

Nassar Case Analysis

For many years, major universities in the United States have struggled with large scale sexual assault allegations. Most recently, Michigan State University has come under fire for a series of allegations spanning two decades against Larry Nassar.¹ Due to countless media missteps, including insensitive comments and withholding information, Michigan State has become a negative example for organizations in similar states of crisis. Their prestige and sizable endowment have left many people wondering just how an institution with access to countless resources could create such a public relations mess.

Michigan State University was founded in 1855 as a land grant institution in Lansing, Michigan's state capital. They are a school of significant fame as a part of the Big Ten conference with 49,809 enrolled students in Fall 2019 and an estimated 634,300 living alumni.² Following the Nassar trial in 2018, application rates dropped by 8.3%, a relatively high rate when compared to institutions facing similar crises, despite showing a steady increase during the prior seven years.³ A spokesperson for Michigan State attributed the drop in applicants to demographic changes and visa issues for their large population of

¹ Murphy, D. (2017, April 19). Four new complaints filed against Larry Nassar, including one dating to '92. Retrieved from https://www.espn.com/olympics/story/_/id/19191934/new-complaints-larry-nassar-allege-sexual-abuse-dates-1992

² Michigan State University. (n.d.). MSU Facts. Retrieved from <https://msu.edu/about/thisismsu/facts.php>

³ Lavigne, P., & Noren, N. (2018, December 2). Applications to Michigan State drop after Nassar, sexual assault scandals. Retrieved from https://www.espn.com/espn/otl/story/_/id/25430618/applications-michigan-state-university-drop-larry-nassar-sexual-assault-scandals-espn-lines

international students when ESPN reached out for a statement.⁴ Michigan State also advertised the 2018 entering class as “largest and most diverse [class] in the school’s history”, but ESPN reported that they admitted 77.7% of applicants rather than the 65.7% in 2016.⁵

The first indications of trouble came for Michigan State University in May 2014, when they were named one of fifty-five higher education institutions under investigation by the federal Office of Civil Rights “for possible violations of federal law over the handling of sexual violence and harassment complaints”.⁶ No definitive results of the investigation are available, but some news sources have reported that the first discussions of Nassar’s sexual misconduct also began in 2014.⁷ Allegations against Nassar date all the way back to 1992, though, when he was a medical student at Michigan State University, but this incident was not officially reported until 2017.⁸ He was named team physician for Michigan State gymnastics and began to work as an assistant professor in 1997, this was also the year of the

⁴ Lavigne, P., & Noren, N. (2018, December 2). Applications to Michigan State drop after Nassar, sexual assault scandals. Retrieved from https://www.espn.com/espn/otl/story/_/id/25430618/applications-michigan-state-university-drop-larry-nassar-sexual-assault-scandals-espn-lines

⁵ Lavigne, P., & Noren, N. (2018, December 2). Applications to Michigan State drop after Nassar, sexual assault scandals. Retrieved from https://www.espn.com/espn/otl/story/_/id/25430618/applications-michigan-state-university-drop-larry-nassar-sexual-assault-scandals-espn-lines

⁶ U.S. Department of Education Releases List of Higher Education Institutions with Open Title IX Sexual Violence Investigations. (2014, May 1). Retrieved from <https://www.ed.gov/news/press-releases/us-department-education-releases-list-higher-education-institutions-open-title-i>

⁷ Kozlowski, K. (2018, January 19). What MSU knew: 14 were warned of Nassar abuse. Retrieved from <https://www.detroitnews.com/story/tech/2018/01/18/msu-president-told-nassar-complaint-2014/1042071001/>

⁸ Kozlowski, K. (2017, August 11). How MSU doc became suspect in dozens of rapes. Retrieved from <https://www.detroitnews.com/story/news/local/michigan/2017/08/10/rise-fall-larry-nassar/104491508/>

first complaint against Nassar, addressed by a parent to Kathryn Geddert, coach of Twistars USA Gymnastics Club.⁹ Later, Geddert would face a lawsuit for failing to report the claims.

