Dean of the School of Professional Psychology at Wright State University in Dayton, Ohio, a position he's held for five years. He was awarded a Bronze Star and the Defense Superior Service Medal during his 22-year service in the military.

So far, James has not been sanctioned for any professional or ethical misconduct by any state or court of appeals court, or any licensing board, Clay said at the press conference.

Allegations and controversy

Harvard Law School's International Human Rights Clinic filed a complaint with the State Board of Psychology of Ohio on July 7, 2010, that detailed allegations of misconduct and violations during James's time at Guantanamo Bay. The complainants alleged he breached professional ethics by violating psychologists' duties to do no harm, to protect confidential information and to obtain informed consent, according to the complaint.

James was accused of playing an "integral role in the system of abusive interrogation and detention used to exploit prisoners' mental and physical vulnerabilities, maximize their feelings of disorientation and helplessness, and render them dependent upon their interrogators." These detainees included minors in James's custody and care, according to the complaint.

The complaint reads that, "If through that hearing this Board finds that Dr. James engaged in any of the acts of misconduct alleged herein, we ask this Board to revoke permanently his license to practice psychology in the state of Ohio."

In January 2011, the board announced that it was "unable to proceed to formal action in this matter," without explaining the decision. The complainants filed a writ of mandamus in the

Franklin County, Ohio, Court of Common Pleas on April 13, 2011. They argued that the board failed in its duty to investigate and asked the court to compel the board to investigate the complaint or provide reasons for the dismissal.

James additionally holds a license to practice psychology in Louisiana, where Toledo psychologist Dr. Trudy Bond also took legal action against James on Feb. 29, 2008. Bond filed a complaint against James before the Louisiana State Board of Examiners of Psychologists, but the board decided not to investigate. Bond filed a petition for judicial review in the 19th Judicial District Court for the Parish of East Baton Rouge, but the court sided with the board. She appealed the case, but the Louisiana Court of Appeal reaffirmed the district court's decision.

In September of 2012, Bond and Dr. Steven Reisner, a psychology-ethics advisor for Physicians for Human Rights, sent an open letter to the American Psychological Association president, asking for a review of the organization's failure to investigate James.

The hiring process continues

Dean of the College of Education Daniel Clay made a statement at a press conference at 1:45 p.m. Friday, before the protest began. Clay said the search committee was aware of the allegations against James and investigated those allegations thoroughly.

"This is not a controversy we invited, obviously" Clay said. "... I felt strongly that in the interest of fairness and transparency that, um, you know, we can't discriminate against an individual based on unfounded allegations... as much as, uh, the thoughts of this turned my stomach and may turn yours, um, the reality is that he's not been, uh, indicted or found guilty of any ethics or, uh, legal or, uh, licensing board violations through this process."

Clay said the position of division executive director requires the administrative oversight of a very large budget faculty and professional staff and an academic program across three diverse departments. In his current position at Wright State University, James has demonstrated the ability to manage these kinds of things, he said.

Clay said free expression is at the core of MU's values, that he will review any information the group would provide and would make sure the search committee also receives the information.

The search has been and will continue to be transparent, he said.

"I have confidence in the work of the search committee as they continue to move forward with this process," he said. "All of us at the college value and respect the opinions of our faculty, staff and students, as well as the members of our community who have come forward today."

At the press conference, Clay said that James is the last candidate to be interviewed in a two-and-a-half day process. Burns completed his interview Friday.

The hiring decision will be made at the end of February or early March, Clay said. The division executive director search committee will interview James next week on campus.

Shortly after the press conference, the protest group, led by Mid-Missouri Fellowship of Reconciliation Coordinator Jeff Stack, met outside the Islamic Center of Central Missouri and marched to Hill Hall, where the MU School of Education is housed, to make speeches and hand in a petition to Chancellor Brady Deaton.

Protesters in Jesse Hall

The protest began with a moment of silence.

