

My Experiences with ASG

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Introduction

I am here to share with you, the Governing Board and the campus community at large, several of my experiences I have had in dealing with the Office of Student Affairs. I intend to read exactly from the paper I am handing you, and refer to the attached documents A-D. While I don't normally pedantically read from prepared statements, I feel that I must in this case given the Board's past history of mischaracterizing my statements. As such I am also submitting these documents to the Secretary to the Board with the request that my presentation be entered into the minutes exactly as presented, including attachments. I would also request that any questions or comments about me or my presentation be made during my time here and not during some other time or place where I cannot respond.

I have divided my presentation into two parts, the first informative and the second argumentative. I had originally written only the first part with the intention of reading it to you in as passive and informative a voice as I could, merely relating to you my experiences without argument. However, since the release of yesterday's telescope and conversations with students I felt compelled to write the second part in which I make arguments in how to deal with issues raised in the first part.

Part I. Andrew Bissell

I have had a long history of campus activism and service as advisor to several student clubs. Through this service I feel I have earned the confidence and trust of many students involved in club activities and student government. It is because of this trust that many active students have sought my advice and help in overcoming many obstacles thrown before them by a less than helpful college administration.

In the early Fall semester of 2009 I was approached by a member of the Associated Student Government (ASG). She was very upset about a situation she was placed in. She told me she had been approached by the Director of Student Affairs outside of a regular meeting, and that the Director had encouraged her to initiate impeachment proceedings against the current ASG President, Andrew Bissell. She felt that other students had been similarly pressured. She said the director appealed to her out a sense that Andrew was an outsider, that he did not work his way up through previous involvement in the ASG, and that he did not deserve to be president.

The student described to me widespread dissatisfaction and discord within the ASG, but felt that students were unfairly blaming Andrew for the problems. She described to me how the Director, who also serves as Advisor to the ASG, was actively undermining Andrew's presidency and creating havoc during ASG meetings. She told me the Director would constantly interrupt Andrew as he led meetings, challenge his knowledge of ASG rules, and admonish him for appearing to not understand the unwritten rules, referred to as 'past practices.' The student also described how the Director would talk and caucus with other students seated near her, undermining Andrew's ability to effectively lead meetings, and was seriously abusing her authority and influence as the advisor.

My response to the student's complaints was to offer to attend future ASG meetings, with the hopes that having a faculty member present might temper the situation, restrain the abuse of authority, and help create a more functional space where Andrew could demonstrate his leadership abilities. The next ASG meeting was scheduled for Wednesday of the following week.

The ASG meeting I attended was even worse than the student had described. At the very beginning the Director announced that no official ASG business could be discussed or actions taken, and that the meeting could only be informal since Andrew had once again failed to follow ASG rules, this time by failing to submit the meeting Agenda to her office for posting. The agenda for official meetings of the ASG are required to be posted three school days in advance of the regular meetings to comply with California's Open Public Meeting Laws, which we all know as the Brown Act. As such the Student Affairs office required that the ASG president submit the Agenda to the office by hand or email no later than the Thursday prior to the meeting so the administration can review, format it on ASG letterhead, and post on the official announcement board.

Upon the announcement of the meeting's cancellation, I witnessed the students erupt in visible frustration. The students felt that the ASG had important issues to discuss and decisions to make. Blame was clearly focused on Andrew, as both the Director and her Assistant insisted that he never sent them the Agenda as required. Andrew responded by swearing that he submitted the agenda properly via email the previous Thursday but could not explain why it had not been received. Although he produced a copy of the email he claimed was received by the ASG Vice-President, he accepted full responsibility for the failure. At this point a student rose and made a motion demanding that impeachment proceedings be initiated against Andrew for his failures. After some discussion another student pointed that since the meeting was unofficial an impeachment could not be initiated and would have to wait until the next official meeting.

