

To: Elizabeth Graddy, Interim Provost; Sarah Van Orman, Chief Health Officer
Fr: Concerned Faculty of USC
CC: Carol Folt, President; Rick Caruso, Chair, Board of Trustees

August 14, 2019

We write in response to the disturbing recent allegations against Dr. Dennis Kelly, and to your alarming institutional reaction. Your letter of August 9, addressed to students and distributed to the whole community, is not only insensitive but insulting to the students who have made very credible accusations against Dr. Kelly of egregiously abusive behavior. To respond directly to the language of your letter, what is “upsetting” is not reading descriptions of his alleged behavior; it is that once again our students may have been victims of sexual predation by a physician at the Student Health Center, and that once again their complaints may have been ignored or brushed off. We know that we do not yet have all of the facts (indeed, we hope that there will be a thorough investigation, and review by a committee that includes faculty and students). We understand the institutional impulse to respond in the narrowest possible manner in the shadow of litigation. Yet seeking to protect the university’s financial exposure at the expense of any expression of care or compassion whatsoever for our own students who say that they were harmed by Dr. Kelly’s behavior, crucially misunderstands the nature of our shared educational mission.

Instead of care and compassion, you have offered generic expressions of commitment to a culture of trust and concern for any member of the community who feels treated “disrespectfully.” These are followed by a list of resources for counseling and procedures for filing complaints that have become standard in such communications. There is no attempt to confront the strong possibility that our students were seriously harmed and their complaints went unheeded, as in the Tyndall case. There is no indication that the university has taken any action in response to the students’ charges even now, in order to correct problems and discipline those at fault, including administrators who have been negligent in the performance of their reporting and disciplinary duties when USC doctors harm students.

Pending litigation should not be used as a pretext for lack of candor and openness, as it has been so often at USC in the past. Doing so merely perpetuates the administrative culture of secrecy that has caused so many of the University’s problems, and has so damaged trust. You speak of the need to “balance communicating with our community while preserving the integrity of the legal process,” but there is no such balance in your letter, which communicates very little.

As usual, we have had to get information about this scandal not from our administration but from the press. We are extremely proud of Sasha Urban, the USC student who reported the original Annenberg Media article, and the highly competitive Beacon Project spearheaded by USC Annenberg faculty Mark Schoofs, Gabriel Kahn, Gary Cohn, and Christina Bellantoni. With their painstaking research and fearless writing, the students in the Beacon Project present a model of how an institution should respond to allegations of wrongdoing. They are a credit to

USC, and a reminder of the best elements of any university: a desire to know the truth and to embrace the difficulty of institutional transformation as an opportunity for growth.

If the students' allegations against Dr. Kelly and USC are valid, this is the kind of statement that we would like to see our administration make:

We recognize that acts of casual cruelty and institutional neglect destroy the fabric of our community, and that the entire Trojan Family, but most especially the administration within Bovard, bears a deep responsibility for the harm done so cavalierly to so many. We especially recognize the betrayal of the trust of our LGBTQ students, and the fact that the institutions designed to protect them willfully led them into harm and failed to accept responsibility. We do so now, and we will do absolutely everything in our power to make sure that nothing like this ever happens again, and that victims are compassionately treated and adequately compensated. We recognize that we cannot repair the harm to those touched by this disaster, but we offer our sincerest apologies, and our equally sincere promise to do better in the future.

We could be proud of a university that speaks in this way.