In 1999, a Michigan State athlete told the program staff that she was sexually assaulted while receiving treatment from Nassar and was dismissed with the statements that Nassar was “an Olympic doctor” and “knew what he was doing”.¹⁰ Similar reports and responses were reported by victims in the following years. In 2004, Nassar began soliciting child pornography and received over a thousand images until a federal investigation in 2016.

¹¹ During the same year, the first report against Nassar was made to the Meridian Township Police Department but was never sent to prosecutors after Nassar defended the treatment with a PowerPoint presentation to the police.¹² The next official reports were seen in 2014 when a Michigan State graduate reported sexual assault by Nassar to Dr. Jeff Kovan of the MSU Sports Medicine Clinic. Lou Anna Simon, president of Michigan State University at the time, was made aware of the complaint and police report but was not aware that Nassar was the perpetrator.¹³ Nassar was allowed to continue treating patients at the clinic for sixteen months while the MSU Police Department was investigating, despite the university’s ability to

⁹ MSU doctor's alleged victims talked for 20 years. Was anyone listening? (n.d.). Retrieved from https://www.mlive.com/news/page/msu_doctor_alleged_sexual_assault.html

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¹¹ Mencarini, M. (2016, December 16). Larry Nassar indicted on federal child porn charges. Retrieved from <https://www.lansingstatejournal.com/story/news/local/2016/12/16/attorney-larry-nassar-arrested-federal-officials/95529364/>

¹² LeBlanc, B. (2018, February 1). Meridian officials release 2004 Nassar police report. Retrieved from <https://www.lansingstatejournal.com/story/news/local/2018/01/30/meridian-twp-apologize-woman-w-hose-nassar-complaint-never-sent-prosecutors/1078230001/>

¹³ Kozlowski, K. (2018, January 19). What MSU knew: 14 were warned of Nassar abuse. Retrieved from <https://www.detroitnews.com/story/tech/2018/01/18/msu-president-told-nassar-complaint-2014/1042071001/>

suspend any employee under criminal investigation.¹⁴ In July 2015, the MSU Police Department turned the investigation over to the Ingham County Prosecutor's Office with the recommendation that Nassar be charged with sexual assault, but he was cleared of wrongdoing.¹⁵

Nassar was a renowned doctor, USA Gymnastics gave him countless awards and he was inducted into the Michigan State University.¹⁶ People valued his opinions, athletes felt honored to be treated by him, and figures of authority were willing to go to incredible lengths to protect that prestige. Dr. William Strampel, former dean of the College of Osteopathic Medicine at Michigan State, was appointed to oversee Nassar's clinic after the allegations in 2014. In an email to Nassar, he addressed the issues by advising Nassar to "...be sure that there is little to no skin to skin contact when in these regions..." and be sure to better explain the procedure to the patient.¹⁷ Dr. Strampel was charged in March 2018 with felony misconduct in office and criminal sexual conduct with a student and storing nude photos of students on his computer.¹⁸ These charges were a significant challenge to Michigan State's image, as Dr. Strampel played a significant role in the steps that the university took to address

¹⁴ Mencarini, M. (2017, December 20). MSU let Larry Nassar see patients for 16 months during criminal sex assault investigation. Retrieved from <https://www.lansingstatejournal.com/story/news/local/2017/12/19/michigan-state-larry-nassar/964034001/>

¹⁵ Mencarini, M. (2017, December 20). MSU let Larry Nassar see patients for 16 months during criminal sex assault investigation. Retrieved from <https://www.lansingstatejournal.com/story/news/local/2017/12/19/michigan-state-larry-nassar/964034001/>

¹⁶ Reneau, N., Upadhye, N., Stein, R., & Kerr, S. S. (2018, January 25). How Did Larry Nassar Get Away With It? Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/video/us/100000005698488/larry-nassar-gymnastics-sex-abuse.html?searchResultPosition=20>

