

Penn State Forward

STUDENT SAFETY PLATFORM

Platform Last Modified April 9, 2022

About Penn State Forward

Penn State Forward is a group of students and young alumni supporting three young, forward-thinking candidates for the Penn State Board of Trustees during the 2022 Alumni Trustee Election: **Dr. Christa Hasenkopf**, **Dr. Edward Smith**, and **Dr. Farnaz Farhi**. The Penn State Forward platform includes commitments and initiatives to advance climate action, educational equity, student safety, and transparent governance at Penn State.

Candidate Biographies

Dr. Christa Hasenkopf is an atmospheric scientist who has focused her professional career on helping communities act on the severe public health and climate consequences of burning fossil fuels. Her work founding OpenAQ prepares her to prioritize student safety at Penn State — it demonstrates her expertise in creating transparent governing structures and advocacy that prioritizes the dignity and well-being of all.

Dr. Ed Smith is a former Black Caucus president who built coalitions to fight for a just, safe, and culturally-inclusive campus. As a higher education expert — Ed holds a doctorate in higher education from the University of Pennsylvania — Ed has the expertise required to implement real changes that ensure student safety. At NASPA, he authored briefs and delivered presentations on the Violence Against Women Act, Title IX, and Americans with Disabilities Act.

Dr. Farnaz Farhi is an Ob/Gyn who has spent 15 years studying sexual violence and caring for those who have experienced it. As an undergraduate, she spent hundreds of hours volunteering at CentreSafe, and she wrote her thesis on barriers students face in accessing resources after experiencing sexual violence. Since then, she devoted her medical training and practice to caring for those who experienced sexual trauma. Farnaz knows Penn State can do more to prevent sexual violence, and she is committed to making Penn State a leader in this area.

All Penn State alumni or former degree-program students are eligible to vote in the alumni trustee election by following instructions at psuforward.org/vote. All Penn State alumni or former degree-program students are eligible to vote in the alumni trustee election, which will take place from April 10th, 2022 to May 5th, 2022 at 9 AM EST.

Platform Modifications

This platform has been created after review of existing research about Penn State's practices and extensive conversations with students, staff, faculty, and alumni. In alignment with our desire to move Penn State forward, we welcome suggestions at team@psuforward.org. And in alignment with our fourth pillar — transparent governance — we will note platform modifications and our rationale on our last page.

Summary

We envision a Penn State where institutional decision-makers safeguard and respect the life and well-being of every Penn State student. If elected to the Board, we will act on preventable sexual violence, hate crimes, and student death. Specifically, we will:

1. Implement a framework for compassionate institutional responses and administrative action in the event of student death
2. Reconvene the 2015 Task Force on Sexual Assault with increased student representation to examine the campus issues, policies, and programs surrounding sexual violence, with an emphasis on structural issues and institutional change. We will monitor and evaluate the previous recommendations and create new ones that champion institutional transparency and structural, cost-effective prevention efforts to sexual violence
3. Increase funding for addressing sexual violence across Penn State campuses, including increasing funding for the Gender Equity Center and providing a larger space and more transparency and institutional accountability in funding

Again, like our other platform pillars, this is just a starting point. We are eager to work with the Penn State community to continue this work.

Student Death

In the past, the death of a Penn State student has not elicited a response from Penn State's higher leadership and/or affected family has been unable to engage directly with Penn State leadership, which not only impede healing, but also have created rumors and confusion with students around whether the death even took place.¹ The lack of or inadequate responses from Penn State institutional decision-makers have been acknowledged by the Penn State community and even grieving family members.^{2,3} Even high-profile deaths, like that of Justine Gross, Tim Piazza, and Joey Dado have not elicited adequate institutional responses — institutional leaders have noted that, for example, “Joe Dado’s death... won’t have any meaning for next year’s freshmen”⁴ and no senior administrators attended Tim Piazza’s funeral.⁵

Student death carries significant meaning. Parents, family members, and friends of students trust institutional leaders with students’ safety. Students should not be conceived “primarily in market terms”⁶ but seen as who they are — valuable members of the Penn State community. Institutional decision-makers have an obligation to memorialize students and examine causal

¹ Eberly, Rosa A., “We need to talk about the death of Justine Gross,” Letter to the Editor, *The Collegian*, Dec 6, 2021

² Ibid.

³ Flanagan, Caitlin, “A Death at Penn State,” *The Atlantic*, November 2017

⁴ Eberly, “We need to talk.”

⁵ Flanagan, “A Death at Penn State.”

⁶ Susan Searls Giroux and Henry A. Giroux, “Universities Gone Wild: Big Money, Big Sports and Scandalous Abuse at Penn State,” *Cultural Studies, Critical Methodologies* 12, no. 4 (2012): 269. doi:10.1177/1532708612446419.

factors to develop and boldly implement preventative measures to **ensure that preventable death does not occur**.

We will create a framework to ensure compassionate institutional responses to student death. This framework will be transparent and include a process to analyze causal factors and develop and implement prevention measures to prevent future harm to students. This framework will be developed with significant participation from students, staff, faculty, and administration.

