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Free Speech? Exclusive Decision-Making, the Propaganda Machine, and Limited Imagination at
The Pennsylvania State University, Institutional Champion of “Free Speech”

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ABSTRACT

Conversations about so-called free speech at Penn State emphasize overt censorship. But free speech requires a capacity to generate ideas, speak them, and be heard. To assess if speech is truly free, we need to consider: Do we have the resources (the education, the information) to generate ideas? Do we have the capacity to share these ideas publicly? And does our speech (and thus ideas) carry meaning? Is it heard? Does it matter?

Penn State's profit-maximization model of institutional management and its related apparatuses clash with the institution's educational mission. Decisions are made by the few and powerful; information is withheld. Discourse is altered, particularly to maintain the University's image. And ultimately students are not expected to participate as citizens. At Penn State, speech is not free; these structures covertly censor it. As a result, Penn State fails to equip students with the skills required to meaningfully participate in community decision-making at and beyond the institution; Penn State's capacity as an educator and community partner is undermined.

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And thank you to the Indigenous Peoples Student Association and the Indigenous Faculty and Staff Alliance. The Pennsylvania State University campuses are located on the original homelands of the Erie, Haudenosaunee (Seneca, Cayuga, Onondaga, Oneida, Mohawk, and Tuscarora), Lenape (Delaware Nation, Delaware Tribe, Stockbridge-Munsee), Shawnee (Absentee, Eastern, and Oklahoma), Susquehannock, and Wahzhazhe (Osage) Nations. Penn State profits from the transfer, purchase, and appropriation of these expropriated (stolen) lands.

DISCLAIMER

This thesis is grounded in my work as a student at Penn State. The examples I provide include my personal observations. I include them because I want to illuminate abstract ideas. But I acknowledge that my observations are biased. For example, I write about the fall 2020 “Return to State” during the COVID-19 pandemic. At this time, I was a student; I held strong opinions about the best course of action. In light of this, I tried to remove and acknowledge my biases.

I am imperfect. So, I ask that when you perceive a bias or disagreement, you bear with me. My intent truly is to illustrate the structures of decision-making and student engagement (or lack thereof) at Penn State. I believe doing so can generate new dialogue and careful consideration of how we can proceed as a university community. I hope you share this belief.

In a similar vein, although some of my examples include specific people (decision-makers, students), I am not attempting to call them out or imply that they are bad people. In fact, I believe doing so absolves them of their responsibility to make better choices and absolves us from building better institutional structures. I truly think we are all just trying find our place — and when we make unappealing decisions, it is often because the structures that we are in incentive them. That is why I am putting forth this work: so, we can consider the underlying system that incentives behavior, including behavior that is harmful or ineffective.

Last, I understand that this thesis is incomplete. There are examples that I left out — that help and hurt my arguments. In acknowledgement of this, if you are reading this work and have questions, see flaws, or are generally interested in these ideas, I am eager to talk.

Chapter 1

Free Speech?

In November 2021, Penn State student group Uncensored America hosted speaker Milo Yiannopoulos — an “ex-gay” social provocateur — for an on-campus event.¹

In response to student opposition, institutional decision-makers wrote that canceling the event would “undermine the basic freedom each of us shares to generally think and express ourselves as we wish”² and the University must “protect various expressive rights.”³ After all, and especially because of Penn State’s status as a public institution, the University is “committed to the principle of free expression and seeks to foster an environment where ideas and opinions may be expressed, heard, discussed, and challenged.”⁴

It seems clear: as universities across the United States are influenced by what many assert is the political correctness movement’s “frontal assault on the tradition of American free speech,”⁵ Penn State remains a champion of free speech and free exchange of ideas.

Right?

The last few decades of student expression and protest reveal a more nuanced University “commitment” to free speech.

¹ Brendan Morgan, “Uncensored America and Milo Yiannopoulos event face backlash from Penn State Community,” WPSU, November 4, 2021, <https://radio.wpsu.org/2021-11-04/uncensored-america-and-milo-yiannopoulos-event-face-backlash-from-penn-state-community>.

² Steve Dunham, Damon Sims, and Marcus Whitehurst, “University leaders denounce Yiannopoulos comments and tour,” Penn State News, October 25, 2021, <https://www.psu.edu/news/administration/story/university-leaders-denounce-yiannopoulos-comments-and-tour/>.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Penn State, “What is freedom of speech and how does it apply to me?” Penn State University, 2021, <https://www.knowyourrightsandresponsibilities.psu.edu/pages/first-amendment/freedom-of-speech-the-basics>.

⁵ Robert Shibley, “Vindictive Protectiveness on Campus,” *Society* 53, no. 4 (2016): 375–382. doi.org/10.1007/s12115-016-0031-7.

For instance, in the spring of 2008, students led a sit-in in Penn State's most prominent administrative building, Old Main, to protest Penn State's use of sweatshop labor.⁶ And despite an institutional "commitment" to free expression, University police arrested 31 students for trespassing.⁷ These actions seemed incongruent with the University's various statements about how "a university is inherently a marketplace of ideas, and Penn State encourages and protects the rights of members of the University community to express divergent viewpoints and opinions on matters of concern."⁸ Instead, the event illuminated that the University *does* censor speech.

After the event, community members suggested that not only does the University censor speech, but the University also *capriciously* censors speech. One faculty member noted that the University enforces AD51 — the University policy about expressive activity⁹ — "when the University wants to enforce it" but "when the University fears it will receive outside criticism, it does not."¹⁰

Dialogue about free speech at Penn State often occurs because of and focuses on individual incidents, like the 2008 arrests or the Milo Yiannopoulos event. External to these events, there is little dialogue about free speech; in particular, there is little dialogue about if Penn State's environment and structures are conducive to free expression — this is especially worrisome because, if Penn State's environment and structure disable free expression, current dialogue about it occurs at the margins of the issue.

⁶ Will Creely, "At Penn State, Protests and Arrests Raise Questions about Free Speech on Campus," Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, April 23, 2008, <https://www.thefire.org/at-penn-state-protests-and-arrests-raise-questions-about-free-speech-on-campus/>.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Penn State, "AD51 Use of Outdoor Areas for Expressive Activities," Penn State, August 7, 2008, <https://policy.psu.edu/policies/ad51>.

⁹ Brian Giallorenzo, "AD51: Freedom of Speech at Penn State," YouTube Video, April 26, 2012, video essay, 9:31, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U8L7YiKVghY&t=1s>.

¹⁰ Ibid.

Popular notions of freedom encourage us to understand free speech as singular and “essentially individual and nonpolitical.”¹¹ They limit the Penn State community’s capacity to analyze broader phenomena and structural barriers that limit expression. But how can staff truly hold “freedom of expression” if they are worried about being fired for doing so? How can students “express divergent viewpoints and opinions on matters of concern”¹² if the University withholds information about these matters?

When I was a first-year student, I joined Penn State’s EcoReps program because of my interest in addressing environmental issues. Yet, I quickly realized the peer-to-peer outreach I performed — encouraging other students to change their personal behaviors to more “eco-friendly” ones — failed to holistically address the ways our community contributed to environmental issues.

