

THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

RESEARCH

The Unraveling of Michael LaCour

By *Tom Bartlett*

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CHRISTOPHER SOWERS

A UCLA grad student, Michael LaCour produced a monumental study about political persuasion. Now he stands accused of fabricating the data.

By his own account, Michael J. LaCour has told big lies. He claimed to have received \$793,000 in research grants. In fact, he admits now, there were no grants.

The researchers who attempted to replicate his [widely lauded Science paper](#) on persuasion instead exposed a brazen fabrication, one in which Mr. LaCour appears to have forged an email and invented a representative for a research firm. *New York* magazine's Science of Us blog noted that Mr. LaCour claimed to have won [a nonexistent teaching award](#), and then caught him [trying to cover up](#) that fiction.

As more facts emerge from one of the strangest research scandals in recent memory, it becomes clear that this wasn't merely a flawed study performed by a researcher who cut a few corners. Instead it appears to have been an elaborate, years-long con that fooled several highly respected senior professors and one of the nation's most prestigious journals.

Commenters are doling out blame online. Who, if anyone, was supervising Mr. LaCour's work? Considering how perfect his results seemed, shouldn't colleagues have been more suspicious? Is this episode a sign of a deeper problem in the world of university research, or is it just an example of how a determined fabricator can manipulate those around him?

Those questions will be asked for some time to come. Meanwhile, though, investigators at the University of California at Los Angeles, where Mr. LaCour is a graduate student, are still figuring out exactly what happened.

It now appears that even after Mr. LaCour was confronted with accusations that his research was not on the level, he scrambled to create a digital trail that would support his rapidly crumbling narrative, according to sources connected to UCLA who asked to speak anonymously because of the university's investigation. The picture they

paint is of a young scholar who told an ever-shifting story and whose varied explanations repeatedly failed to add up.

An Absence of Evidence

On May 17, Mr. LaCour's dissertation adviser, Lynn Vavreck, sent him an email asking that he meet her the next day. During that meeting, the sources say, Ms. Vavreck told Mr. LaCour that accusations had been made about his work and asked whether he could show her the raw data that underpinned his ([now-retracted](#)) paper, "When Contact Changes Minds: An Experiment on Transmission of Support for Gay Equality." The university needed proof that the study had actually been conducted. Surely there was some evidence. A file on his computer. An invoice from uSamp, the company that had supposedly provided the participants. Something.

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That paper, written with Donald P. Green, a professor of political science at Columbia University who is well known for pushing the field to become more experimental, had won an award and had been featured in [major](#) news [outlets](#) and in [a segment](#) on public radio's *This American Life*. It was the kind of home run graduate students dream about, and it had helped him secure an offer to become an assistant professor at Princeton University. It was his ticket to an academic career, and easily one of the most talked-about political-science papers in recent years. It was a big deal.

Mr. LaCour couldn't provide that raw data. In [a digressive 23-page paper](#) that he published on his website Friday night, he wrote that he had destroyed the data "in accordance with institutional policy." But the [UCLA policy](#) Mr. LaCour links to says

only that “identifiers” should be destroyed, not the results themselves. Anonymizing survey data is a common practice; wiping out all traces of the data collected for a study is not. Mr. LaCour had earlier told Mr. Green, his co-author, that he accidentally destroyed the data.

The survey, according to Mr. LaCour, was created using Qualtrics, an online survey-design tool. At first when questioned, Mr. LaCour said that he had used the login of a former UCLA graduate student, Colleen M. Carpinella, to conduct the study and that he needed her password. So Mr. LaCour contacted Ms. Carpinella, who graduated from UCLA last year and is now a postdoctoral scholar at the University of Hawaii-Manoa. She provided that password.

Mr. LaCour also sent an email to Tim Groeling, chairman of communication studies at UCLA, informing him that he was conducting a survey and needed his Qualtrics password. (The communication department at UCLA has a license to use Qualtrics; the political-science department does not.) This wasn’t an odd request. They had taught a course together, and Mr. Groeling serves on Mr. LaCour’s dissertation committee. Mr. Groeling, who hadn’t yet learned of the accusations, sent along his login information.

Mr. LaCour then created survey panels on both accounts, according to the sources connected to UCLA. It seemed to be a last-minute attempt to make it look as if the surveys in question had actually been carried out. Mr. LaCour posted Qualtrics screenshots online to bolster his case. However, he did not include a screenshot that would have revealed when or whether the surveys had been sent.

Anyone with access to the Qualtrics account would know with a few clicks on what date surveys had been sent out and when they had been completed. As ruses go, it wouldn’t be very effective.

Except for the paper he published on his website, and [a brief interview with *The New York Times*](#), Mr. LaCour has largely kept quiet — on the advice of his lawyer, according to a statement. He has yet to fully explain what happened, even privately, say colleagues and friends at UCLA. He did not respond to *The Chronicle*'s numerous requests for an interview.