¹⁷ Reneau, N., Upadhye, N., Stein, R., & Kerr, S. S. (2018, January 25). How Did Larry Nassar Get Away With It? Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/video/us/100000005698488/larry-nassar-gymnastics-sex-abuse.html?searchResultPosition=20>

¹⁸ Joseph, E., & Valle, L. del. (2019, June 13). Former Michigan State dean guilty of misconduct in office and willful neglect of duty. Retrieved from <https://www.cnn.com/2019/06/12/us/msu-strampel-conviction-nassar/index.html>

preliminary complaints against Nassar. Continued charges against the staff of Michigan State University showed the public that the problems of covering up sexual assault allegations were not solely based around Nassar, they indicated an institutional value of prestige over truth.

News of Nassar's crimes first broke in the Indianapolis Star on September 12, 2016. Rachel Denhollander came forward in an interview with the newspaper about the charges she filed with MSU Police because she was concerned that USA Gymnastics might be aware of Nassar's assault of the gymnasts.¹⁹ This was the first of a series of coverage that allowed the case to spiral out of Michigan State's control before the trial began. Nassar was fired four days after the news story broke, but they had already lost the chance to speak first on the charges. Jason Cody, Michigan State's spokesman at the time, was reluctant to share information and spoke entirely on Nassar's violations of the university's "employment requirements", which he also did not clearly define.²⁰ Cody's avoidance of speaking directly on the allegations was not wise in the face of strong emotions that other news sources were publishing. Michigan State set the tone for future statements to be cold and unwelcoming to Nassar's victims and ultimately hindered how its reparation efforts would be perceived by the country.

In many ways, it is still unclear who knew what and when they knew it, but it is undeniable that several administrators at Michigan State University were made aware of Nassar's actions through the years and failed to take appropriate action. Their first response to the allegations going public was not well researched or executed. During the most vital part of the media coverage when the information was uncertain and accusations were

¹⁹ Gymnast accuses former USAG doctor of abuse. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.indystar.com/videos/news/2016/09/12/90274492/>

²⁰ Haxel, C., & Mencarini, M. (2016, September 20). MSU fires doctor facing sexual assault allegations. Retrieved from <https://www.lansingstatejournal.com/story/news/local/2016/09/20/msu-fires-doctor-facing-sexual-assault-allegations/90734818/>

escalating, officials from Michigan State withheld information, avoided blame, and even outright lied. President Lou Anna Simon said in an early letter to the college community, “We believe the evidence will show that no MSU official believed that Nassar committed sexual abuse prior to newspaper reports in late summer 2016.”²¹ This statement was carefully phrased to avoid explicitly stating that Michigan State was unaware of the allegations, but the evidence has still shown that officials were well aware of the abuse, including Simon herself. In November 2018, after resigning under pressure in January, Simon was charged with two felonies and two misdemeanor counts of obstructing information from the police.²²

Before her resignation, President Simon made a series of mistakes in her handling of the media and statements directed at victims. Her first proper statement to the campus community was not issued until February 3, 2017, months after the news first broke, and this was also the first time that Michigan State outlined the steps that it was taking to remedy the situation.²³ The statement should have been issued within days of the media coverage, the months of silence on the action that they planned to take allowed time for the outrage to build. Most of Michigan State’s initial official response to the crisis centered around her, which may indicate a lack of proper research into handling scandals in higher education. They should have better assessed what figures have the highest levels of trust within their college community and from outside stakeholders in order to be more intentional with the faces delivering reassurances.