At this point I asked to be recognized and gave my assessment. I said I would look into the email problem, but I questioned why it was necessary for the Agenda to be submitted through the Student Affairs Office rather than posted by the ASG President directly. If failure to post can result in a President's impeachment, than surely the President should have full control of getting the job done. With accountability should come responsibility. It seemed especially absurd to me since the ASG considers itself an autonomous student organization. I could not for the life of me understand why the Student Affairs Office needs to be in the loop in the first place.

Andrew announced that he would research and present at the next meeting a proposal for having the ASG President take full responsibility for posting the agenda. The students seemed relieved with the prospect of moving forward, and the meeting was adjourned.

After the Wednesday ASG meeting that wasn't, I wrote to the Director of Student Affairs. I appealed to her to please check her email folders carefully to be sure she did not somehow miss the Agenda that Andrew claimed he sent. I told her I was particularly concerned that Andrew might be unfairly shouldering the blame for a mistake the College made, and it would be extremely unjust if he were to be impeached as a result [Attachment A.] I got no response to my appeal.

Given my experience with this college administration and the Office of Student Affairs in particular, I felt that both the Director and her Assistant were lying about not receiving the Agenda as a pretext for having Andrew impeached. So I proceeded to file a California Public Records Act Request (CPRA) with the College the following week. I requested that the College confirm or deny that its servers received the email from Andrew Bissell on October 1st, and to furnish me with a list of all emails regarding ASG business received by both the Director (Sherri

Titus) and her Assistant (Marilyn Lunde) on October 1st. I was told by the Administration that it would require several weeks to respond to my request.

In the meantime I met with and got to know Andrew Bissell. Andrew is a returning combat veteran of the Iraq war, and a man of fine character. Andrew had been elected at the end of the previous Spring Semester in what was the largest and most active student election turnout I know of. He had been convinced to run by his peers in the Veterans Student Alliance, who actively ran a very colorful campaign complete with an iconic image of Andrew as a smiley face with a Mohawk. The leaders in the VSA were extremely enthusiastic about getting Veterans involved in student government and felt that it would be a very cathartic way for them to become re-engaged with civilian life. Many of them were coming to Palomar after serving in multiple deployments and combat situations in Iraq and Afghanistan.

As I got to know Andrew he became more comfortable sharing his problems serving as the ASG President, and how it was the most difficult and painful challenge he had ever faced in his life. He told me of his anxiety and nightmares, not of roadside bombs and insurgent snipers, but of College Administrators and false-witnesses bent on destroying his reputation and well-being. Several times he had been chastised for not submitting paperwork that he remembered submitting. But he felt increasingly confused and was reluctant to challenge the person who was supposed to be assisting him. He was beginning to worry that PTSD might be interfering with his memory and judgment. He told of his anxiety of not being able to distinguish between friend and foe, and was beginning to question his own sanity.

I assured him that he was perfectly sane, and that more than a few students have complained to me in the past that applications and paperwork submitted to the Office of Student Affairs had gone missing, causing them to miss out on important opportunities. I counseled him to get signed copies of everything he submitted to the Office. Andrew responded that having both the Advisor to the ASG and the Secretary actively working to sabotage the elected President was an intolerable situation, and felt it would ultimately destroy him if it were not resolved. So he decided to request a meeting with the Vice President of Student Services to see if it would be possible for him to seek another Advisor and Secretary for the ASG.

I subsequently received a response to my Public Records Act Request [Attachment B.]. It showed that on October 1st both the Director of Student Affairs (Sherri Titus) and the Secretary (Marilyn Lunde) had both received the emails Andrew had sent them containing the upcoming Agenda for the October 7th ASG meeting [Attachments C, D.] There also appears to be email discussion between them regarding the Agenda. Their public statements to the contrary were clearly lies intended to discredit Andrew and cause him to be impeached by the ASG. I did not at this time share this information with Andrew in the hope that the College Administration would take action to discipline the two and have them at least re-assigned away from the ASG.

