

Famed geneticist Francisco Ayala resigns following unsubstantiated allegations of sexual harassment

By Kimie Saito
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Francisco J. Ayala, a world renowned evolutionary biologist at University of California, Irvine, resigned July 1 following an investigation into allegations that he sexually harassed three faculty members and a graduate student.

In an extraordinary move, the university is removing his name from its School of Biological Sciences and its science library, as well as from graduate fellowships, endowed chairs and other programs started with Ayala's funds.

UCI Chancellor Howard Gillman announced that the 84-year-old Ayala, who has been a member of the faculty for 30 years, will leave the university without "emeritus" status and that he "will abstain from future campus activities."

Micha Star Liberty, an attorney representing three of the women, said that Ayala had touched them inappropriately and made sexual remarks and that this conduct happened over decades. However, the investigation into the allegations has not been made public and it was not subject to any of the normal due process procedures required in a criminal inquiry.

Ayala has not even been informed as to what specifically he is alleged to have done. He issued a statement to the *Los Angeles Times*, stating, "I deeply regret that what I have always thought of as the good manners of a European gentleman—to greet women colleagues warmly, with a kiss to both cheeks, to compliment them on their beauty—made colleagues I respect uncomfortable. It was never my intent to do so."

Ayala is one of the most significant academics caught up in the #MeToo witch-hunt. Born in Madrid in 1934, Ayala studied at Columbia University under

Theodosius Dobzhansky, the Russian geneticist who provided laboratory evidence for natural selection and variation. Ayala joined the faculty at UC, Irvine in 1987. He been called the "Renaissance Man of Evolutionary Biology" because of his research on population and evolutionary genetics. His discoveries opened new approaches to the prevention and treatment of diseases, such as malaria and the Chagas disease, which affects 16-18 million people in South America.

Ayala has authored over 1,000 scientific articles and published 40 books on evolutionary theory. He has received 21 honorary doctorates, the 2001 National Medal of Science, and the 2010 Templeton Prize, which included \$1.5 million that he donated to the university. He has been the president of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, the most prestigious scientific group in the world.

Ayala's rapid removal from UCI and the effort to wipe his name from university records has provoked shock and outrage from many academics, in the US and internationally.

Astrophysicist Virginia Trimble, one of Ayala's colleagues, told the *New York Times*, "He is a good human being. I don't know how else to say it." She said she was "floored" by the chancellor's letter announcing the resignation and that her first action on reading it was to send Ayala an email declaring, "I don't believe a word of it."

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