²¹ Reneau, N., Upadhye, N., Stein, R., & Kerr, S. S. (2018, January 25). How Did Larry Nassar Get Away With It? Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/video/us/100000005698488/larry-nassar-gymnastics-sex-abuse.html?searchResultPosition=20>

²² Smith, M., & Davey, M. (2018, November 20). Ex-President of Michigan State Charged With Lying About Nassar Case. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/20/us/lou-anna-simon-michigan-state-nassar.html>

²³ Letter to the Spartan community on Larry Nassar investigation, Feb. 3, 2017. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://msu.edu/ourcommitment/news/2017-02-03-letter-to-spartan-community.html>

Even the Michigan State Board of Trustees noted a “general sentiment that M.S.U. has avoided being transparent or, worse, that it might be involved in a cover-up” when they requested Michigan Attorney General Bill Schuette to conduct an official inquiry.²⁴ A statement of lack of confidence from the Board of Trustees did not reflect well on Michigan State at all and indicates a lack of institution-wide cohesion when planning their response to the crisis. Despite this, the board maintained support for Simon amidst calls all the way from the State Legislators to the college newspaper for her resignation.²⁵ Nassar’s case and sentencing had gained nationwide attention, as Judge Rosemarie Aquilina allowed over 150 young women to directly address Nassar, and the entire process was live-streamed.²⁶ Many of these women called Michigan State out for concealing reports and mishandling early accusations, increasing the public’s outrage. At this point, the public had made it clear that they no longer held any trust for Simon as the leader of Michigan State, meaning that the college would need to be very careful in their next choice of a communicator.

Once again, though, Michigan State’s research and planning fell flat, as they appointed former Michigan governor John Engler to the position of interim president roughly a week after Nassar was sentenced to 40-175 years in prison.²⁷ Engler started strong, with an emotional letter to the campus community outlining his intentions for holding everyone

²⁴ Saul, S. (2018, January 19). Calls Grow for Michigan State University President to Resign Over Nassar Case. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/19/us/michigan-state-nassar.html?action=click&module=RelatedCoverage&pgtype=Article@ion>

²⁵ Saul, S. (2018, January 19). Calls Grow for Michigan State University President to Resign Over Nassar Case. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/19/us/michigan-state-nassar.html?action=click&module=RelatedCoverage&pgtype=Article@ion>

²⁶ Saul, S. (2018, January 19). Calls Grow for Michigan State University President to Resign Over Nassar Case. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/19/us/michigan-state-nassar.html?action=click&module=RelatedCoverage&pgtype=Article@ion>

²⁷ Michigan State University. (n.d.). Statement from John Engler, interim president. Retrieved from <https://msutoday.msu.edu/news/2018/statement-from-john-engler-interim-president/>

accountable for sexual assault and harassment immediately following his appointment.²⁸ By April, though, it was apparent that Engler too was engaged in questionable discussions about the allegations. Kaylee Lorincz, a survivor of Nassar's abuse, accused Engler at a Michigan State board meeting of privately offering her \$250,000 to drop her lawsuit against the college.

²⁹ Engler released a statement that is available on MSU's website claiming "Our memories and interpretations of the March 28 meeting are different than hers."³⁰ The statement is offered without context on the website. Vice President Carol Viventi also found herself facing backlash after an email sent out to the board disparaging survivors of Nassar was made public.³¹ Like Engler's, her apology is also available on MSU's website without context, along with several more for various public comments and emails from Engler over the rest of his term. This choice suggests that Michigan State was still refraining from total transparency toward the actions of its employees. Also at this meeting, Engler referred to the actions of Dr. Strampel by saying, "Oh that was no big deal, just a slap on the butt."³² Protestors at the meeting were furious, but this would not be the last time that Engler would belittle the experiences of survivors of abuse from Michigan State's employees.

At the same time as the Nassar case was gaining traction in the media, the #MeToo movement had begun on social media, encouraging women to tell their stories of sexual assault. One former Olympic gymnast, McKayla Maroney, posted a #MeToo story about

²⁸ Michigan State University. (n.d.). Statement from John Engler, interim president. Retrieved from <https://msutoday.msu.edu/news/2018/statement-from-john-engler-interim-president/>

²⁹ Wells, K. (n.d.). Nassar survivor accuses Engler of "secret payoff" attempt. Retrieved from <https://www.michiganradio.org/post/nassar-survivor-accuses-engler-secret-payoff-attempt>