University administrators marketed the opportunity to join EcoReps as a fun, student leadership experience and touted how we made a “big impact.” But data suggested otherwise. And while we encouraged students to stop using plastic water bottles, Penn State profited from their widespread sale and maintained corporate partnerships with plastic water bottle companies.¹³

In fact, after learning more about Penn State’s policies and the EcoReps program’s lack of efficacy, I came to believe that the presence of apolitical student volunteers *absolved* Penn State administration of their responsibility to address more significant environmental issues on

¹¹ Ilya Winham, “Rereading Hannah Arendt’s ‘What Is Freedom?’: Freedom as a Phenomenon of Political Virtuosity,” *Theoria: A Journal of Social and Political Theory* 59, no. 131 (2012): 84-106. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42705243>.

¹² Penn State, “AD51 Use of Outdoor Areas.”

¹³ Ron Dicker, “Pepsi Says It Will Stick With Penn State Sponsorship,” Yahoo! News, November 16, 2011, <https://www.yahoo.com/now/2011-11-16-pepsi-says-it-will-stick-with-penn-state.html>.

campus like unsustainable procurement practices and institutional support of fossil fuels and plastics.

While there was no *overt* censorship of students within the program, the program enabled University decision-makers to undermine their power to foster change, covertly censoring them. Students were *indoctrinated* — the program failed to provide them with opportunities to participate in institutional decision-making or education about institutional policy; instead, students were expected to repeat institutionally approved personal responsibility rhetoric that presented recycling and taking shorter showers as solutions to large environmental crises.¹⁴

Students in the program who saw the necessity of broad, structural changes were unable to articulate what they could be; they were unable to *imagine* what these institutional changes might look like. And when decision-makers were criticized for not investing more substantially in solutions to environmental issues — or were criticized for directly contributing to environmental issues — they pointed to these apolitical volunteer opportunities or used various other tactics to escape true accountability, for instance, speaking vaguely about initiatives already being pursued instead of responding directly to criticism. Institutional decision-makers acknowledged publicly that during discussions about environmental issues, “students... share their concerns with us and we... update them on the University’s ongoing sustainability efforts.”¹⁵¹⁶

Such responses to student criticism are self-protective, not productive or deliberative.

These self-protective responses control speech insidiously. No one is arrested. But the structure

¹⁴ Penn State EcoReps (@psuecoreps), <https://www.instagram.com/psuecoreps/>.

¹⁵ Penn State, “University partners with students to further educate community on sustainability,” Penn State News, May 27, 2021, <https://www.psu.edu/news/impact/story/university-partners-students-further-educate-community-sustainability/>.

¹⁶ This comment came after a petition asking for divestment from fossil fuels garnered thousands of signatures; instead of responding directly, the institution just shared “updates.”

of the EcoReps program and institutional communication nullifies student activists. It limits information and limits student imagination.

Even without overt censorship, decision-makers and leaders have the capacity to limit expression. Consider George Orwell's *1984*.¹⁷ The totalitarian society portrayed retains control by forcing the implementation of an invented language that prevents community members from criticizing the ruling Party. While the Party retains control overtly, too — the main character, Winston, ultimately is tortured for breaking community rules — is it their *covert* censorship of speech and thought that enables them to maintain control of the general populace.

Key characteristics of this type of totalitarian society exist at Penn State. At Penn State, decision-making happens privately between the few and powerful; compelling marketing strategies absolve institutional decision-makers of their responsibility to address structural issues. Information is hidden; strategically selected favorable news is disseminated, not discussed, and used to undermine public criticism. These systems *covertly* censor students. How can anyone possibly express their viewpoints freely if they lack the information required to create informed opinions?

And as a result, administrators — and thus students, faculty, staff, and community members — promote volunteering and surface-level solutions to community problems. Although these methods provide some short-term aid and the semblance of effective action to those in need, they ultimately fail. They fail from an efficacy standpoint and an ethical standpoint; they fail to address the root causes of issues and commodify and strip political agency from students. They focus on the individualized facets of structural problems and devalue student citizenship

¹⁷ George Orwell, *1984* (New York: Signet Classic, 1950).

and community-based decision-making and the transparency and accountability on which these are based.

But why? Why, if institutional decision-makers create merchandise with the quote, “the most important thing an institution does is not to prepare a student for a career but for life as a citizen,”¹⁸ do they maintain institutional systems that prevent students from participating as citizens?

Perhaps it is because the University has another, more powerful goal. Globally, individuals and communities are encouraged to formulate “everything, everywhere, in terms of capital investment in appreciation, including and especially humans themselves”¹⁹ as neoliberalism — a dominant political and economic ideology — insists that public policy emphasizes the free market as the appropriate method of resource allocation. This ideology and subsequent public policy encourage institutional decision-makers of all types to promote the institution’s financial interests, even at the expense of human health and safety. And because the rhetoric and communication surrounding this dominant political theory emphasize “self-determination, free choice, and personal responsibility,”²⁰ issues like food insecurity or sexual violence, or environmentally unsustainable actions, are presented either individual problems or intractable problems, rather than as the result of political systems. This form of seeing the world encourages “spatially uneven and non-strategic action.”²¹

¹⁸ Sticker. Penn State Center for Character, Conscience, and Public Purpose.

¹⁹ Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism’s Stealth Revolution* (Brooklyn, NY: Zone Books, 2015).

²⁰ Laina Y. Bay-Cheng and Rebecca Eliseo-Arras, “The Making of Unwanted Sex: Gendered and Neoliberal Norms in College Women’s Unwanted Sexual Experiences,” *Journal of Sex Research* 45 no. 4 (2008): 388. doi.org/10.1080/00224490802398381.

²¹ Jacqueline Nelson and Kevin Dunn, “Neoliberal Anti-Racism: Responding to ‘Everywhere but Different’ Racism,” *Progress in Human Geography* 41, no.1 (2017): 26. doi.org/10.1177/0309132515627019.

As students face serious issues within the Penn State community, institutional decision-makers face tremendous pressure to maximize profits. Those charged with addressing community issues lack accountability to the constituency most directly affected by a disregard for safety and health — students — and instead report to administrators and governing boards increasingly concerned with maximizing profit. As such, it is not beneficial to tackle these structural issues if it comes at the expense of the institution's image or other factors tied to its profitability. Ultimately “the neoliberal university is primarily concerned with self-protection, not reducing harm to campus citizens.”²²

This incentivizes the creation of a system that covertly censors expression — specifically speech that questions the ways that the institution's structure enables institutional decision-makers to prioritize profitability. For instance, institutions of higher education ignore, avoid, or cover up sexual violence to protect their brand image, even though this comes at the expense of the wellbeing of students.²³

As we consider “free speech,” we need to consider the characteristics required for freedom. To truly analyze the status of free speech at Penn State, we need to leverage a definition of freedom that examines the conditions required for freedom. Hannah Arendt's definition does just this. In Arendt's text, *The Human Condition*, she argues that freedom is something that is possible for everyone but can only be actualized under certain conditions.²⁴ Freedom is our capacity to produce new words and deeds; only when one is able to accomplish something in the world, or is doing it, can one be “free.”²⁵

²² Sarah Prior and Brooke de Heer, “Everyday Terrorism: Campus Sexual Violence and the Neoliberal University,” *Sociology Compass* 15, no. 9 (2021): 8. doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12915.

