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## Party Culture and Sexual Assault: MSU Responds <sup>[1]</sup>

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**By:**

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*Above: a party at a student rental building in the Park District area.*

MSU has now provided a response to my question <sup>[2]</sup> on October 30 to President Lou Anna Simon about what East Lansing residents should do when they see students partying with large amounts of alcohol in scenes that would seem to set a backdrop for sexual assault.

The November 21 response to my question came from MSU's Assistant Vice President for Community Relations Janet Lillie. In response to Lillie's letter, I sent back a series of more

specific questions to which I received the answers this week.

In her letter, Lillie writes that, "Since [ELPD] Chief Murphy has responded with suggestions for addressing immediate safety concerns through East Lansing Police, I will focus my comments on steps that MSU is taking to address large celebrations and prevent sexual assault/misconduct and relationship violence." (See Murphy's response [2] and Lillie's letter [3].)

Lillie points to work MSU is doing via residence halls and through the "Celebrations Committee, which is made up of sixty members of the MSU and East Lansing Community." I asked Lillie how a committee of 60 people functions and whether I could see the meeting schedule, agendas, and minutes. She explained "there are no formal minutes taken at the meetings," and said that the group often works via email.

Lillie provided examples of a plan developed in advance of expected large-party days but did not wish me to reproduce the documents (even though this material is subject to the Freedom of Information Act). The documents suggest anticipation of possible problems on every MSU football game, whether played in East Lansing or not. Problems are also anticipated on days associated with the NCAA basketball tournament, St. Patrick's Day, and the starts and ends of semesters. (We understand that none of this will come as news to those citizens who live in near-university neighborhoods.)

Based on what Lillie sent and on other available material, the Celebrations Committee specifically strategizes for the NCAA basketball, ramping up efforts if MSU wins, because this increases the likelihood of alcohol-fueled large gatherings. Strategies include distributing information and working with the police, landlords, and Greek Life leaders. Popular leaders like Coach Tom Izzo are sometimes used to reinforce messages about good and bad behavior.

For evidence that MSU's efforts are having an impact on actual behavior, Lillie referred me to a 2012-14 report [4] that did not provide trend information about sexual assault rates. I also asked for numbers of students dismissed for sexual assault. According to Lillie and MSU's Rick Shafer, in the last three years, a total of seven students have been dismissed (without the option of readmission) for off-campus sexual assaults, and a total of five students have been dismissed for on-campus sexual assaults. This gives an average of four student dismissals per year for sexual assault in a student population of about 50,000.

I asked Lillie why MSU frames this problem as being about "celebratory behaviors" and "celebratory drinking," since the same problems happen when MSU loses a big game. She responded by email that "our research has shown that students behave differently on what we would call celebratory occasions than they would otherwise." She explains that, "These occasions often create a permission structure for some students to do things they might not normally do otherwise (like drink to excess)."

The national press has amply documented that the party culture of MSU, including its association with sexual assault, is not unique. In fact, it was a New York Times report [5] on five other universities (University of Michigan, Indiana University, Stanford University, Ohio University, and Boston University) that partly compelled me to write to Murphy and Simon in October. That report and our police chief's response to my questions also led me to write an op-ed on the problem [6] that was published in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* where it contributes to a long series by

that publication on the national problems of alcohol [7] and sexual assault [8] at universities. Many universities are struggling with these issues.

This week, MSU announced [9] that it has a grant from Michigan First Lady Sue Snyder's campaign to end sexual assault and that it will use it to raise awareness of this important topic at an earlier age by partnering with high schools and focusing on bystander intervention.

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[2] <http://eastlansinginfo.org/content/chief-shares-ellds-game-day-experience-advises-distressed-resident-sexual-assault>

[3] [http://www.eastlansinginfo.org/sites/default/files/msu\\_response\\_to\\_alice\\_deger\\_on\\_sexual\\_assault\\_112116.pdf](http://www.eastlansinginfo.org/sites/default/files/msu_response_to_alice_deger_on_sexual_assault_112116.pdf)

[4] [http://www.eastlansinginfo.org/sites/default/files/2012-2014\\_final\\_biennial\\_review\\_report\\_w\\_attachments.pdf](http://www.eastlansinginfo.org/sites/default/files/2012-2014_final_biennial_review_report_w_attachments.pdf)

[5] <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/30/us/college-crackdown-drinking-sexual-assault.html>

[6] <http://www.chronicle.com/article/Step-In-or-Look-Away-/238481>

[7] [http://www.chronicle.com/interactives/beer\\_main?cid=rclink](http://www.chronicle.com/interactives/beer_main?cid=rclink)

[8] [http://www.chronicle.com/interactives/assault\\_main?cid=rclink](http://www.chronicle.com/interactives/assault_main?cid=rclink)

[9] <http://msutoday.msu.edu/news/2016/msu-to-focus-on-area-high-schools-to-combat-sexual-assault/>

[10] <https://eastlansinginfo.org/gown>

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