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Dr. Jared L. Cohen
President
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5000 Forbes Ave.
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Dr. Cohen,

I write this letter with concern, but before I begin, allow me to introduce myself. I am a recently-graduated (E'10, E'11) donating alum of Carnegie Mellon University; I send this letter on my own behalf, but also on behalf of many other alumni sharing my concern.

I'm writing with regard to a concerning weblog post that I recently read; on May 5th, a Carnegie Mellon undergraduate – Nicole Ickes – posted that she would not be graduating this year as a result of a handful of events that transpired at Carnegie Mellon. I'll go into these in more detail, but additionally, I have enclosed a copy with this letter¹. In short, this student was sexually assaulted, harassed, and even after those, prevented a friend of hers from committing suicide some time later.

Were these all that occurred, I would not be composing this letter. Carnegie Mellon is neither a high school nor a mental institution, and its students are not subject to around-the-clock monitoring (nor should they be!). In a college setting, students have freedoms that they may never have had before, and some of them will abuse them to cause untold amounts of distress to others; it would be unreasonable to blame the University for the direct actions of students.

However, these events were not the only things that befell Ms. Ickes, according to her account. No, my anger and concern leveled at the University comes from their response. In the case of Nicole's assault, the University appeared to violate the rights made available to her by Title IX and the U. S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights on numerous occasions. Worse, in my mind, is that, the University informed Ms. Ickes that they suspected that she **fabricated** all three incidents.

For emphasis, I will pause to reflect on the meaning of this. In the case of a student entering with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder after a previous assault, the University is not simply ignoring what happened to her, but telling her, in essence, that **her experience was not real**. Many of us (myself included) have no basis by which we can compare what it means for somebody to tell us that an assault on our persons didn't happen; we have no way of understanding what it's like to have someone tell us that a trauma isn't legitimate or isn't real, and accuse us of overreacting. So, if you don't know, I'll inform you, and you'll have to take this at face value, how this feels: for these people, being denied the reality of what happened can be as painful as the original event. When we tell people who have been sexually assaulted that their reality isn't, and that their experience isn't valid, we're telling them that they're "less human" than the rest of us. We're telling them that they need to hide what happened to them; we're telling them that **they're** not valid. On top of that, the message that we send to the community at large – anybody who has similar experiences – is that it's not

¹Nicole's post can be found online at <http://insertsymbolshere.wordpress.com/2012/05/18/shush/>.

worth their time or the pain that they will suffer to report these sorts of incidents.

Obviously, this is not an experience that I would wish on anyone, and that is why I feel it particularly angering that the University did just that. I find it difficult to understand just how this happened, and how the University's Police Department thought that this was a compassionate or acceptable way to treat a student who was sexually assaulted *and then proceeded to save another student's life*.

The depth of the University's errors in Nicole's case do not stop with the Police Department, however. In the case of a student as affected as Nicole, the University should go out of their way to observe her and make sure that she is getting the support that she needs. Again, just the opposite happened here; since she wasn't able to get the resources needed, she proceeded to "slip through the cracks", failing all her classes that semester without the University so much as noticing. (When she brought this up in retrospect, the University acknowledged that she may have had a case for removing those courses from her record; the University did not acknowledge the role it played in her failing those classes in the first place, nor did it acknowledge its legal obligation to erase the records of those courses upon her request.)

The above paragraphs are simply a summary of Nicole's experience, with a highlight on what so angered and concerned me as an alum. I urge you to read Nicole's account for yourself; I feel that it is important that you understand how this has impacted her.

I'm sure that upon reading this, you will also be as concerned as I. As such, I (and my fellow alumni) have some questions for you to answer:

1. Was this case handled according to policy? If not, why not? In cases where policy was violated, it would be most useful if you could provide information as to where the system failed, and how that could have happened; additionally, please provide information on systematic changes that will be made to prevent such violations from occurring again.
2. How does Carnegie Mellon intend to handle Nicole's case going forward?
3. What, if any, changes does Carnegie Mellon intend to make in order to better serve students in a similar position? Have any of these changes been discussed in the past? If so, why were they not implemented?

One of the core values of any university – and especially so ours – is acknowledging one's mistakes so that we can fix them, and then learn from them. Acknowledging our mistakes is necessary not only so that we can correct them, but also so that we can correct the ideas that led us to them in the first place. Our University's approach to problem solving – in its academic fields, and in its own affairs – is part of what built Carnegie Mellon's respected reputation; I hope that we can continue on this path to bring resolution and closure to Nicole's situation, and to prevent it from happening again.

I, and my fellow alumni, eagerly await your response. In the coming days, I will be setting up a site to track the progress of this; you should expect to receive letters in support of Ms. Ickes from a percentage of the other students and concerned alumni who read this letter.

Sincerely yours,

Joshua Wise