In late October I accompanied Andrew to a meeting with the Vice President of Student Services, Dr. Mark Vernoy. Andrew articulated the problems he was having with Titus and Lunde, and insisted that they be removed from involvement in the ASG. Dr. Vernoy acknowledged Andrew's concerns and offered to try and mediate between Titus and Andrew. He also indicated that he was aware of my Records Request for the missing Agendas they claimed to not have received. He explained that it would be impossible for him to re-assign them and again encouraged Andrew to find a way to work with them.

Although Dr. Vernoy did try and mediate by attending several ASG meetings, very little actually changed. Andrew was informed by the Office that he would not be allowed to participate in the upcoming Leadership Conference in San Francisco, a trip that the entire ASG

was scheduled to attend. The reason was that the deadline for registration had passed weeks before, and the Office claimed he had not submitted his application for travel. Andrew told me he had not learned of the trip until after the deadline had passed. I wondered how both the advisor and secretary to the ASG could allow this to happen without malicious intent. I know I or any competent advisor would not allow a student I was advising to miss such an important opportunity.

At this point Andrew informed me that he was going to resign from ASG. He realized it would take a war to change things at Palomar. But he had already fought in one war for his country and did not feel he had the stamina for this one. He had originally been very excited about getting involved in student government, serving student needs, and having a meaningful impact on campus life for veterans. Instead he realized Palomar had no integrity as an institution and was just eager to get Veterans' money while paying little more than lip-service to their cause.

Andrew then shocked me by telling me that he also intended to drop out from Palomar mid-semester. He had only one-year left on his GI-Bill benefit and was too disgusted to expend it at Palomar. He instead intended to pursue his degree in Hospitality Management at Phoenix University. I was very disturbed by his intention to leave school and counseled him to meet and talk with some of his favorite teachers here to get advice.

Unfortunately his negative experience with College Administration outweighed all of the positive experiences he had had at Palomar. Andrew asked me to accompany him to a final meeting with President Deegan and Vice-President Vernoy, which I did.

At the meeting with President Deegan, Andrew retold the details of his experiences with the Office of Student Affairs and of his decision to resign. He also told President Deegan that he was very concerned that once he left, Titus and Lunde would target and harass his successor, ASG Vice-President Anne Hong, since she had been very supportive of him and resisted being manipulated. President Deegan tried to convince Andrew to stay at Palomar, mostly I believe because he understood that having the student government president resign ASG and quit Palomar mid-semester was a public relations disaster. Andrew negotiated with Deegan and Vernoy that they would ensure that Anne would not be retaliated against for her support, and in exchange Andrew would keep his resignation quiet.

Later Andrew asked me to also agree to keep quiet. I agreed that I would not publicly criticize the college or reveal my findings for as long as Anne was ASG President and had no problems with the Administration. We both agreed that I would be free to share the experience once all students involved had successfully transferred on to University. Anne Hong did succeed Andrew and led the ASG through a pretty successful year without interference from the Administration.

Part II-Need for Structural Change

Unfortunately the negative experience that Andrew Bissell had with this Administration was not an isolated incident, but one of many in a long line of problems that active students have had here. While these problems have gone on for years and years and years, the College Community has been unwilling or unable to deal with them. I believe the reason is because the problems are deeply structural rather than a matter of personalities, regardless of how the problems arise or which individuals are involved.

While the college was trying to manipulate the ASG and have Andrew Bissell impeached last year, a number of students came forward to testify as to their own experiences the previous

year. You are all aware of the testimonial sent by Ms. Jessica Baker, the former president of Phi Theta Kappa, and her experiences of college corruption she shared. I have included her letter in the packet as attachment D and request that it also be entered into the permanent record of this meeting tonight. I was witness to several of her experiences and am able corroborate much her testimony.

And the problems with the ASG continue on into this year, as uncovered by the student's own newspaper The Telescope just yesterday. Here we find that of 14 ASG senate positions only two are filled. But this is not due to lack of student interest or the fault of the current ASG president Channing Shattuck who I have witnessed to be a very active and charismatic student leader. Why, then, despite 12 of 14 senate seats being open, well qualified students such as Javier Tovar are being turned away in violation of the ASG's own by-laws? Is it because of Javier's previous encounters with the Office of Student Affairs in which he expressed his independence of thought and action?