²³ Ibid, 9.

²⁴ Hannah Arendt, “Labor, Work, Action,” in *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958).

²⁵ Ibid.

Freedom of expression thus is an individual's capacity to generate ideas, speak them, and be heard. It is inherently political because it requires us to work in collaboration with one another; freedom cannot occur alone. So, to assess freedom of speech, we need to consider: Do we have the resources (the education, the information) to generate ideas? Do we have the capacity to share these ideas publicly? Is there an environment or a structure that enables us to share our ideas? And does our speech (and thus our ideas) carry meaning? Are they heard? Do they *matter*? Do they generate action?

These questions require an examination of institutional structure — and they require an examination of how the increasingly-powerful desire to maximize profits affects student engagement.

But critiques of the impact of neoliberalism on institutions of higher education, however, typically do not come from a student perspective. As a result, this research fails to acknowledge how institutions fail to protect and educate students. For example, in his article “Are Students Becoming Consumerist Learners?” Dr. Trevor Norris presents students as unaccepting of education values rather than unwilling participants in a system built against their own interests — e.g., their safety, health, and educational outcomes.

Norris disregards examples of how students *want* to participate in institutional decision-making or push back against neoliberal norms; he focuses instead on his belief that students assume “education should be easy and palatable and not involve suffering or adversity... [but] there is no easy button in education!”²⁶ By taking this tone and offering a criticism of how students approach learning — rather than criticizing the system they are forced into — Norris

²⁶ Trevor Norris, “Are Students Becoming Consumerist Learners?” *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 54, no. 4 (2020): 875. doi.org/10.1111/1467-9752.12489.

adopts a punitive tone that undermines the capacity of his research to uplift students as he instead chooses to insult them. This tone is pervasive across the body of research critiquing increased consumerism and profit-maximization in higher education.

As such, it is critical to expand the body of research to include the perspectives of students and examine how institutional decision-makers and the institutional structure limits their freedom of expression. This paper aims to do just this, asking a key question: are students at Penn State able to express themselves in word and deed? And presenting a simple answer: no.

Penn State's self-protective decision-making structures prevent students from enjoying the resources necessary to generate ideas; there are a lack of structures that enable students to share their ideas publicly and in a way that influences action. Student speech is not heard. And student expression is systemically limited by a lack of information. The lack of free expression at Penn State damages the institution's capacity to serve as an educational institution; it results in college students who lack the skills required to meaningfully participate in community decision-making and undermines Penn State's opportunities as an educator and community partner.

Chapter 2

Exclusive Decision-Making

Penn State's institutional decision-makers' choice in summer 2020 to hold in-person classes and open on-campus housing in light of the COVID-19 pandemic was controversial.

Significant pushback followed the announcement of the decision to return to campus. More than a thousand faculty, staff, and graduate students signed an open letter demanding an affirmation of their autonomy.²⁷ This would have not been necessary if decisions been made with these concerns in mind. However, Penn State's decision was constructed by twelve "core" groups, predominately led by senior administrators and other University policy "experts." In these groups, there were no students and few faculty members.²⁸

Instead of providing public, deliberative opportunities for students to respond to the University's potential protocol, administrators released a student survey which asked students blanket questions, like if they were "willing to comply with... campus policy."²⁹ This prevented students from providing nuanced thoughts; the process was not deliberative. And the survey failed to provide relevant information — for example, the survey instrument failed to outline policies.

When decision-makers solicited input from students about what "Return to State" may involve, students' opinions and concerns were frequently dismissed. During a focus group in late

²⁷ Matt DiSanto, "Hundreds of Penn State Faculty, Staff Sign Open Letter Criticizing University's Fall Semester Planning," Onward State, <https://onwardstate.com/2020/06/16/hundreds-of-penn-state-faculty-staff-sign-open-letter-criticizing-university-for-ignoring-concerns/>.

²⁸ Penn State, "Penn State coronavirus task groups continue future-focused planning," Penn State News, April 29, 2020, <https://www.psu.edu/news/administration/story/penn-state-coronavirus-task-groups-continue-future-focused-planning/>.

²⁹ Piazza Center, "COVID-19 Fraternity and Sorority Members Readiness to Return to Campus Survey," Penn State Student Affairs, <https://studentaffairs.psu.edu/department-directory/piazza-center/covid-19-readiness-return-campus-survey>.

spring 2020, I voiced the importance of transparency in the decision-making process to a relevant administrator — an opinion that was echoed by the other students in the group and students and faculty external to this group, too. Then, throughout the summer semester, decisions were made behind closed doors and announced via “town halls” that provided no opportunity for community feedback or contribution.

Closer to the beginning of the fall semester, I participated in one of Penn State’s Student Leader Roundtable meetings and watched as a fellow student conveyed to an administrator the importance of the sanctity of life; she explained that the return to campus seemed to be antithetical to her personal morals as it put students and faculty, their families, and the larger Penn State community in danger. Many other students shared similar concerns. During that meeting, the administrator asked the group of around 40 students if we should continue the so-called “Return to State,” or switch to remote learning. Only one student indicated they believed we should continue to pursue the in-person experience.

Student sentiments — the need for transparency, the want to save any lives possible, and an obvious majority opinion amongst student leaders of staying remote — was pushed to the wayside. Once the decision was made by a select group, the University’s course was set. The process revealed who holds power in Penn State’s decision-making processes: students have little and upper-level administrators have lots.

Administrators seemed to believe that their policy expertise overshadowed the local knowledge and beliefs of students. They insisted that their decisions were appropriate, even as this created more problems and conflict.

For example, student government leadership called for the University to change their plans in an interview on CNN.³⁰ They synthesized local knowledge (from conversations with RAs, their experiences living on campus, and so on) with technical knowledge (from the University's surveying of students) to call for increased protections for RAs and a transition to remote learning. But I was later in a meeting when a university administrator joked that one of these students was an "all-star media personality" without ever responding to the students' arguments, in that meeting or elsewhere.

In another example, after the so-called "Return to State," an email from one administrator circulated following a Resident Assistant's (RA) expression of frustration. The RA was attempting to mitigate crowds of non-mask wearing or social distancing students. But instead of responding to this frustration with understanding, the administrator responded by saying: "Our plan is designed to encourage intervention by staff before enlisting law enforcement, and I'm told that when the students were told to disperse, they did."³¹ The student, left even more frustrated and confused, responded by pointing out RAs did "not sign up to police the quad."³² This email exchange typifies the types of outcomes that are caused by Penn State's exclusive decision-making. Students' concerns are not heard, let alone considered, when developing

³⁰ Ryen Gailey, "UPUA President Zach McKay Appears on CNN, Calls for Remote Learning," Onward State, August 24, 2020, <https://onwardstate.com/2020/08/24/upua-president-zach-mckay-appears-on-cnn-calls-for-remote-learning/>.