This framework will include a compassionate response from Penn State leadership — its president and the Board of Trustees — to the family of the deceased and, in alignment with family wishes, to the Penn State community. This is important for community healing and a shared, accurate understanding of the student’s death — and an opportunity to memorialize the value and the meaning of the student’s life.

Further, this framework will include the identification of systemic causes underlying the death — unsafe housing, hazing, mental health, or any other causal factors. These causes must be identified to catalyze university action and to do the necessary preventative work. To increase transparency to the Penn State community, a summary of causal factors and new measures implemented will be released regularly, in a way that respects the privacy of deceased students and also ensures increased university accountability. The framework will be released publicly and regularly reviewed.

Sexual Violence

According to a national survey, more than 25% of women undergraduates and 7% of men undergraduates experience sexual assault or rape.⁷ Students deserve university accountability and transparency, and data-driven, research-informed preventative measures can reduce the incidence of sexual violence in a cost-effective manner. Students cannot learn if they do not feel safe — and student activism around sexual violence reveals that many students do not.

Background

The movement to address sexual violence on Penn State’s campus has been around since the rise of second wave feminism in the 1980’s. The Center for Women Students, now known as the Gender Equity Center, was established in 1985 with Sabrina Chapman as the Director.⁸ The original goal of the center was to address the situation of, “doubly discriminated against on the basis of race, ethnicity, chronological age, disability, or sexual orientation.”⁹ The Center was created and initially allotted a small office to share with returning adult students, and the parent’s program.¹⁰ The space was cramped and not able to host all of the events led by the

⁷From [RAINN.org](https://rainn.org) and sources cited therein.

⁸ [Sonenklar, Carol. *We Are a Strong, Articulate Voice: A History of Women at Penn State*](#)

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

women students. It was not until 1987, when the University realized the need to expand the center and they hired a full-time counselor.¹¹

The Center for Women Students changed its name to the Gender Equity Center in 2017 to “better reflect its diverse services and the students it serves.”¹² The current Gender Equity Center is still located in the Boucke Building with the mission of, “students who have been impacted by sexual violence, relationship violence, stalking, harassment, and other campus climate issues. In addition, the office works to educate the campus community about Gender Equity issues and to provide workshops and resources for the prevention of sexual violence.”¹³ The Center currently has four full time staff members, and a graduate assistant. It has grown considerably since its inception in 1985. The Center has evolved from a place for students to meet and support each other to a resource and advocacy organization that supports students affected by gender-based violence. The Gender Equity Center hosts two peer-education groups: Men Against Violence, and Peers Helping Reaffirm, Educate, and Empower (PHREE). These student-focused groups are based out of the center; they host training and lead educational initiatives for various student organizations across campus. In addition to the groups run out of the Gender Equity Center, students on Penn State’s campus have begun their own activist organizing to call for reforms.

Recently, student activists have formed advocacy groups to demand the University address sexual violence through an intersectional lens and make serious reforms. The [Schreyer Gender Equity Coalition](#), which was created in 2019, aims to, “advocate for just policies and educate students to create a more equitable Penn State, focusing on critical issues facing women, intersex, trans, and non-binary individuals — sexual violence, reproductive justice, and the intersection of marginalized identities.” They also [spearheaded](#) the effort to demand the University release the 2018 Climate Survey. The Coalition has been active in raising awareness about initiatives the University can take to better serve survivors of sexual violence and holding them accountable when they fail to follow through on their promises. Additionally, [Penn State Lotus](#), was founded in 2021 with the aim to, “address the stigmas around sexual violence in minority communities by creating a safe, healing environment for survivors and allies.. Lotus aims to create a space for marginalized survivors of sexual violence and to advocate for Penn State policies that will better serve students of color who are affected by gender-based violence. [Students Against Sexist Violence](#) also formed this year to protest the how the university handles sexual assault. The organization held several “Untimely Warning Protests” to demand better support for victims of sexual assault. **The rise in student activism about sexual assault on campus is evidence that the institution needs to be taking more concrete and research-informed steps to address sexual violence.**

[Data collected by the University](#) reveals that current efforts – that focus on bystander intervention and reducing alcohol consumption – have not reduced the incidence of sexual violence at Penn State. In addition, the University selectively releases data collected, [notably](#)

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² [“Center for Women Students Changes Name to Gender Equity Center,” Onward State.](#)

¹³ [Gender Equity Center.](#)

[omitting data](#) about the efficacy of Penn State’s resources. Students have commented on the self-protective nature of university-sanctioned sexual violence efforts, including the fact that university “experts” — those hired to do anti-sexual-violence work — often lack academic protects and are not empowered to make policy changes.

