

Missouri State Comments on Student Press Conference
2/25/16

Missouri State University encourages its students to participate in civil discourse as we view it as a learning opportunity for all parties. As an institution that serves students, it helps us to better understand their needs and concerns.

Supporting first generation students has been an area of development and commitment over the last several years at Missouri State. As Monica Villa Meza described her experience and confusion in filing a complaint with the office of institutional equity and compliance (OIEC) regarding what she believed to be discriminatory behavior on the part of Juan Meraz, assistant vice president for multicultural services, we realize even our best intentions to provide support can sometimes result in confusion.

As a first step to begin the progress toward a resolution, Meraz would like to apologize for his language and tone used during a recorded discussion with Villa Meza.

“Working closely with students has been a very important part of my life and my career,” said Meraz. “It was never my intent to hurt this student or other students at Missouri State with language that was unprofessional and offensive. As a member of a historically excluded group, I have felt the sting of words and actions many times in my life, which is why I understand that I let the students down with my words. I have been disciplined by Dr. Siscoe and I accept it as an appropriate university response to my actions. This has been a regrettable but powerful learning opportunity for me and I will continue to strive to ensure all students on campus feel welcome and valued in my presence.”

While public statements of concern and signed petitions have been presented to the university by the Springfield Coalition for Minority Advancement (SCMA) regarding Meraz, no complaints were filed by the SCMA through any of the university’s established policies or procedures.

At the end of this statement is a timeline of the investigation initiated by Villa Meza as documented by the OIEC.

As a final note, the university has reached out to engage with SCMA leaders to discuss their concerns and the university’s efforts to respond to those concerns. Specifically, leaders of SCMA were invited to speak at the Board of Governors meeting in December. Additionally, two SCMA leaders, Villa Meza and Ravyn Brooks, accepted invitations to serve on the President’s Diversity Council, which first met on Feb. 19.

Since student protests began in November, President Clif Smart and other leaders within the university have also sent emails and otherwise reached out to leaders of SCMA to invite them to meet in person to discuss the issues of concern. While the students have not responded to these communications, President Smart and Dr. Dee Siscoe, vice president for student affairs, remain open to meeting with them.

Timeline of the Complaint as documented by the OIEC

First week of December

Wes Pratt, former director of the OIEC, met with Villa Meza, at her request, to discuss her concerns about Juan Meraz. At that time, Villa Meza was seeking input and confiding in Pratt. She advised him that she did not want him to investigate and/or interview witnesses or Meraz. Villa Meza said she had an audiotape with some of the comments associated with her complaint and that she would send it to Pratt for his review.

12/4/2015

Pratt received a copy of the audiotape from Villa Meza via email.

12/11/15

At the invitation of the university's Board of Governors, members of SCMA – including Villa Meza – shared certain diversity-related concerns during the public Board of Governors meeting.

12/14/15

Pratt and Melissa Berry, interim director of the OIEC, met with Villa Meza. Villa Meza indicated that she had decided to proceed with a complaint and investigation. She was informed that consistent with the OIEC's usual practice, it would be routed through the “informal processes” as outlined in the [Complaint Procedures](#), and that the informal process would be completed by the end of January. During this meeting, Villa Meza questioned Pratt about his relationship with Meraz. Pratt informed her that he had both a professional relationship and personal friendship with Meraz, but would conduct the investigation in an impartial manner since that was the function of his position. Villa Meza requested that Pratt proceed with the investigation.

Winter Break

12/11/15-1/11/16 – Students on break between semesters

12/21/15-1/4/16 – Staff on winter break

Multiple meetings were held with the complainant to confirm the allegations in her complaint, and to seek her input as to witnesses who had information relevant to her complaint.

1/14/16

Pratt and Berry met with Villa Meza to confirm that they accurately understood the specifics of her allegations.

Following this meeting, Pratt had minimal involvement in this investigation due to his new assignment as assistant to the president and chief diversity officer. At that time, Berry was named interim director for the OIEC and equal opportunity officer. Pratt did not participate in the evidence review or the deliberative process resulting in the findings. He did not consult with Berry or have any knowledge of the findings of the investigation.

1/12/16 - 1/28/16

The OIEC conducted interviews with multiple witnesses, most of whom had been identified by Villa Meza. Many witnesses denied Villa Meza's allegations. Interviews were scheduled with an additional three witnesses requested by Villa Meza; however, those witnesses neither appeared for nor canceled their scheduled meetings. Another witness identified by Villa Meza did not respond to attempts by the OIEC to schedule a meeting. Meraz, the respondent, was also interviewed.

1/20/16, 1/25/16, and 1/28/16

Villa Meza contacted the OIEC seeking clarification on the formal vs. informal process. She indicated that she wanted the complaint to be routed through the formal process and dropped off a complaint form downloaded from the [OIEC website](#). Each time, Berry explained the investigative process, and noted that a formal process could be requested at the conclusion of the informal process if either the complainant or the respondent was dissatisfied with the results. Additionally, on Jan. 28, Berry asked Villa Meza about her availability for the following week to meet to discuss the findings of the investigation.

1/29/16

OIEC reviewed, compiled and summarized all evidence.

2/1/16

Berry emailed Villa Meza to schedule a time to meet to discuss the results of the informal process. OIEC staff also attempted to reach Villa Meza by telephone.

2/2/16

Villa Meza responded to Berry's email to schedule a time to meet to discuss the results of the informal process.

2/4/16

Berry met with Villa Meza and informed her of the findings of the informal process/investigation. They discussed in detail Villa Meza's remaining options, including the initiation of a formal process and/or mediation. Berry had forms ready for Villa Meza to sign that would immediately initiate the formal process. Villa Meza declined and said she wanted to think about it. She said she would let Berry know the next day whether she wanted to file a formal complaint.

2/4/16

Berry met with Meraz and informed him of the findings of the informal process/investigation.

2/10/16

Consistent with university policy, Berry also met with Siscoe, Meraz's direct supervisor, to review all investigatory findings for consideration. During this meeting, Berry also referred to other issues raised by Villa Meza that were outside OIEC jurisdiction (e.g., FERPA concerns).

2/12/16

Since she had not heard from Villa Meza since their meeting on Feb. 4, Berry emailed Villa Meza to inquire whether Villa Meza wished to proceed with a formal process.

2/15/16

Villa Meza responded by email, indicating she did not want to proceed with a formal complaint. The file was closed.