³⁰ Interim President Engler: Statement on survivor discussion, April 13, 2018. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://msu.edu/ourcommitment/news/2018-04-13-Engler-survivor-statement.html>

³¹ Jesse, D. (2018, April 18). Top Engler aide apologizes for e-mail attacking Nassar survivors. Retrieved from <https://www.freep.com/story/news/local/michigan/2018/04/18/engler-aide-apologizes-nassar-survivors/530127002/>

³² Wells, K. (n.d.). Nassar survivor accuses Engler of "secret payoff" attempt. Retrieved from <https://www.michiganradio.org/post/nassar-survivor-accuses-engler-secret-payoff-attempt>

Nassar on Twitter that gained widespread attention and lead to more Olympic gymnasts posting their stories.³³ In January 2019, Engler was answering questions on record for The Detroit News when he made a comment that finally ended his relative success during his troubled tenure as interim president: "It's very tough," Engler said. "You've got people, they are hanging on and this has been ... there are a lot of people who are touched by this, survivors who haven't been in the spotlight. In some ways, they have been able to deal with this better than the ones who've been in the spotlight who are still enjoying that moment at times, you know, the awards and recognition. And it's ending. It's almost done."³⁴ He was attempting to explain the struggles that leaders like him had faced during the Nassar trials, but this comment was widely received as accusing survivors of benefiting from and enjoying their experience. The delivery of these comments on record shows a lack of media training and monitoring from Michigan State's public relations employees. After all of the challenges that they had faced due to insensitive claims from former officials, they should have been very cautious of allowing Engler to make comments on behalf of the university. Michigan State also could have learned from their former blunders with Simon when to remove a prominent figure.

Overall, Michigan State University seems to have not followed the R.A.C.E. process, but no communications plan is available for public access, and the university has declined to release any plans regarding the Nassar crisis, so they can only be evaluated through external observation. As far as research, Michigan State's strategy shows a definite lack of understanding of the needs and preferences of their audience. They would have benefited

³³ Dator, J. (2017, October 18). McKayla Maroney alleges sexual abuse by former USA Gymnastics doctor. Retrieved from <https://www.sbnation.com/2017/10/18/16495174/mckayla-maroney-sexual-abuse-metoo-larry-nassar>

³⁴ Kozlowski, K. (2019, January 29). How John Engler's MSU reign fell apart. Retrieved from <https://www.detroitnews.com/story/news/education/2019/01/29/how-john-engler-michigan-state-university-reign-fell-apart/2604186002/>

from in-depth research of what figures the various stakeholders find trustworthy to use for delivering messages, as well as research into the history and temperament of candidates for significant figures before assigning them to be conveyors of information. Michigan State's choices indicate a lack of goal setting, they seemed to only be reacting to each immediate crisis as it became a problem, rather than proactively addressing issues before other media sources. This led to a series of statements and changes in leadership that further damaged their reputation, showing unsuccessful action and planning on behalf of the university. Michigan State should have created a long term strategy for addressing Nassar as soon as charges were released, including a sensitive and honest statement before other news sources began reporting. With proper planning and research, they could have avoided many of the later changes in leadership and unsuccessful apologies.

Because of the lack of preliminary work, Michigan State University was also unsuccessful in the communication and relationship building aspect of their campaign. Countless news articles have been written criticizing their response to the crisis, and the general consensus seems to be that Michigan State lost respect from their peers and consumers. As far as evaluation, Michigan State also declined to release information or comment on the effectiveness of their communication strategies during the crisis. External indicators of Michigan State's failure include a settlement of \$500,000 mandated by the courts for their role in concealing Nassar's assaults and the 8.3% drop in applicants.³⁵ Michigan State University could have and should have done many things differently, and now they will serve as a case study for what not to do in a crisis situation.

³⁵ Levenson, E. (2018, May 17). Michigan State University reaches \$500 million settlement with Larry Nassar victims. Retrieved from <https://www.cnn.com/2018/05/16/us/larry-nassar-michigan-state-settlement/index.html>

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