

Raymond McDaniel Profile
Bruce Darnell

In 21 years of working here, Raymond McDaniel, a 67-year-old math instructor at SIUE, has cultivated a divisive image. To some, he is a hilarious, caring teacher who genuinely loves his students; to others, his tangents breach into overt racism, sexism and harm the classroom environment. So, which is true?

McDaniel would say the first group is correct, as he said the other group are, in math's terms, "outliers." An example figure he gave was 308 students, where 300 thought he was "great" and the remaining eight thought he was "Satan incarnate."

McDaniel said he has never acted with malice in the classroom. He said he does not want to lose any students since he loves them all and loves teaching. He added he views his students as the most important thing next to his family and faith as a Christian.

McDaniel denied both knowing of and making any racist or sexist comments, saying, "I'm not gonna address those issues. Every semester students have complaints about things and you have to deal with them one at a time. If a student has a problem, they should come to me. But they never do."

He also said he has dealt with conduct investigations in the past and said none were found to be true. SIUE administration — specifically College of Arts and Sciences Dean Kevin Leonard and Provost Coordinator Thomas Jordan — declined to make any statements about McDaniel.

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According to a Freedom of Information Act request, a graduate nursing student in McDaniel's class attempted to file an informal complaint around Jan. 27 after dropping his course. Their name was redacted, and attempts to reach an email associated with the complaint were not successful.

"Thank you for speaking with me earlier today regarding my concerns for the teaching environment with instructor Raymond McDaniel," the email stated. "Please inform me of how I can move forward with an informal or formal complaint."

Details of their complaint were not included in the FOIA request outside of a reply from Jordan, who relayed some of the details to Dean Leonard in a separate email.

"She spoke to me about comments made by McDaniel that she felt were condescending to students, disrespectful to colleagues in the math department, and potentially sexist," Jordan stated.

In reference to alleged racist comments he made about Asian people's abilities at math, he said it was a cultural difference rather than racially intrinsic — his meaning being Asian cultures value education more than other cultures, including his own from rural Texas.

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Allegations of McDaniel's statements about Asian people come from three different students, two of whom requested anonymity due to fears of retribution. One of the three, Kennedy S., spoke candidly about their experiences with him.

"Calling it intriguing would be putting it nicely," Kennedy said. "He was really weird about Asian people, and said it wasn't fair that American and Asian students were in the same class."

Kennedy was a freshman when they took McDaniel's class and said he was their introduction to college life. In one instance, Kennedy said they had just failed their second test and went to talk to McDaniel during his office hours. Once there, they started crying.

"I never failed a class before," Kennedy said. "I was so stressed out. Then he looked up to me from his grading and said, 'Did you even try?' While not verbatim, he kind of started going, 'Wrong, wrong, wrong (while grading their test).'"

Kennedy said the next day McDaniel asked the classroom from his podium, "what do you do when a woman comes into your office crying? Nothing, because they're inconsolable creatures. No matter what you say to them, they'll always be upset. So you just have to nod and agree." When asked about this, McDaniel said he did not know the meaning of the word inconsolable.

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Another student, who asked to remain anonymous as they are currently in his class, spoke of similar experiences in pre-calculus.

“Recently, I answered a question, and he said, ‘No, you forgot the plus or minus, blah, blah — this is why some of you guys aren’t ready for calculus,’” they said. “There’s a lot of whiplash ... the class is oddly structured, he’s strict and then not strict. He also makes a lot of crazy comments.”

The student said McDaniel tends to single out students for good scores, which they said breeds resentment among other students in the class. McDaniel said he does this out of encouragement, although he also said it needs to be done wisely to avoid that issue.

Some students have had very positive experiences with McDaniel. One such student is Nevaeh Green, who is also in his pre-calculus class.

“He genuinely loves all his students and does whatever he can to benefit them,” Green stated in an email. “He may go off topic and talk about his personal life, which some people may find unproductive. But he does that to draw students back in to be engaged with the material he is going over.”

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Another student, junior Clayton Barnes, also said McDaniel genuinely cares for his students and has never said anything he found offensive. Barnes said he “pretty much agreed with everything he said.”