So problems with the ASG have gone on for years and years and years with little done about them. The common denominator is the College Administration, which clearly shoulders the responsibility for these failures. Rather than face the problems and deal with them directly, the Administration has consistently either denied their existence, acted to sweep the problems under the carpet, or directly lied about them in the case of Andrew Bissell. And the Administration continues to insulate itself from change by using character assassination, false rumors, and insinuation to undermine its challengers.

When Jessica Baker presented her testimony to the college community she was vilified by this administration and President Deegan. She was initially cast as a vengeful malcontent and her letter declared hate speech. When attacking one of Palomar's best and brightest students did not go over well, especially with those of us who know Jessica and had her in our classes, the college then instead portrayed her as an innocent dupe being manipulated by faculty union activists such as myself. This was manifest in unscrupulous rumors spread by this Administration and articulated by a college Dean, who in a mass email accused several of us of "stooping to recruiting innocent students into battles that are far more complex than they can even begin to imagine." When asked to provide evidence to substantiate this and other remarks, the College refused.

Labeling legitimate criticism as hate speech is one means by which our College has acted to dissuade students from engaging in politics and acting independently. Another is spreading rumors and characterizing faculty who actually listen to and advocate for their students as scheming manipulators to sideline otherwise well-intentioned faculty from becoming involved.

Character assassination is another means by which the system resists change. When I first became knowledgeable about Andrew Bissell's situation and began to advocate for him there was an attempt to dissuade me. It was suggested that I be more sympathetic to Ms Titus because managing the ASG was perhaps the toughest job on campus, not to mention working with an especially difficult group of veterans who had cheated in the election of Andrew Bissell anyway. My reaction to this was the same as it is now: Show me evidence of the ASG election being stolen by our student veterans.

The fact is the Administration has no evidence of the election being stolen. But what an effective rumor to use in order to undermine a group of student leaders that seek to act independently. A group of student leaders who will not be satisfied with just the appearance of democracy and shared governance, but instead expect to have real and meaningful impact on the

way the college is governed, how the college sets its priorities, how it allocates its resources, and how it establishes accountability.

Through these experiences and others I have come to believe that this College's greatest fear is having to share power and control and being held accountable to its students. It is my belief that it is not power that corrupts, but the fear of loosing power that corrupts. And I believe that I have shown that we have become corrupt. I have shown that individuals have lied, have cheated, and have born false witness against others all to maintain their position of status and power within the College structure. And so I believe it is the structure of the College itself where I believe the root of the problem lies. Yes, some individuals have acted badly and made poor decisions, but the fact that these problems have continued for so many years indicates a deep structural problem. The fact that the people who have done these bad things are not necessarily bad people, as I am sure each of these people can produce a cadre of supporters who will attest to their goodness, indicates that the problem is structural in nature.

We as a college community have to accept that this is what we have become. We have to accept that despite all the positive things we do and stand for, the abuses and events I have described have happened and continue happen. And it only takes a few unchecked negatives to cancel all of the good work we do as a community.

Therefore, if we are to fix the problems that have plagued student government, we need to look for a structural change. The years of mismanagement and lack of accountability have demonstrated that the College Administration is incapable of handling student organizations and government. What is required is a reorganization of the ASG into a truly independent student body by removing it from under the auspices of the Administration.

As I have said in the past, we have several outstanding examples by which to model this reorganization. Our college newspaper, The Telescope, is independently run by students while advised by faculty who have expertise in the field of Journalism. Our award winning literary journal Bravura is independently run by students while being advised by faculty who have expertise in the field of literature. Our outstanding theatre program is another great example in which students participate in a rich and rewarding experience with faculty who are expert in the field of theatre.

I argue that student government should therefore be modeled along the lines of these exemplary programs. A truly independent student body, self organized but advised by faculty who are experts in the field of government and democracy. The students themselves should create and determine the details of this organization. This can only occur, though, if the College Community acts decisively to free the organization from its current place in the college structure.

Sincerely,

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