A 'Hard Charging' Scholar

Those who know Mr. LaCour describe him as hard-working. That's probably true of most graduate students at top universities, but Mr. LaCour has a reputation for working harder than most. First at the office, last to leave, always busy. And more productive than most too. The lengthiness of his response was typical.

He's also described as creative. Several colleagues mention a study Mr. LaCour had conducted on whether political knowledge is shaped by access to entertainment media. In that study, he brought undergraduate students into a waiting room to see what channels they would watch on a television set up for that purpose. Mr. LaCour had to prep the room himself — it was filthy — and make it look like a convincing, professional waiting room. He pulled it off.

But what most impressed colleagues was how Mr. LaCour had solved a tricky problem. Undergraduates equipped with smartphones might not look at the TV at all, thus spoiling the experiment. Mr. LaCour came up with the idea of using a device that blocks cellular signals to get around that obstacle.

"It was very well designed and organized — clever," says a fellow graduate student.

Words like "ambitious" and "hard charging" are often used. Several researchers who worked with Mr. LaCour say that he was not regarded as an effortlessly brilliant young researcher — the kind who instantly seems destined for greatness — but that he made up for that by being dogged. Some who know Mr. LaCour describe him as a

workaholic. “If he has free time, he’ll find a way to work more,” says a fellow graduate student.

Another graduate student, though, describes Mr. LaCour as well rounded, sociable — a big U2 fan, passionate about gay rights, close to his family. He was willing to serve as a sounding board for other researchers’ ideas, but also willing to just hang out. “You meet some academics, and you’re like, You need a hobby,” says one friend. “He’s not like that.”

Among Mr. LaCour’s mentors and friends is David O. Sears. Mr. Sears, a professor of psychology and political science at UCLA and a former dean of social sciences, came to know and like Mr. LaCour, finding him to be a “very engaging and interesting guy.” The two shared an enthusiasm for research on persuasion. Mr. Sears was impressed enough to approach him about collaborating, but Mr. LaCour said he preferred to work on his own. “He wanted to be innovative,” Mr. Sears says. “I didn’t see anything suspicious at all. I was totally blown away when I found out what the suspicions were about this project.”

Mr. Sears says he is reserving judgment on whether Mr. LaCour is guilty of fabricating the *Science* study until a formal university investigation has been completed. “I have never seen somebody accused and condemned so quickly, and I think that’s wrong,” Mr. Sears says, noting that he has been at UCLA for half a century.

Many who know Mr. LaCour are, of course, rethinking their initial impressions. Dave Fleischer, program director of the Leadership Lab at the Los Angeles LGBT Center, worked with Mr. LaCour on the persuasion study for two years. To him Mr. LaCour seemed like “a junior academic out of central casting with a lot of appealing, nerdy qualities.” In one instance, first reported on the [This American Life blog](#), Mr. Fleischer recalls Mr. LaCour’s showing him data being collected from electronic surveys in real time on his laptop. Now, Mr. Fleischer assumes that must have been yet another hoax — a way to make it seem as if the research was really being conducted.

What's perplexing to many, including Mr. Fleischer, is that the nerdy junior academic seemed sincerely both knowledgeable about the study he was conducting and passionate about the issue of gay marriage. Looking through Mr. LaCour's [Twitter history](#), it's a topic he mentions again and again. "Did he say he was interested? Yes. Was he interested? If somebody is genuinely interested they don't just make it up," Mr. Fleischer says. "If that was really the truth of who he is, he wouldn't have done these things. I think I and others misjudged him."

'That Can't Be True'

Alex Coppock thinks he misjudged Mr. LaCour too. Mr. Coppock is a political-science graduate student at Columbia University whom Mr. Green asked to help analyze the data Mr. LaCour had provided. That was the so-called "clean data" — the results Mr. LaCour had ostensibly culled from the raw data, which he kept to himself. The assumption now is that the clean data were invented, but Mr. Coppock didn't suspect that then. He found the results exciting.

In an email Mr. Coppock wrote in November 2013 — part of an exchange Mr. LaCour briefly made public on his website — Mr. Coppock was full of praise for the study's design. "Thanks very much for sharing this fascinating paper," he wrote to Mr. LaCour and Mr. Green. "I've given the code a thorough look," he went on to tell them. "The data analysis is done in a very principled, straightforward manner."

Mr. Coppock and Mr. LaCour kept in touch. In April they met up at a conference, where they decided to work together on a paper based on the same data set. They were well into the process when news of the apparent fraud became public. Mr. Coppock didn't email or call Mr. LaCour in the aftermath, though he did unlink Mr. LaCour from their shared Dropbox account. What's difficult to fathom, Mr. Coppock says, is that Mr. LaCour was seemingly going to embark on another project based on a fantasy. "He was doubling down. If it's a fabrication, it's so galling," Mr. Coppock says. "There's no evidence that any survey respondents were actually contacted. That's the

thing that is so puzzling. That's why it's hard for me to parse what his motivations were."