³¹ Damon Sims to [redacted]. "What did the RAs and other RL staff do other than calling the police, [redacted]? Our plan is designed to encourage intervention by staff before enlisting law enforcement, and I'm told that when the students were told to disperse, they did. Were you and others included among those intervening? Many thanks for your insights. We're trying to find the best path. Damon," email communication, fall 2020. [Redacted] to Damon Sims. "I would hope you are more familiar with University protocols than myself. You should probably know that RAs cannot enforce policy outside of a dorm. I did not sign up to police the quad when I became an RA. You have a *literal* police force for that. My job is to call the police. I have done my job and referred residents for not wearing masks. The question is whether your police force has done theirs," email communication, fall 2020. Email screenshots available upon request.

³² Ibid.

institutional procedures; this leaves students feeling disillusioned — they feel an “institutional betrayal.”³³

If Penn State decision-makers championed student participation in this decision-making process, they would have heard these concerns and provided students with a meaningful opportunity to participate in community decision-making; RAs would have felt more prepared.

I recount these stories not because I disagree with Penn State’s decisions (this paper isn’t about that), but rather to illuminate how exclusive the decision-making structure itself is. Penn State’s structures of decision-making fail students — they fail to provide what’s necessary for students to have free expression.

First, COVID decision-making reveals the **lack of shared governance**. Faculty member Michael Bérubé has explained that Penn State has a history of “rejecting any viable notion of shared governance” and that “decisions, even about academic programs, are made by a central administration and faculty members are ‘consulted’ afterwards.”³⁴ As writers Henry and Susan Searls Giroux point out, the American Association of Universities went further, insisting that the lack of faculty governance is “the consequence of a university system that factors the needs of a sports empire over the educational needs of students, the working conditions of faculty, and health and safety of vulnerable children.”³⁵ The University’s desire to maximize profits incentivizes a centralization of power. The University’s COVID response typifies this; decision-

³³ For more on “institutional betrayal” see Carly P. Smith and Jennifer J. Freyd, “Dangerous safe havens: institutional betrayal exacerbates sexual trauma,” *Journal of Traumatic Stress* 21, no. 1 (2013): 119-24. doi:10.1002/jts.21778.

³⁴ Michael Bérubé, “At Penn State, a Bitter Reckoning,” *New York Times*, November 17, 2011, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/18/opinion/at-penn-state-a-bitter-reckoning.html>.

³⁵ 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.

making groups are led by select groups of administrators, who unilaterally chart Penn State's path forward (or backward).

Student government lacks real power to enact their own policies. They pass legislation and “advocate”; essentially, they make recommendations to administrators, who decide what will happen. Students rightly perceive this lack of power, and the result is a lack of participation in student government, further exacerbating the student government's lack of power by diminishing their advocacy potential. For example, typically a mere 10% of students participate in the undergraduate student government at University Park's elections.³⁶ Even Penn State's Student Fee Board — which allegedly controls the levels and allocations of the student-initiated fee — merely makes a *recommendation* to the Board of Trustees; the Board retains the control to accept or deny this recommendation. Similarly, while student governments lead the selection of the sole student trustee on the University's highest governing board, the 38-member Board of Trustees, the Board retains control to approve or deny their recommended appointee. When it came to COVID decisions, even if student government or institutionally recognized student leaders had opportunities to voice their opinions, they lacked real power — their speech lacked the capacity to catalyze institutional action; it was not *heard*.

The Board of Trustees and senior administrators make Penn State's most significant decisions. **Power is centralized.** But the Board of Trustees is dominated by corporate and financial interests, and members lack professional expertise in major university issues that harm

³⁶ And it seems that this percentage is decreasing. In 2022, fewer than 2400 of the approximately 45000 (~5%) undergraduate students voted in Penn State's University Park undergraduate student government elections. More information can be found at Ryen Gailey, “Najee Rodriguez Elected Student Body President,” Onward State, March, 31, 2022, <https://onwardstate.com/2022/03/31/najee-rodriguez-elected-student-body-president/>.

the health and safety of students: food insecurity, sexual violence, hazing, or racial discrimination, to name a few.³⁷

Even as the institution grows in racial, gender, socio-economic status, and myriad other forms of diversity, administrative and decision-making positions are dominated by older, white men. These University leaders share an isolationist style of decision-making; they are “protective of [their] cohort and shaped by an administrative culture that values institutional tradition and reputation above all else.”³⁸ The fraternal leadership styles, typified by the “the extended history and incestuous nature” of previous cohorts of Penn State administrators, reveals “institutional structures that sustain violence.”³⁹

For these decision-makers, “money has an enormous influence on shaping agendas within the University that play to their advantage.”⁴⁰ The lack of ideological and experiential diversity amongst decision-makers enable these decision-makers to tune out other interests or dissenting opinions; or as civic theorist Parker Palmer notes, create and use “strategies to evade... differences... to dismiss... or eliminate the stranger.”⁴¹ This is what happened as decision-makers charted a “Return to State.” The structure enables institutional decision-makers to dismiss expression that does not encourage adherence to a plan that maximizes the institution’s financial interests.

³⁷ Some of the job titles of those on the Board of Trustees: Senior Vice President, Reliance Bank; CEO and President, First Citizens Community Bank; Chief Brand Officer, Hilton; CEO, JKLM Energy, LLC. More information can be found at Office of the Board of Trustees, “Current Trustees,” Penn State, 2021, <https://trustees.psu.edu/trustees/>.

³⁸ Lorraine Dowler, Dana Cuomo, and Nicole Laliberte, “Challenging ‘The Penn State Way’: a feminist response to institutional violence in higher education,” *Gender, Place & Culture* 21, no. 3 (2014): 388. doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2013.802676.

³⁹ Ibid, 389.

⁴⁰ Giroux and Giroux, “Universities Gone Wild,” 269.

⁴¹ Parker Palmer, *Healing the Heart of Democracy: The Courage to Create a Politics Worthy of the Human Spirit*. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2014).

Further, a “**culture of concealment**”⁴² at Penn State prevents students (and other community members) from accessing the information required to create informed opinions about community happenings. Not only are these community members unable to participate in institutional decision-making as full-fledged decision-makers, but they are also not even able to access the information required to create an opinion.

While most public universities are subject to some form of open records law, Penn State is not; institutional decision-makers can withhold almost all information about institutional decision-making. Penn State’s peer institutions — including all other Big 10 institutions and most other public universities in Pennsylvania — have a legal obligation to respond to open records requests.⁴³ However, because of the 2007 rewrite of Pennsylvania’s open records law, Pennsylvania’s state-related institutions (Penn State, the University of Pittsburgh, Lincoln University, and Temple University) are excluded from these obligations.⁴⁴ Instead, they are required to report only the salaries of officers and directors, the 25 highest employee salaries, and information required on an IRS form 990.⁴⁵ This means that, unlike other, similar universities, Penn State can withhold substantial amounts of information from the public and Penn State community members.

