



President Armstrong Issues Message to Campus Community



May 13, 2011

To the Campus Community:

When I first sat down today to write to you, it was to be about the report of a rape occurring at or following a Sigma Phi Epsilon fraternity party on May 7.

Late this afternoon, University Police received a report of a second rape, this one reportedly occurring in Poly Canyon Village on May 12. Police are investigating.

These incidents are terribly disturbing to me for many reasons, as they should be to all of you.

Beyond our concern for the women involved – and my heart goes out to both young women – the most useful questions we can ask right now are simple: What can we learn from these incidents? What more will we do as a community to prevent sexual violence? What more will we do to eliminate use of illegal drugs and reckless consumption of alcohol?

First, though, let's start with a few important and indisputable facts about what occurred on May 7.

A young woman reported to San Luis Obispo police that she was raped at or following a party at the Sigma Phi Epsilon house.

A large number of Cal Poly students attended the party; many drank to reckless excess, and many were under age.

As required by law, University Police issued a security alert stating that a young woman reported she was raped at or following the party. I understand and share the concerns of many that it is crucial that security alerts are conveyed with sensitivity. I have relayed this to University Police. I want to assure you that our officers are not lacking in sensitivity or respect for the young women, and I commend them for a timely and factual alert. Please know that the alerts they issue have to be in compliance with the Clery Act, a federal law that is quite specific.

As a community, we need to recognize some additional facts: These incidents have forever altered the lives of two young women who deserved respect and protection that they did not receive from the people around them.

As for the accused in these incidents, the justice system will determine their culpability and consequences.

We must also acknowledge that others bear responsibility as well, and as a campus, we must address the root causes. Fundamentally, rape stems from an utter disregard of another person's dignity. And common sense requires us to re-examine our campus culture regarding alcohol and drug abuse.

Second only to the victim's suffering, the most disturbing aspect of the May 7th incident is that some Cal Poly students knew what occurred at the party, failed to stop or report what they saw and failed to keep each other safe. [Clarification posted May 16: I do not mean to imply that people witnessed an assault and did nothing; I do mean to say that people saw others drinking to excess and did nothing to keep each other safe.]

This is not who we are as members of the Cal Poly community. This is not merely unacceptable behavior; this is deplorable, contemptible, infuriating behavior. Perhaps some who failed to report what they knew stemmed from a fear that they would be in trouble as well. That's a change in culture we must embark on immediately. Others, perhaps, simply didn't care. I don't know that we can fix that sort of calloused behavior, but we surely must try.

Have we learned nothing from Carson Starkey's death? Do we care so little about our fellow human beings that we fail to step up and offer protection when there is trouble?

I am confident that the people of our campus community know right from wrong.

As I said at the outset, we should all strive to learn from this incident.

We are each ambassadors of Cal Poly's values, wherever we go and whatever we do. We are Cal Poly, as individuals and collectively.

We have to take responsibility for the culture to which we contribute.

Toward this end, I have asked ASI President Sarah Storelli, Academic Senate Chair Rachel Fernflores and Student Affairs Vice President Cornel Morton to chair a task force comprised of representatives from all constituencies whose charge is to examine how we can create a culture that does not tolerate sexual assault, that never blames the victims of sexual assault, and that works to minimize alcohol and drug abuse.

Our primary goal now is to be a community that knows how to be respectful, healthy and safe.

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