Green said she would “100 percent” take another class with McDaniel if she could. She also said he has never said anything she found to be offensive. Green said McDaniel’s teaching philosophy is kind so long as a student shows motivation.

McDaniel said motivation is key to a student’s success in college, and he has spent countless hours attending seminars and reading books to attempt to learn how to better motivate his students. He said he wants all of his students to succeed and has made it his mission to do all he can for them.

One success he celebrates is how he received an award in Orlando, Florida, because, after a decade of teaching there, his students had a 92 percent pass rate on their academic skills tests.

When asked about his pass rates at SIUE, McDaniel said those numbers could not be predicted from semester to semester, including past semesters, as, “you cannot predict what humans will do.” He likened this to attempting to predict Super Bowl outcomes.

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McDaniel said the only thing he hates is when students don't show up and don't do the work. When discussing writing and poetry — a topic he is passionate about but only keeps to himself and his wife, who he said hates poetry — he said one of his favorite poems is “Did I miss anything?” by Tom Wayman.

“(Wayman) says that's one of the most obnoxious things a student can ask,” McDaniel said. “But the way he ended it was, you know, this is just one little place in the world where things are happening, and you weren't here.”

This is why McDaniel gives out his phone number, requests student phone numbers at the beginning of the semester, and can usually always be found in his office. He wants his students to know he is always there for them.

McDaniel said he once had a star basketball recruit as a student. Her mother died mid-season, so McDaniel called her and asked if she was coming back; if she was, he could help her any way he could. Eventually, she did come back.

“And it ended up that she was the 30 foot picture of the girl basketball player on the side of the Vadalabene Center,” McDaniel said. “I worked with the coach to get her back, and he had a deal where the players picked a teacher who influenced them the most, and she picked me.” Because it happened 15 years ago, McDaniel said he could not remember the player's name.

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No matter the difference of opinion on offensive comments, everyone has said McDaniel goes on wild and long tangents — even he is in agreement on this. He is very talkative and open about his personal life, even if the details go a bit far.

Kennedy said they were in his office as he started to tell them about how he thought his foot was broken. As it turns out, it was actually a foot fungus; Kennedy said they had to tell him to stop as he reached over to take off his shoe.

Kennedy also said he would tell the classroom stories about family drama, colleague drama, and his near-death experiences.

One near-death experience, McDaniel said, occurred when he went to adopt a child in Vietnam sometime in the summer of 1996. He was on a Boeing 747 flown by Garuda Indonesia, the country's main airliner. Mid-takeoff, the plane shut down and dropped to the runway.

“We fell about 18 feet, ran into a ditch, and then there was dead silence,” McDaniel said. “We were there for hours. Apparently, a serious warning light came on and the pilot aborted takeoff.”

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McDaniel got on a separate flight, eventually leaving Singapore and making it to Ho Chi Minh City in time to adopt his future son. But when walking into the airport, he heard a crowd of people “screaming and wailing and rolling their tongues.” The plane he was supposed to be on crashed in the ocean and everyone died, he said.

The details of this plane wreck could not be verified. Garuda Indonesia has never had a plane wreck in the ocean, nor have they ever wrecked a Boeing 747.

There was a plane wreck on June 13, 1996, which is close to the time frame McDaniel gave, but it was on a runway in Japan and only killed three people out of 275. The next year, September 1997, a plane wrecked near a mountain village, and killed everyone on board. The most similar wreck he described happened in January 2002, when a Boeing 737 crashed into an Indonesian river, though this only killed one person.

After detailing the plane crash, McDaniel immediately shared other stories about how he survived 70 skin cancer surgeries, an open heart surgery, a fall off a cliff while hunting, and getting hit by a drunk driver while in college. Another health issue McDaniel spoke about was how he had encephalitis as a child, permanently giving him poor memory and requiring him to compensate by documenting everything.

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Later, when questioned about a painting titled “10 things Mr. McDaniel has taught me,” he briefly commented on it and other decorations in his room, such as math formula clocks his wife made and a bowl he got from a coworker labeled “Ashes of Obnoxious Teenagers,” then started talking about his seven children and their careers. The painting, made by a nursing student in his class, began with, “Global warming is a hoax,” and ended, “... a little bit about statistics.”