This exemption occurred because Penn State institutional decision-makers wanted it. In 2007, former Penn State President Graham Spanier lobbied the state government “aggressively”

⁴² Louis Freeh, *Report of the Special Investigative Counsel Regarding the Actions of The Pennsylvania State University Related to the Child Sexual Abuse Committed by Gerald A. Sandusky*, Freeh Sporkin & Sullivan, LLP, July 12, 2012, <https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/interactive/2012/07/12/sports/ncaafootball/13pennstate-document.html>.

⁴³ Rob Arcamona, “What documents can a reporter obtain from Penn State officials?” Student Press Law Center, November 15, 2011, <https://splc.org/2011/11/what-documents-can-a-reporter-obtain-from-penn-state-officials/>.

⁴⁴ New York Times Editorial Board, “Open the Records at Penn State,” New York Times, November 16, 2011, www.nytimes.com/2011/11/17/opinion/open-the-records-at-penn-state.html.

⁴⁵ Rob Arcamona, “What documents... from Penn State officials?”

to ensure that Penn State was exempt.⁴⁶ Not only do administrators withhold information, in the recent past, they have fought to be able to withhold *more* information. This presents a direct attack on freedom of expression. How can students express their viewpoints freely if they lack the information required to create informed opinions?

This exclusive decision-making structure provides few opportunities for students to participate in institutional decision-making. While administrators “energetically address concerns,”⁴⁷ they have the capacity to frame issues in the way that they choose. The institution creates **essentially non-participatory and powerless opportunities for student participation**, using “town halls” and “focus groups” that give an opportunity for Penn State to posture as transparent and forward-thinking while still disregarding students’ voices.

For instance, town halls enable institutions to “perform accountability theater,”⁴⁸ focusing on “making students feel as if they have been heard” but ultimately disenfranchising “the community that is ostensibly the reason for these meetings in the first place.”⁴⁹ For example, for Penn State’s town halls about COVID, all questions were solicited beforehand. Institutional decision-makers did not have to respond to community concerns in real-time. And, crucially, concerns that did not fit within the institution’s image could be selected out.

So, while Penn State administrators leverage town halls as props to move students, alumni, faculty, and staff, and other community members to see the University as transparent and forward-thinking, these town halls fail to provide sufficient means for students to participate in

⁴⁶ New York Times Editorial Board, “Open the Records at Penn State.”

⁴⁷ Robin Clair, “The Bureaucratization, Commodification, and Privatization of Sexual Harassment through Institutional Discourse: A Study of the Big Ten Universities,” *Management Communication Quarterly* 7, no. 2 (1993): 135. doi.org/10.1177/0893318993007002001.

⁴⁸ Jonathan B. Field, “Town Hall Meeting as Campus Spectacle,” in *Town Hall Meetings and the Death of Deliberation* (University of Minnesota Press, 2019), 51.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 60.

dialogue about the issues at hand. Instead, they enable institutional decision-makers to disseminate instead of answer and never be held accountable for it.

In total, these characteristics of Penn State’s decision-making structure — a lack of shared governance, the centralization of power, a culture of concealment, and essentially powerless and non-participatory opportunities for student “participation” — covertly censor students’ speech. Students cannot access the information required to make an informed opinion; they cannot participate in institutional decision-making. Their speech does not carry meaning.

And while the COVID decisions illuminate how these characterizes appear, they appear across a variety of issues. The lack of shared governance is illuminated when overwhelming student calls for specific policies through official student government channels are benched, without a public comment — for instance, the call from both the undergraduate and graduate University Park student governments for Penn State to participate in an external sexual violence survey.⁵⁰ The centralization of power was revealed during the University Presidential selection process: of the 21 people on the Presidential Selection Committee, there was only 1 student and 19 members were current or former trustees or administrators.⁵¹ The Sandusky sex abuse scandal demonstrated the University’s culture of concealment.⁵² Limited opportunities for student participation are illustrated by the University’s various town halls, which cover topics from racism to sexual violence.⁵³

⁵⁰ Both the University Park Undergraduate Association and Graduate and Professional Association endorsed the recommendation of the Schreyer Gender Equity Coalition, advocating for Penn State to participate in future iterations of the AAU’s sexual misconduct survey. Claire Kelling (sponsor), Support of the Schreyer Gender Equity Coalition’s Sexual Misconduct Survey Recommendations, Resolution 71-08, Graduate and Professional Student Association at Penn State, November 10, 2021, <https://gpsa.psu.edu/documents-and-records/legislation/>.

⁵¹ Penn State, “Next Gen Penn State Committee Leadership,” Penn State, 2021, <https://nextgen.psu.edu/leadership/#committee>.

⁵² Freeh, *Report of the Special Investigative Counsel*.

⁵³ See the University’s various town halls at Penn State, “Live Events,” Penn State Strategic Communications, 2017, <https://liveevents.psu.edu/>.

This way of decision-making is markedly different than democratic, participatory systems. David Mathews writes of the possibilities of “organic politics,” citing that in these types of communities, citizens work together to define community problems and “the knowledge needed to decide what to do about [community] problems is created in the cauldron of collective decision making.”⁵⁴ In this type of community, “decisions are based on the recognition that concerns are interrelated as well as competing... decision making is deliberative [and] involves carefully weighing possible actions against what people consider most valuable.”⁵⁵

Envision this type of decision-making at Penn State. Imagine legitimate town halls, democratic deliberations about pressing issues, and genuine, robust outreach efforts to students and other Penn State community members, led by institutional decision-makers. Students work together to assess and develop solutions to community issues. Their concerns and input are valued by decision-makers. In fact, it is *so* valued that administrators and Board of Trustees members proactively and honestly share information about institutional happenings and seek students’ input on University decisions. As a result, students leave Penn State with a strong sense of civic purpose, with the capacity and drive to ask questions and engage deeply within their future communities. Financial incentives continue to exist, of course, but institutional decision-makers acknowledge them and work with students to ensure the institution reaches its key missions of education, research, and teaching.

But this is not reality. Instead, institutional decision-makers use exclusive decision-making structures to systemically limit students’ capacity to engage productively. This limits students’ freedom of expression.

⁵⁴ David Mathews, “Ships Passing in the Night,” *Journal of Community Engagement and Scholarship* 2, no. 1 (2009): 3. <https://digitalcommons.northgeorgia.edu/jces/vol2/iss1/3>.

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, 3-4.