"Let's begin with a silence for our brothers and sisters who've been victimized," Stack said. "This decision is obscene to us as people of good will in our society. We are standing with the people who have been oppressed. We are not standing with the torturers."

Stack organized the march after he first heard of James's possible hiring from a friend, he said. He then contacted Barbara Peterson, director of strategic communications for the College of Education. Peterson suggested he research more about James and come to his own conclusion, Stack said.

"I spent hours researching," he said. "The more and more I looked into him, I thought 'Why would they want to create this PR blunder? Why is the college drawing attention away from all the good things they do?'"

Having James as the center of focus now creates unnecessary shame for the university, Stack said.

"He (James) is not someone with a sound moral compass," Stack said. "He has shown no remorse for what he's done. We are offended that he is being considered as a candidate. We don't think this is appropriate."

MU graduate student Nabihah Maqbool marched with the protestors. The reputation of the university is at stake with James's possible hiring, Maqbool said.

"This university is important to me," Maqbool said. "This university shouldn't be condoning this action ... I don't want my university to be smirched by this."

Students from other Missouri schools attended the protest. Hasan Ali came from Westminster College in Fulton, Mo. to join.

"This is just like a thief," Ali said. "A thief will never admit he stole something. As a school that pushes for freedom and democracy, I don't think they should hire someone who has the potential to be against certain groups of people."

Ali, who is from Iraq, had a family connection to the incidents in Abu Ghraib, he said.

"Two of my cousins were killed in that prison," Ali said. "They were taken and then later we got a letter saying they were killed."

In the span of one hour, the protestors collected roughly 70 signatures for their petition not to hire James, Stack said.

Outside Hill Hall, Stack and other protesters spoke to the crowd. Stack urged people to contact university officials with complaints for the hiring of James.

"Make your voice heard because our case here is really, really sound and needs to be honored," Stack said. "Human life should be honored and respected."

Dean Clay also met the protesters outside of the building and spoke to the crowd. The concerns of the protesters and the community are important sources of information for the search committee, Clay said.

"I asked my secretary to take me out of a meeting so I could come here and spend a couple minutes with you to talk with you about your concerns, to hear from you directly and to answer questions that you might have," Clay said.

Community members should do research and look at all the evidence about James and form conclusions for themselves, instead of reading editorials or opinion pieces about him, Clay said.

"We felt as a committee, and I felt strongly as the dean, that we have to have the same level of respect and responsibility and transparency and fairness in this process for Dr. James and give him the opportunity firsthand to respond to these concerns, and to not make that decision for him and to not make that decision for you," Clay said.

Following Clay's statement, the protesters entered Jesse Hall to speak with Deaton and hand in the petition. Deaton was not present at the protest but Assistant to the Chancellor Ann McGruder met and spoke to the group. McGruder accepted the petition and told the group she would relay the information and petition to Chancellor Deaton.

The protesters dispersed after agreeing to meet at Tuesday's open forum at 3 p.m. where James will answer questions from MU faculty and the public.

The tip of the iceberg

Stack organized Friday's protest in a few days, and anticipates that the resistance will grow as more and more people become aware of the situation, he said.

"This is a very fast response," Stack said. "This is the tip of an iceberg."

Mid-Missouri Peaceworks Director Mark Heim said that he hopes the protest can gather broader opposition to the potential hiring of James.

"This is a ridiculous hire for our university to be considering and it's time for us to wake up," he said. "People who were involved in the kinds of atrocities that we saw at Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib and at other sites around the world the various so-called black sites ... these people should be held accountable. They certainly should not be rewarded with academic positions at prestigious universities. That's out of line and it needs to be stopped ... I think once our community and once our state knows more about this Larry James, there will be many many more people joining our cause and that's very important."

Stack said the College of Education has been very transparent with the issue, and the protesters plan on maintaining transparency with their actions as well.

"We want to give (James) the same kind of respect that we would want," Stack said. "Mr.

James is my brother, all those people in (Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo) are my brothers. We are one human family."