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Marquette U rescinds offer to hire dean, who is gay

Tracy Rusch Catholic News Service | May. 14, 2010

MILWAUKEE -- Jesuit-run Marquette University in Milwaukee closed its search for a dean to head the Klingler College of Arts and Sciences May 6 after rescinding its offer to a Seattle professor who is openly gay.

The candidate, Jodi O'Brien, is the chairwoman and professor of the department of anthropology, sociology and social work at Seattle University, which also is a Jesuit institution.

Some Marquette faculty and students were upset by the decision, suggesting the university made it because of O'Brien's sexual orientation and because school officials questioned some of her published works and their relationship to the Catholic Church's mission.

Jesuit Fr. Robert A. Wild, president of Marquette, was not available for an interview. However, a May 6 letter to university colleagues signed by him and John J. Pauly, provost, stated that the search was closed "without identifying an acceptable candidate for permanent appointment."
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The letter indicated the offer to O'Brien was rescinded because after further review of "cumulative published records of the candidates, particularly as they relate to Catholic mission and identity, subsequent discussion raised issues that had not been fully addressed earlier."

The search committee sent two names to the provost for further consideration, according to the letter, each with issues identified for further discussion.

"We did make this offer to one of the two finalists; in retrospect that was done prematurely," Wild and Pauly stated in the letter.

Nancy Snow, a philosophy professor who specializes in ethics at Marquette, said O'Brien has a lengthy publications record that includes two articles, published in 1996 and 1999, that contain the alleged objectionable content.

Snow said neither Wild nor Pauly made clear exactly which articles or parts of those articles were questionable.

"A same-sex marriage article was mentioned," Snow said in a phone interview with the *Catholic Herald*, newspaper of the Milwaukee archdiocese. "It didn't even mention Catholicism. It didn't question Catholic marriage. It suggested in a paragraph -- she suggested in a paragraph -- that the institution of heterosexual marriage needs to be revised on issues of patriarchy."

According to *The New York Times*, O'Brien's biographical information cites many articles and book chapters on topics such as "Queer Christian Identities" and "Queer Christian Social Movements," besides same-sex marriage.

Snow speculated that sources outside the university, such as donors, pressured Wild "to rescind the offer that

had been made and accepted."

O'Brien, who has worked for Seattle University for 15 years, told the *Catholic Herald* in an e-mail interview that she is not Catholic, but has participated in several Jesuit and Catholic activities sponsored by the university and local faith groups.

She said the values of a university that treasures its Jesuit, Catholic mission, have been at the center of her evolution as a teacher and scholar.

"Because Marquette is recognized as one of the nation's top Jesuit universities, I was deeply honored earlier this year when I was offered the opportunity to help advance its Jesuit mission as dean of arts and sciences," said O'Brien, who will likely remain at Seattle University.

The May 6 letter from Wild and Pauly stated that while O'Brien "has an excellent background, a record of achievement and a strong academic track record, it was decided after further analysis that this individual was not the person who could best fill this very important position."

"The person who becomes dean needs, above all, the ability to represent the Marquette mission and identity," it said.

The letter also said that factors such as a candidate's personal background didn't affect the decision, nor does the decision "in any way challenge a faculty member's freedom to write in his or her area of scholarly expertise."

Marquette spokeswoman Mary Pat Pfeil said that "there were certain oversights in the search process, and we regret that deeply."

She said Marquette takes its nondiscrimination statement and statement on human dignity and diversity seriously.

"As a Catholic, Jesuit university, Marquette recognizes and cherishes the dignity of each individual regardless of age, culture, faith, ethnicity, race, gender, sexual orientation, language, disability or social class," she said in an e-mail. "These differences help us to promote a culture of learning, appreciation and understanding."

Pfeil did not state who was consulted in the search process, but said the public nature of the leadership search "means the university hears from multiple audiences, including faculty, administrator, alumni and friends."

Jerry Topczewski, Milwaukee Archbishop Jerome E. Listecki's chief of staff, told the *Catholic Herald* that "the archbishop was glad to know that Father Wild and the university leadership have a strong appreciation for the Catholic mission of the university and understand that being true to that Catholic identity while honoring academic freedom are not mutually exclusive."

In a May 12 interview, Archbishop Listecki confirmed he had spoken to Wild "about two or three weeks ago" to tell the university president about "concerns" that had been brought to his attention.

"I just considered my voice as one of many that expressed concern to Father Wild," the archbishop said. "My own sense is that I responded and called him out of courtesy because I had been receiving concerns from both clergy and laypeople concerning the pending appointment so I offered those concerns to Father Wild."

Listecki said his phone call to Wild was not unlike others he would make in the course of his work.

"You talk to somebody, you say, 'Here are the concerns,' and then the issue is dropped. I didn't hear anything about the appointment or no appointment," he said. "If I had some impact on it, you'd think the offer would have

been rescinded the next day. I didn't exercise any pressure. I didn't talk to anybody else about it."

Listecki added, "I appreciate people thinking I have that type of influence" on whom Marquette hires, but "the decision is Marquette's, not mine. ... I play no role in their hiring or firing."

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