Chapter 3

The Propaganda Machine

During the fall of my senior year, I began participating substantially in anti-sexual-violence advocacy. Specifically, I wanted to challenge a lack of institutional transparency. I joined a student organization — the Schreyer Gender Equity Coalition — and, with the organization, wrote an open letter to Damon Sims, the Vice President of Student Affairs. The letter addressed administrators’ failure to release survey data collected in 2018 that decision-makers had committed to compiling and releasing (repeatedly, and first in 2015)⁵⁶; we demanded the release of the 2018 Sexual Misconduct Climate Survey Report, noting that “students’ inability to access basic data about the prevalence of sexual misconduct at Penn State — data that Penn State already committed to compile and release — indicates that Penn State’s 2015 commitments lacked the institutional support and long-term implementation plan to make them more than a positive publicity effort.”⁵⁷

The letter gained over 700 signatures in a span of two weeks and elicited the release of the survey report just two weeks later.⁵⁸

But the report was inadequate; administrators omitted data about the efficacy of Penn State resources, key correlative factors, and offensively perpetrated rape myths.⁵⁹ In a way like

⁵⁶ Penn State, “President Accepts All 18 Recommendations Presented by Sexual Assault Task Force,” Penn State News, February 17, 2015. <https://www.psu.edu/news/campus-life/story/president-accepts-all-18-recommendations-presented-sexual-assault-task-force/>.

⁵⁷ Megan Swift, “‘It’s very disturbing’ | Penn State students say Timely Warnings signal larger sexual violence concerns,” Daily Collegian, September 30, 2021, https://www.collegian.psu.edu/news/campus/it-s-very-disturbing-penn-state-students-say-timely-warnings-signal-larger-sexual-violence-concerns/article_28deb71c-2175-11ec-a531-d7b8393498e5.html.

⁵⁸ Julia Mertes, “Penn State releases 2018 Sexual Misconduct Climate Survey results,” Daily Collegian, September 20, 2021, https://www.collegian.psu.edu/news/campus/penn-state-releases-2018-sexual-misconduct-climate-survey-results/article_7f1c1f70-1a59-11ec-8a39-cb68300a2003.html.

⁵⁹ Nora Van Horn, “A Critical Analysis of the 2018 Sexual Misconduct Survey Report,” October 5, 2021, online unpublished document, Schreyer Gender Equity Coalition, <https://www.geneqcoalition.org/2018-survey-response>.

the COVID decisions discussed in the previous chapter, conversations about “next steps” and institutional decisions happened privately — with little (if any) student input.

Once decisions were made, institutional decision-makers disseminated information through channels designed for top-down communication: Penn State News and University-sanctioned town halls. At this time, criticisms of the University, unsurprisingly, were filtered out; in addition, there were no platforms that enabled, let alone were designed for, communication between student activists (or students in general) and institutional decision-makers.

Further, those who criticized the institution were nullified and their legitimacy was questioned. The exclusion of students within decision-making was justified in administrators’ communication. For instance, I received an email from Vice President of Student Affairs Damon Sims during this time in which he admitted that he had not read the open letter, but he assumed that the institution’s planned response would be “responsive” to our requests.⁶⁰ In a public letter, he wrote that there is “impatience with progress” amongst student activists, but did not respond to any of our specific complaints.⁶¹ Students’ capacity to participate in a meaningful way — students’ capacity to add wisdom and unique insight — was doubted; it was doubted even though students were *already* meaningfully participating.⁶² But this was not recognized on institutionally controlled platforms; instead, the institutions’ control enabled them to justify the exclusion of students.

Institutional decision-makers reiterated their various “commitments” to addressing sexual violence, even though it was obvious amongst students who had all the available information that

⁶⁰ Damon Sims, email to author, September 15, 2021.

⁶¹ Damon Sims, “Commitment to addressing sexual misconduct,” Digging Deeper, October 3, 2021, <https://diggingdeeper.psu.edu/2021/10/commitment-to-addressing-sexual-misconduct/>.

⁶² It was students’ research and advocacy — their speaking and action — that elicited the survey report release.

the institution could do more.⁶³ The distinction between institutional communication and reality was repeatedly made clear. For instance, Penn State News reported, “since becoming Penn State president in 2014, Barron has made addressing sexual misconduct a University priority,”⁶⁴ But, elsewhere, Barron noted that it was “race and free-speech issues”⁶⁵ that were “at the forefront during his tenure.”⁶⁶ Vice President Damon Sims wrote that “it is impossible to know what portion of reported cases [of sexual assault] actually result from a greater openness to report and the increased means for reporting [versus a legitimate increase in sexual violence].”⁶⁸ But it is not “impossible”; surveying students and releasing the data enables us to see this very information. These are just two examples of how institutional decision-makers leveraged their monopolistic control of media outlets to present only one side of the story — a narrative that fails to disclose and, in some cases, actively hides the full picture.

A robust analysis of the institutionally-sanctioned anti-sexual-violence work at Penn State reveals a lack of financial investments and effort to legitimately address sexual violence; programming introduced during this time actually reinforced rape myths;⁶⁹ the Office of Sexual

⁶³ When I refer to “key information” here, I mean information about administrators’ historical commitments and institutional history, an understanding of how peer institutions address sexual violence, an understanding of what sexual violence is and how it manifests, and other pertinent information.

⁶⁴ Penn State, “President Barron, panelists discuss campus sexual assaults, prevention,” Penn State News, November 9, 2021, <https://www.psu.edu/news/administration/story/president-barron-panelists-discuss-campus-sexual-assaults-prevention/>.

⁶⁵ Karen Weaver, “When It Comes To Big-Time College Sports, Penn State’s New President Has Walked Through The Fire Before,” *Forbes*, March 7, 2022, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/karenweaver/2022/03/07/when-it-comes-to-big-time-college-sports-penn-states-new-president-has-walked-through-the-fire-before/?sh=351826b44753>.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ These issues are undoubtedly important. This is not to say that there was an incorrect prioritization, just to point out that there is not consistent messaging about what President Barron “prioritized” during his time at Penn State.

⁶⁸ Sims, “Commitment to addressing sexual misconduct.”

⁶⁹ Van Horn, “Critical Analysis.”

⁷⁰ An example is that Penn State’s first-year alcohol and sexual violence training listed three “health-related consequences of high-risk drinking”: alcohol poisoning, blacking out, and sexual assault. Read more from Van Horn, “Critical Analysis,” 6.

Misconduct Prevention and Response failed to invest in *any* prevention efforts; and it seemed like — at least from my perspective — that institutional decision-makers essentially ignored sexual violence, unless student activists demanded they take more substantive action on the issue. The fact that data that the institution committed to release in 2018 had not yet been released in 2021 was just the surface of institutional failures.

The narratives promoted by institutional decision-makers were enabled by their control of the media. As a result, discourse occurs at the margins; limitations are pre-imposed by institutional decision-makers. “Neoliberal discourse” — discourse that champions the role of “self-regulating, individual practices”⁷¹ over systemic and institutional action, thus absolving the institution of responsibility to tackle this issue — becomes pervasive. Blame can be placed on individual perpetrators and individual victims. Because this communication — with these assumptions — is disseminated through the most popular and powerful media outlets, institutional decision-makers get the first word (or at least appear this way). This effectively forces others to engage with the ideas they espouse. The language they use, and the assumptions implicit in it, become even more widespread.

