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Title IX coordinator from Larry Nassar scandal drops job at Cal Poly after protests

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Paulette Granberry Russell, left, enters Eaton County Judge Julie Reincke's courtroom, Tuesday, April 16, 2019, in Charlotte, Michigan. Granberry Russell was head of MSU's Title IX office when a 2014 complaint was filed regarding abuse by Larry Nassar. Granberry Russell was one of Simon's senior advisers. [USA Today Network/Matthew Dae Smith/Lansing State Journal] (Photo: Matthew Dae Smith/Lansing State Journal)

The hiring of Paulette Granberry Russell, former senior diversity adviser to the president and Title IX coordinator at Michigan State University, by a Cal State University system school sparked protests and a petition to rescind the offer.

On Wednesday afternoon, Granberry Russell withdrew from the position, per a school-wide email from Jeffery Armstrong, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo (Cal Poly) president.

Armstrong announced Granberry Russell's emergency hiring in a [school-wide email July 1](#). In the wake of that hiring, more than 11,000 people [signed a petition to rescind the contract](#).

The controversy at the central coast campus surrounded Grandberry Russell's connection with the Larry Nassar sex abuse scandal.

Granberry Russell spent the last 22 years at Michigan State University (MSU), during which she was the school's Chief Diversity Officer and senior adviser to the president. Her duties also included the position of Title IX coordinator during the time MSU doctor [Larry Nassar sexually abused hundreds of female students](#).

Russell's time at MSU

In late 2015, while Granberry Russell was MSU's Title IX coordinator, The Association of American Universities conducted a survey of female University of Michigan and Michigan State University students.

Here's what the survey found.

At MSU, [71.9% of female students surveyed who say they were the victims of non-consensual sexual penetration by force never reported the assault](#).

Nearly 30% of those surveyed said they didn't report it because they didn't think anything would be done about it. Overall, almost one in four female undergraduates reported being the victim of non-consensual sexual contact.

The U.S. Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights (OCR) also found that MSU [violated federal law in the handling of sexual assaults on its campus in 2015](#) while Granberry Russell was Title IX coordinator.

One year later, the Larry Nassar scandal [was reported by the Indianapolis Star-Tribune](#). More than 500 people came forward with allegations of sexual abuse against the former faculty member.

Documents obtained by the Michigan State Police show handwritten notes from Granberry Russell and MSU President Lou Anna Simon discussing Nassar's sexual abuse in May 2014.

An affidavit from Michigan State Police Sgt. William Arndt [includes a depiction of Simon and Granberry Russell discussing a complaint filed by student Amanda Thomashow, who was assaulted by Nassar while seeking hip treatment](#).

Granberry Russell was told on May 16, 2014, of Thomashow's complaint by Kristine Moore of the MSU Office for Inclusion and Intercultural Initiatives, according to the affidavit.

Granberry Russell stated that she had handwritten a note stating, "Sports Med, Dr. Nassar, SA." The "SA" stands for "sexual assault."

Granberry Russell and Simon met May 19, 2016, to discuss the assault. Simon was later charged with two felony charges and two misdemeanor charges for lying to investigators before [the charges were dropped in May 2020](#).



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Paulette Granberry Russell looks over phone records presented by Asst. Attorney General Scott Teter to confirm the records are indeed hers, Tuesday, April 16, 2019, in Eaton County Judge Julie Reincke's courtroom in Charlotte, Michigan. Granberry Russell was head of MSU's Title IX office when a 2014 claim of sexual assault was filed. [USA Today Network/Matthew Dae Smith/Lansing State Journal] (Photo: Matthew Dae Smith/Lansing State Journal)

Cal Poly response

Within days of Granberry Russell's hiring, faculty and staff at Cal Poly wrote a letter to Armstrong [expressing concerns over her hiring](#).

"As the head of Michigan State University's Title IX office, Russell was in charge during one of the worst sex abuse scandals in American history," the letter said, [per Mustang News](#).

Faculty were never informed that this was an "emergency search," the letter continued, and the traditional public calls for faculty participation or input or public interaction with Granberry Russell were bypassed entirely.

"By all accounts, for years MSU maintained a culture hostile to complaints of sexual abuse," the letter read. "As head of the Title IX office, Russell was at the top of that system. Her claim that she was unaware of what was going on—if true—would seem to be a powerful indictment of her ability to lead and to create a campus climate rooted in love, empathy, and respect."

Over 3,000 faculty, staff, students and alumni signed the letter.

"Armstrong's assertion that Russell 'had no connection to past misconduct issues at Michigan State University' seems disingenuous at best," Cal Poly English professor Brenda Helmbrecht [told Mustang News](#). "Her involvement is documented."

According to Cal Poly Administration and Finance, Granberry Russell's hiring came at a time when the school [has implemented a hiring suspension](#), or what school spokesman Matt Lazier referred to as a hiring "chill."

Granberry Russell was offered the Vice President of Diversity and Inclusion position, one of three that were vacant during the hiring chill, after an emergency hire was needed following the retirement of Jozi De Leon.

Armstrong was MSU's dean of the College of Agriculture and Natural Resources from 2001 to 2011, overlapping with Granberry Russell's time.

"I can vouch for the fact that faculty were not consulted at all," Helmbrecht [continued](#). "The search process was not transparent and seems to have been kept confidential."

The change.org petition included a comment from Jasmine Till, ASI (Associated Students, Inc.) Secretary of Diversity and Inclusion.

"I believe we desperately need a leader who sincerely listens to students and passionately advocates for progress in fostering a welcoming and safe community," Till wrote. "I challenge (Cal Poly president Jeffrey) Armstrong's purported 'confidence' in Russell's expertise and experience. No accomplishment of any magnitude can outweigh the misconduct and irreversible harm she has brought to the MSU community."

Armstrong assessed stakeholders following Granberry Russell's withdrawal.

"First, let me say that I am always open to criticism, questions and protest, and I acknowledge and understand the concerns that many have raised," Armstrong wrote in an email. "However, I must express how disappointed I am that Paulette's decision comes after an outcry from some campus community members that was, to be frank, ill-informed, misplaced and in some cases downright vile."

Armstrong wrote that a "not-so-veiled" death threat was also sent to both him and Granberry Russell.

"Clearly many disagree with my decision to offer Paulette a position at Cal Poly. I consider and respect these perspectives," he continued. "However, I am deeply troubled and disappointed that members of our community have posted false claims, assumptions and accusations about Paulette as though they were fact.

Regardless of the topic, I ask every member of our community to take the time to research the facts before making judgments and posting conclusions based on something they may have read online or heard on social media or elsewhere."