Actions the Penn State Forward slate will take, if elected to the Board of Trustees:

- 1. Reconvene the 2015 Task Force on Sexual Assault with increased student representation, emphasis on intersectionality, structural issues, and institutional change. Monitor and evaluate the previous recommendations and create new ones that better reflect the evolution of student and public attitudes in response to sexual violence.**

The 2015 Task Force on Sexual Assault was convened by President Barron as one of his first acts as President of Penn State to examine the campus issues, policies, and programs surrounding sexual violence.¹⁴ The 2015 Task Force produced 18 recommendations over the span of several months which were all adopted by President Barron. The task force recommendations mostly focused on the institutional response and revision of the Title IX Process. The entire list of recommendations can be found [here](#). Several of the recommendations and outcomes of the 2015 Task Force include:

- Create a new, stand-alone staff position to coordinate Title IX goals and initiatives, along with accompanying staff, including an investigator, a prevention and education coordinator, and a deputy coordinator for the Commonwealth Campuses.
- Administer a climate survey this spring to better understand the scope and nature of the problem and conduct regular surveys on sexual assault in successive years
- Move Office of Student Conduct away from its traditional hearing process and embrace instead an investigative model for resolving sexual misconduct cases;
- Implement various educational experiences for students that reflect their evolving developmental needs during the course of their college experience, including a required course for all first-year students that explores issues of student well-being and safety, with an emphasis on building positive relationships and preventing sexual misconduct and alcohol misuse
- Implement a timely (e.g. annual or semi-annual) release of aggregate data on sexual misconduct at the University, beyond the data included in the annual Clery Act report

The Title IX Process has changed since the recommendations of the 2015 Sexual Assault Task Force, mostly due to new guidelines by the Department of Education under Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos. President Biden made a commitment to repeal the DeVos Title IX guidelines and implement new guidelines. The fluctuations in federal policy make it difficult to constantly update Penn State Title IX regulations. One of the key problems in Penn State’s continuous revision of Title IX regulations is the **lack of transparency with the student body**. A

¹⁴ [2015 Penn State Task Force on Sexual Assault Recommendations, Daily Collegian.](#)

Title IX Student Advisory Board was created in 2021, but the process to get on the board and the recommendations by the board are gatekept by institutional barriers and red tape. **Students should have a greater voice and place at the table in the continuous revision of Title IX regulations, and it needs to be institutionalized—not decided at the discretion of the current Title IX Coordinator.**

Another update that can occur from a recommendation from the 2015 Task Force is the ambiguous nature of the “annual or semi-annual” release of aggregate data on sexual violence at the university. The university conducted its first report in 2015 and released the results in 2015. The university conducted another iteration of the survey in 2018 and did not release those results until the fall of 2021. The survey results were delayed by almost three years. Public student outcry prompted the university to release the results immediately¹⁵ and hold the university accountable for delays. Notably, the Schreyer Gender Equity Coalition created a [open letter](#) to Student Affairs leadership to demand the release of the results of the climate survey. Further, the **data was selectively released with information about the efficacy of Penn State’s resources notably omitted**. No tangible changes were made after the release of the survey; **Penn State’s preventative measures are not informed by data**, even though they expend institutional resources to complete the surveys — **this isn’t efficient, nor is it fair to students**.

The changes in public attitudes towards sexual violence, the rise in student advocacy voices, and the university’s failure to properly implement the 2015 recommendations lead us to ensure, as trustees, that there will be a new task force convened to address sexual violence at Penn State and increased oversight of and transparency of the implementation process with future recommendations.

2. Increased funding for Gender Equity Center initiatives including a larger space, a student programming budget, and more transparency in funding for essential student services.

Currently, the Gender Equity Center exists on the second floor of the Boucke Building in a small office with privacy for students seeking assistance. The Gender Equity Center’s peers have large places of prominence in the HUB. The Gender Equity Center has recently hired a survivor advocate and a programming director in addition to a Director, Assistant Director, Administrative Support Assistant, and Graduate Assistant. The small space does not provide enough room for office space, student peer meeting spaces, and confidential meetings between victims and survivor advocates.

Additionally, the Gender Equity Center has a very limited programming budget. The Gender Equity Center does have an endowment called the Giardini endowment but the endowment has strict stipulations such as, “it can only be used for self-defense programs for the empowerment of women.” As a result of the stipulations, the Center is unable to access the funds for honorariums and other empowerment events. The thinking around sexual violence programming has evolved from teaching individuals “self-defense” to one that uses theories

¹⁵ Penn State institutional decision-makers released results two weeks after a public letter was released; the letter gained over 700 signatures, mostly from Penn State students, during these two weeks.

from intersectional feminism and that has been created in a post #MeToo world. Unlike its peers, The Gender Equity Center does not have a large endowment to draw from for programming, and largely relies on the Student Fee Board and various student organization co-sponsors — placing the burden of funding on students, not on the institution.

The Gender Equity Center provides support to all students who have experienced sexual violence, and domestic violence, and provides essential educational events to the 40,000 students at University Park. Its funding should match the level of importance to the university. Additionally, University funding for social services is incredibly hard to find and not made publicly available to the students who use them. An increase in transparency for Student Affairs budgets would help students and community members feel confident that the university is funding offices equitably — and prioritizing student services along with athletics.