

May 2, 2018

An open letter to MSU Interim President Engler and Board of Trustees (Brian Breslin, Joel Ferguson, Dianne Byrum, Melanie Foster, Dan Kelly, Mitch Lyons, Brian Mosallam, and George Perles):

I will graduate this Friday with a Ph.D. from the MSU Department of Integrative Biology. As do all who earn a doctoral degree, I have given my blood, sweat, and tears these last six years to become an expert at what I love to do: science. People will no longer refer to me as Miss or Ms., I'm a Dr. now. Even though this is a tremendous achievement for me I am boycotting commencement, and I'd like to tell you why.

In 2015 I experienced sexual harassment at MSU, went through the OIE (Office for Inclusion and Equity) investigation process, and dealt with significant tension in the workplace as a result. It was clear to me how administrators (not those in my dept.) prioritized the institution's reputation above the people they claim to serve. I was enraged to see this pattern unfold again for the survivors of Nassar's abuse. Speaking truth to power always comes at a cost for survivors, in the currency of re-living trauma, often only to be disbelieved.

Much of the Nassar tragedy could have been prevented, especially if MSU administrators and staff had believed the victims who came forward decades ago. In the aftermath of the survivors' testimony in Lansing this January, the Board ignored input from students and faculty, and secretly chose a former Michigan governor with a record of covering up sexual abuse of women prisoners to serve as our interim president. Again, you did not listen.

So listen now.

You and I clearly have very different perspectives of what makes MSU great. While the Board was busy worrying about the MSU brand, my fellow MSU scientists and I were busy working on local and global issues like climate change, water and food security, and environmental justice. While the Board and then-President Simon were busy ignoring the stories of Nassar victims and perpetuating a culture that enabled Nassar, we were busy empowering K-12 students and teachers with science. MSU is full of scholars doing rigorous, socially relevant, and groundbreaking research—this work, not sports or profits, is at the core of MSU's value to society. I suspect the late Sen. Justin Morrill, namesake of the Morrill Land-Grant Colleges Act of 1862, would agree.

So this Friday, instead of shaking your hand, I'd rather be doing what my colleagues and I do every Friday: doing science that will hopefully make a difference in the world. I hope that in the coming months, you will listen to survivors, students, and faculty. I hope that as a result, you take decisive action to make the MSU environment safe, inclusive, and accountable in a way that enables our education, research, and outreach programs to continue to flourish. I hope that your actions in the coming months will make the 2019 Ph.D. graduates once again proud to walk across the stage and shake hands with the president of MSU.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Bonnie McGill". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned above the printed name.

Bonnie McGill