



July 8, 2020

Response to June 30, 2020 letter

Dear Students:

Your letter of June 30 asks me to acknowledge my “involvement in the decision to arm the Campus Public Safety Officers at PSU” and how I “will work to make sure students at Lewis & Clark remain safe.”

Let me start by acknowledging that I was involved in that decision, and that Jason Washington being shot and killed by the Portland State University police was horrible and tragic. Furthermore, I state unequivocally that I will never propose or support any effort to arm Lewis & Clark Campus Safety officers.

I became PSU’s president in 2008. PSU is a 27,000 student, 50-acre open access campus in the heart of downtown Portland. At that time, there already had been long-standing debate about how to keep the campus safe. A Task Force established at PSU following the shootings at Virginia Tech in 2007 had recommended the campus should have a sworn police force itself, or as part of a system-wide police force for all public universities. (Sworn police have the authority to serve warrants, make arrests, carry weapons, and have other powers that public safety officers do not have). At PSU, the then-Vice President of Administration opposed it for financial and other reasons, and we did not pursue it. Having grown up in the Netherlands, where gun ownership is almost non-existent, I have always hated guns, and had no interest in arming officers.

In 2013, a new Vice President for Administration, along with the Vice President of Student Affairs, and the Chief of Public Safety came to me and argued they could not keep the campus safe, given the increasing incidents of crime on and near campus, including incidents with armed drug dealers and people carrying guns and other weapons on campus. Other issues that were raised included the lack of adequate assistance from Portland Police in pursuing sexual assault cases, or the frequent thefts and car break-ins; and concerns about their slow response time, especially in light of the nationwide campus and school mass shootings that were taking place around that time.

As part of a statewide discussion regarding policing on public university campuses, the Oregon Legislature had recently enacted a new law authorizing public universities to create police departments, and the University of Oregon and OHSU had already followed up on this new legal authority and done so. (OSU already had dedicated police support from the Oregon State Police). The Vice President and others argued that it would be irresponsible for PSU to be an outlier in the event of an active shooter or other horrific criminal event on campus. Many people also felt that if police were ever necessary to deal with an issue on campus, PSU police officers would be more sensitive to the nature of students and campus life than Portland Police would be.

We charged a new task force, which pointed out that among the 100 largest campuses in the United States, PSU was the only one without either its own sworn police force (96 campuses) or a special detachment of local police (3 campuses). They also found that of the people arrested on campus, virtually none were affiliated with PSU, and over half had prior convictions for violent crimes. The task force recommended PSU explore contracting with Portland Police, OHSU Police, or Oregon State Police, and that if none of these proved feasible, PSU should create its own police force.

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We explored the options suggested, but none of the three police forces were willing to take on the responsibility of policing another institution. As the campus was debating these issues, an armed student shot and killed another student at Reynolds High School in Portland, before being shot by a police officer stationed at the school. This incident further aggravated fears on campus. After much soul-searching, and acutely conscious of the risks associated both with going forward and with leaving things as they were, I proposed to the Board of Trustees in the fall of 2014 that PSU establish its own police force.

This recommendation was controversial. There was significant opposition from students and from faculty. Therefore, the Board created a special committee to again consider the issue. After several open town halls and many meetings the committee recommended going forward. The Board approved this in December of 2014, subject to the development of intensive training and operational protocols and creation of an oversight body. Another broad-based task force with students, faculty, staff, and policing experts developed these, and the Board gave final approval in June 2015. In its approval and with my support, the Board stressed the importance of recruiting a diverse police force that represented the PSU community, and training about the specific needs of effective university-oriented policing, cultural competency, unconscious bias, mental health issues and interacting with persons with disabilities. (Later in 2015, an active shooter killed a professor and eight students at Umpqua Community College in Roseburg, giving further urgency to the implementation of these recommendations).

I retired from PSU in the summer of 2017. A year later, the worst scenario came to pass. Jason Washington was killed by PSU officers during a street fight, holding a gun, on June 29, 2018. The Multnomah District Attorney did not bring any charges against the officers. The subsequent report by independent experts did not blame the officers, but faulted PSU for not fully implementing its own training and operational protocols, and PSU settled a civil suit with Jason Washington's family for \$1 million.

Summing up and reflecting back, it is certainly true that I played a significant role in establishing a sworn police force at PSU. It was a decision made after lengthy deliberation and study by many people, with divergent opinions. In the end, the Board of Trustees made the decision to go forward. The PSU police have been able to pursue criminal cases and prevent assaults. If I had known then what I know now, both in terms of what happened to Jason Washington and in regard to alternative forms of securing public safety, I don't believe we would have taken the same approach. Like other leaders in government, higher education, or other organizations, I was required to make a difficult decision. I tried to do it in a transparent and data-informed manner, in consultation with many others on campus, and based on the best available information I had, knowing that such a decision could have significant consequences--both good and bad. It was agonizing at the time, agonizing again after the death of Jason Washington, and all the more agonizing now as our nation struggles anew with issues of policing and race.

That brings me to Lewis & Clark. As stated above, I will never propose or support arming our Campus Safety officers. However, the larger issue of safety for Black, Indigenous, and other people of color goes beyond the role of Campus Safety. It requires a community-wide effort to explore and change many of our own practices and beliefs. It will include the initiatives announced in my letter of June 9. We are already changing our student recruitment in order to attract more Black, Latinx and other students of color. To make attendance possible for more of these students, we are starting several new fundraising initiatives, and also plan to work with a major national organization that supports such efforts. And to help create a campus where everyone is seen, heard, and valued, we will implement antiracism training for faculty, staff and students. We will work with faculty to address issues with classroom climate and

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curriculum; and redouble our focus on hiring more faculty and staff of color. Additional activities will be developed with input from the campus in the fall.

I look forward to working with you and the entire campus community as we undertake this important work.

Sincerely,

Wim Wiewel
President