An example is decision-makers’ desire to use the term “sexual misconduct” instead of the term “sexual violence.” Both are blanket terms that refer to a broad range of behaviors: sexual harassment, sexual assault, and sexual abuse. These are typically the legal terms. But as described by Ann-Derrick Gaillot, “the appeal of the term [sexual misconduct] lies in its numbing vagueness”; the term is deployed “in lieu of terminology that more acutely gets to the

⁷¹ Nike Ayo, “Understanding health promotion in a neoliberal climate and the making of health conscious citizens,” *Critical Public Health* 22, no. 1 (2012): 102. doi.org/10.1080/09581596.2010.520692.

heart of sexual violence.”⁷² While there are legal reasons that some news outlets, when talking about a specific case, use sexual misconduct, it “leads to habits that effectively serve to diminish acts of physical and psychological violence with the sterility of legal language.”⁷³ It distracts by recontextualizing the act as a trespass of norms of conduct instead of a violation to a person. It boils down what is violence to misconduct — students not following the rules, akin to something like drinking underage or plagiarism. And it suggests that conduct — the status quo — is not inherently patriarchal or flawed even though research suggests that patriarchal norms are built into society, particularly at institutions of higher education.⁷⁴ In total, it absolves the institution of responsibility by *individualizing* what is a systemic, cultural issue.

Penn State’s use of the term in lieu of sexual violence seems to be encouraged by Penn State’s Office of Strategic Communications, a unit comprised of staff and administrators who lack expertise in sexual violence. The use of “sexual misconduct” is pervasive: Sexual *Misconduct* Climate Survey, Town Hall on Sexual *Misconduct*, Office of Sexual *Misconduct* Prevention and Response. The seeming institutional favoritism of “sexual misconduct” has resulted in a ubiquitous use of it — both by institutional actors and by students. The term “misconduct” is parroted by student leaders, student activists, media outlets, and more. And using the term “misconduct” instead of “violence” transforms the way we perceive sexual violence, and thus the way that we address it.

⁷² Ann-Derrick Gaillot, ““Sexual Misconduct” is a numbingly vague term,” The Outline, January 4, 2018, <https://theoutline.com/post/2844/sexual-misconduct-origin-usage>.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Prior and de Heer, “Everyday Terrorism,” 1-15.

The way we discuss our community's problems and exchange ideas matters. It matters because it determines how and if we deliberate — and if students learn how to deliberate while at Penn State. And the way that we deliberate and learn to deliberate determines how and if we solve community issues, both at Penn State and beyond.

One may assume that language — and the ways that institutional decision-makers communicate — is apolitical or otherwise does not matter. But this is not the case. The response to student activists and sexual violence reveals this. It reveals key characteristics of Penn State's "propaganda machine."

Foucault's conception of power indicates that discourses shape and create meaning systems — "some meaning systems gain[] the status and currency of truth, and dominate how we define and organize both ourselves and our social world; other alternative discourses and marginalized and subjugated."⁷⁵ Clair further explains: communication "creates, enacts, and reproduces power structures," including power structures that privilege certain groups over others."⁷⁶ In this, communication provides challenges and opportunities: the language that we use has the power to oppress as well as emancipate people."⁷⁷

Penn State can and does use methods of communication to exert power and reinforce existing power structures. By controlling the language and framing the terms in which we communicate, Penn State decision-makers can justify exclusive decision-making and they can elude accountability.

⁷⁵ Ahamadreza Yazdannik, Alireza Youseft, and Sefideh Mohammadi, "Discourse analysis: A useful methodology for health-care system researchers," *Journal of Education and Health Promotion* 6, no. 111 (2017): doi:10.4103/jehp.jehp_124_15.

⁷⁶ Clair, "Bureaucratization, Commodification, and Privatization," 126.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

Institutional decision-makers **control the means of communication**; those already in power have a monopoly on the means of communicating institutional decisions and happenings. They disseminate information via mass email, Penn State News, institutionally sanctioned-town halls, and many other forums. Grassroots activists and other stakeholders lack the capacity to use similar, wide-reaching media.⁷⁸ And because institutional decision-makers want the institution to look good, they hide unattractive information while using these channels. This was certainly true last fall as they highlighted their “commitment” to addressing sexual violence; they simultaneously failed to recognize the exigence for the release of the survey results.

Even the town hall itself, a public event, seems like a concealment in and through an act of public discourse. Of the six participants on the town hall, only one participant (me) held academic freedom. The other five were staff members; if they critique institutional decision-makers or the institution, they potentially jeopardize their jobs. The town hall itself was livestreamed; as discussed in Chapter 2, questions were selected beforehand and there was no dialogue during the event. Then, following the town hall, the contrast between how other media outlets portrayed the event and how Penn State News portrayed the event reveals the slanted narrative.

Other media outlets featured information about institutional shortcomings. The Daily Collegian coverage of the event featured my statement that “students believe that the University is not doing all that it can” and conveyed specific institutional shortcomings that I brought up. For example, “structuralized problems [like sexism and the normalization of violence] are embedded in Penn State’s culture” and that “current [University] efforts focus on preventing

⁷⁸ As examples, mass emails can only be sent by a select few and must be approved by administrators; town halls require room reservations.

sexual assault happening between two adults in private and without a cultural or systemic lens... This isn't [the] reality of sexual violence."⁷⁹ The article also featured some of my tangible suggestions: "the university must take "accountability" and "stop framing sexual and relationship violence as an interpersonal and inevitable issue."⁸⁰

Similarly, WPSU — the PBS/NPR station in central Pennsylvania — noted the three specific recommendations I made: defining sexual violence correctly, investing in prevention efforts, and being transparent with students.⁸¹ WTAJ-TV highlighted a critical quote: "students believe the University is not doing all that it can and historically the university has not been a leader."⁸²

Penn State, on the other hand, wrote that during the town hall, "Van Horn... shared specific ideas about how... the University could continue to improve sexual misconduct prevention."⁸³ However, notably, I did not argue for a *continuation* of current efforts; I argued that current efforts were problematic and ineffective. In addition, none of the tangible suggestions I talked of were shared. The selected quote from me, buried amongst staff and administrators' quotes (unlike the other news outlets), was:

"from the student perspective, sexual violence is a devastating issue. Of course students want to be involved in creating solutions, however, if students aren't

⁷⁹ Jenna Meleedy, "Penn State President Eric Barron addresses university sexual violence climate during virtual town hall," Daily Collegian, November 9, 2021, https://www.collegian.psu.edu/news/campus/penn-state-president-eric-barron-addresses-university-sexual-violence-climate-during-virtual-town-hall/article_bbe3567c-413b-11ec-b002-e74826ce1de3.html

⁸⁰ Meleedy, "Penn State President."

⁸¹ Becky Marcinko, "Penn State hosts virtual panel to discuss sexual misconduct at the university," WPSU, November 9, 2021, <https://radio.wpsu.org/2021-11-09/penn-state-hosts-virtual-panel-to-discuss-sexual-misconduct-at-the-university>.

⁸² WTAJ News. "PSU Sexual Misconduct Townhall," November, 8, 2021, YouTube video, 1:06. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K_c7xiPn4wM.