While Mr. LaCour has admitted making up grants, he continues to stand by his study. One of his friends, a fellow graduate student who spoke anonymously out of career concerns, says that after the accusations were made, Mr. LaCour seemed determined to mount a defense. "He was stoic and focused, trying to get his response written," the friend says. "There are moments when he's sad and you cheer him up. There are moments when he seems discouraged. I think he's probably tired."

In a radio interview after the revelations, Mr. Green suggested that Mr. LaCour's academic career was very likely over. That came as a particularly stiff blow. "I could tell that that hurt," his friend says. "Michael told me numerous times, 'You have to meet Don Green. He will change your life.'"

Several people close to Mr. LaCour say they have been holding out hope that he could provide a persuasive explanation. Maybe this was a weird misunderstanding or a mistake — or a series of mistakes — rather than a complete fraud. One friend compared it to finding out your favorite athlete is on steroids: "You think, That can't be true. I've been rooting for this guy the whole time. But then as it starts to crystallize, you want to think he can get out of it."

Flying Solo

The odds of Mr. LaCour's getting out of it seem slimmer by the day. But do others share responsibility for failing to notice red flags along the way? His co-author, Mr. Green, [told NPR](#) that he accepts "quite a bit" of the blame. "You know, I should have been the one to have noticed this," he said. "And looking back on it, I wasn't suspicious enough."

Mr. Coppock says the paper was more thoroughly vetted than most because the results were so remarkable that Mr. Green wanted to be sure the data were rock-solid.

“When a researcher gets data back and it’s on the line, so they fudge a number — that’s the sort of fraud that we’re trained to detect and trained to be skeptical of,” he says. “This kind of thing, where it’s fabricated whole hog, is really hard to defend against.”

Mr. LaCour was adept at developing relationships with senior researchers, more so than most graduate students, according to several sources. Each may have assumed that the other was providing significant guidance for Mr. LaCour’s research when in reality he was more or less flying solo.

For instance, Mr. Sears signed the institutional-review-board application to perform surveys for the canvassing study, though it’s not certain now when that form was turned in. The IRB sent Mr. LaCour a letter scolding him for not having obtained permission in advance to conduct research on human subjects, though the survey was retroactively approved. “I had signed off on the IRB application,” says Mr. Sears. “I don’t remember doing it. I have no doubt that I did.”

Mr. Sears says that while he had conversations with Mr. LaCour about the study, he had no supervisory role.

Mr. Green and Ms. Vavreck, Mr. LaCour’s dissertation adviser, declined to comment for this article, citing the university’s investigation. Other members of his dissertation committee did not respond to requests for interviews.

In a written statement, Michael Ross, vice chair for graduate studies in political science at UCLA, said that “naturally there will be a division of labor” when scholars collaborate: “Often people will check each other’s work — more to avoid basic errors than anything else — but a certain amount of trust is essential.”

Very few academic papers achieve the kind of renown Mr. LaCour’s did. “Everybody read it,” says James N. Druckman, a professor of political science at Northwestern

University. “It got more media coverage than any paper I can think of in poli sci ever.”

As a result, it has the potential to cast the entire field, and those engaged in experimental political science, in a negative light, worries Mr. Coppock. “We thought we knew how people’s minds changed when day canvassers came to talk to them, and we don’t. We lost that knowledge,” he says. “We can get that back by doing another experiment. The thing I’m worried about is that people are going to stop trusting experiments.”

Several of those who have worked with Mr. LaCour say that they are still waiting for an explanation, that they hope he will answer some of the outstanding questions. There are a host of factual issues — like why he didn’t try harder to obtain funding, or why he offered multiple accounts of what happened to the raw data — but the overriding question is simple: Why do this in the first place? Was it ambition run amok? Was it one minor deception that grew into a tapestry of falsehoods?

Mr. Fleischer, the program director at the LGBT center, says he’s not interested in hearing those answers. He and canvassers at the center tailored their work to Mr. LaCour’s study. To provide a control group, they asked some households about recycling rather than gay marriage. They skipped some households entirely. It was a sacrifice, but it was in service of proving that their canvassing approach — persuading people door-to-door on contentious social issues — was a good one. They wanted that proof.

The likelihood that they wasted all their time and effort was an enormous disappointment. But he doesn’t want to focus on that. Mr. Fleischer says that he’s looking forward now to actually carrying out the experiment Mr. LaCour apparently faked, and that two of the researchers [who exposed Mr. LaCour](#) — David Broockman and Joshua Kalla — plan to redo his work, properly this time. Mr. Fleischer doesn’t want to talk to Mr. LaCour again: “Why would I believe a single thing he has to say at this point?”

Tom Bartlett is a senior writer who covers science and other things. Follow him on Twitter [@tebartl](#).

Correction (6/2/2015, 5:29 p.m.): The original version of this article incorrectly listed one professor as a member of Mr. LaCour's dissertation committee. David Sears, a professor of psychology and political science at UCLA, considers himself to be a friend and mentor to the graduate student but says he was too busy to serve on the committee. The article has been updated to reflect this correction.

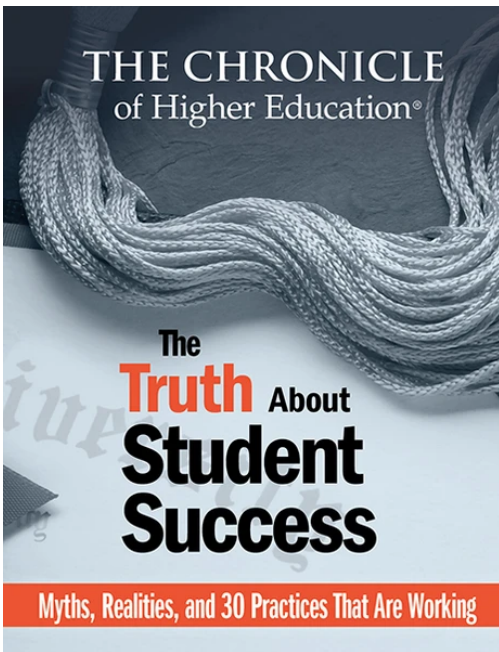
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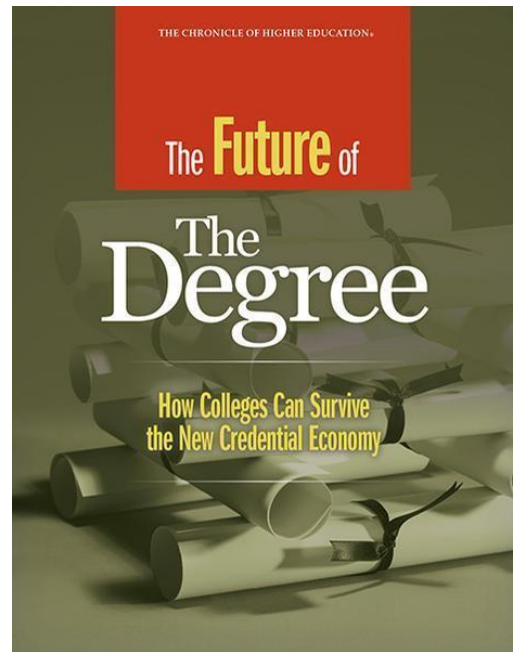
Tom Bartlett

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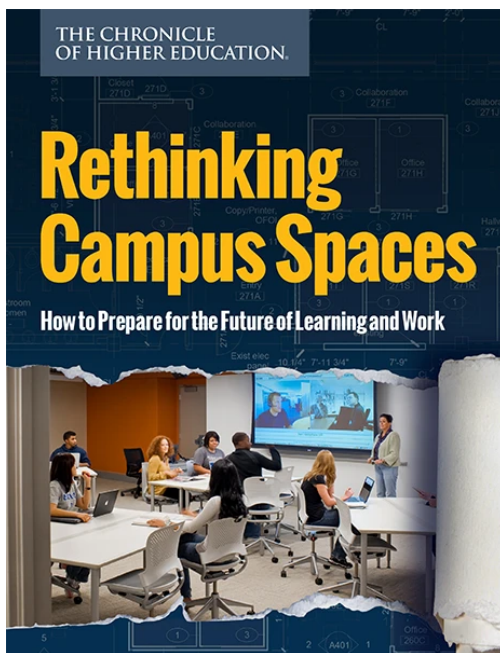
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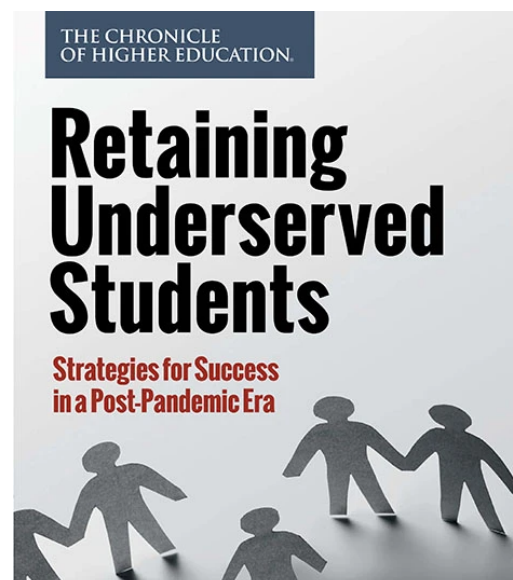
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