⁸³ Penn State, "President Barron, panelists."

invited to participate in conversations about Penn State’s culture and policy, from contributing to real changes,” said Van Horn. “Students perceive, and rightly so, that sexual violence is a systemic and cultural issue. We can’t just expect students to just do programming and [attend] events.”⁸⁴

Penn State News took this quote out of context and immediately followed it with “examples” of how the institution was going to engage students. They omitted my next line: “we need more transparency and accountability from the institution.”⁸⁵⁸⁶

Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky acknowledge that most “mainstream news outlets” operate in concert with “corporate financial interests” and thus most of the “information presented to the public will be biased with respect to these interests.”⁸⁷ For one, they filter the news “in favor of their advertisement providers” and “avoid news items which may bring sorts of negative responses.”⁸⁸ Penn State News typifies this phenomenon. Penn State News is an effort to manage public information, not a legitimate news source.

Students realize this. The editorial board of the Daily Collegian has recognized that Penn State News “typically highlight[s] the success of the university and its members... [it shines] light on the many great things accomplished by students and faculty across different colleges.”⁸⁹ They indicated that it is obvious that “the purpose of Penn State News isn’t supposed to be

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Marcinko, “Penn State hosts virtual panel”

⁸⁶ WPSU featured this line.

⁸⁷ Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, “A Propaganda Model,” in *Manufacturing Consent* (New York City: Pantheon Books, 1988).

⁸⁸ Herman and Chomsky, “A Propaganda Model.”

⁸⁹ Daily Collegian Editorial Board, “Students need better media literacy, outlets like Penn State News can improve that,” Daily Collegian, February 9, 2022, https://www.collegian.psu.edu/opinion/editorials/editorial-students-need-better-media-literacy-outlets-like-penn-state-news-can-improve-that/article_107d9b5e-8960-11ec-9944-8f7cc1a4e9aa.html.

another hard news outlet... the site is meant to present the university at its best while [helping with] damage control when issues arise.”⁹⁰

But the editorial board, and I think many people, fail to see how the exclusive decision-making style of institutional decision-makers and Penn State News (and similar mediums) operate in concert. The Daily Collegian Editorial Board wrote that Penn State students “already have access to” many other “hard news outlets.”⁹¹ However, this is not completely true. Even so-called “hard news outlets” repeat Penn State’s propaganda because Penn State retains control of the information and the means through which it is disseminated. Those who run Penn State News have access to information that hard news outlets do not, especially due to Penn State’s lack of obligation under Pennsylvania’s open records laws. So, if Penn State decision-makers opt to censor something,⁹² the truth may never reach the public. Chomsky illuminates the dangers of this in acknowledging that the fact that “the assumption of reputability” maintains a propaganda machine.⁹³ Penn State News is often cited by other groups including media organizations and the Penn State community without a critical lens, spreading a skewed, positive spin on institutional decisions and happenings. This undermines our capacity to freely exchange ideas, because to participate freely one must “have the means to inform [oneself], to have ideas, to interchanges those ideas with others, to turn them into possible programs, to press for those programs... [this] takes access to information. It takes independent media.”⁹⁴

Penn State’s control of the media system is reinforced with **rhetorical choices that present this system as necessary** and inevitable. The communication style is self-reproducing;

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Or present it in a way that makes the institution look more positive than alternative accounts would.

⁹³ Herman and Chomsky, “A Propaganda Model.”

⁹⁴ Ibid.

it “casually reinforce[s] the status quo as if it is the natural order of things... [it reproduces] the current structure and process of socio-organizational life, as inevitable or natural systems.”⁹⁵

Simply put, the way that Penn State’s decision-makers communicate about institutional decisions or happenings implies that the hierarchical, bureaucratic, exclusive structure is the way that things must be. They imply that it would be unnatural for Penn State to make decisions or communicate differently.

For one, the way that Penn State’s decision-makers communicate frames decision-makers and the institution as one and the same; the decision-making process at Penn State is equated to the institution itself. Penn State news articles and electronic communication about the COVID-19 pandemic stated that “Penn State announces,”⁹⁶ “Penn State is reviewing,”⁹⁷ or that “Penn State implemented.”⁹⁸ In regards to sexual violence, the same tactics were used. This rhetoric allows Penn State’s decision-makers to remain nameless — and thus lack accountability. Further, this way of communicating institutional decisions is not conducive to teaching students who or which bodies make institutional decisions or how institutional decisions are made. The bureaucracy is hidden. The decision-making process is hidden. But it is identified with Penn State itself, as though the institution had collectively made the decision. Penn State metamorphosizes; to be against the decision-making structure is to be against the institution itself — because they are interpreted as one and the same. There are no other options. *This is just the way things are.*

⁹⁵ Clair, “Bureaucratization, Commodification, and Privatization,” 132-133.

⁹⁶ Penn State, “Penn State announces new COVID-19 testing protocols for fall semester,” Penn State News, August 3, 2021, <https://www.psu.edu/news/campus-life/story/penn-state-announces-new-covid-19-testing-protocols-fall-semester-0/>.

⁹⁷ Penn State, “Penn State reviewing CDC’s latest masking guidance,” Penn State News, February 26, 2022, <https://www.psu.edu/news/administration/story/penn-state-reviewing-cdcs-latest-masking-guidance/>.

⁹⁸ Penn State, “Coronavirus FAQs: Specifics from the University’s fall 2021 plans,” Penn State News, August 4, 2021, <https://www.psu.edu/news/administration/story/coronavirus-faqs-specifics-universitys-fall-2021-plans/>.

When the 2018 Sexual Misconduct Survey results were finally released, the news article noted that “Penn State has released,”⁹⁹ effectively absolving the administrators responsible for the egregious delay of blame. Subsequent articles about the situation were vague; for instance, the article’s note that “Penn State worked with students, faculty, and staff,”¹⁰⁰ there was no mention of specific people or how collaboration occurred.

Similarly, the rhetoric used to dismiss student criticism (like that detailed in the story about sexual violence advocacy) or input makes the exclusion of students seem natural, too. Decision-makers are not expected to listen to student feedback; the way they communicate normalizes this. So, in the above story, Damon Sim’s assumption that the institutional response will be responsive to students’ demands — without seeing these demands — assumes that the way that the institution acts is natural and sufficient; it reveals his belief that there is no need to incorporate students into the way decision-making functions because doing so would create identical results. Even if students are not represented in institutional decision-making, it does not matter.

Further, armed with the control of media, Penn State is able to use rhetorical choices to evade accountability in the wake of public pressure. Once issues come to light in the public sphere, Penn State decision-makers use four very specific **rhetorical tactics to evade accountability**.

First, they *individualize and nationalize* structural issues — often simultaneously. The blame for problems is placed on individual students or issues are presented as so large and

⁹⁹ Penn State, “2018 Sexual Misconduct survey results released in anticipation of 2022 survey,” Penn State News, September 20, 2021, www.psu.edu/news/administration/story/2018-sexual-misconduct-survey-results-released-anticipation-2022-survey/.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

pervasive so that institutional decision-makers claim that they could not possible do anything more to address these issues. This is true for many issues — COVID, hazing, sexual violence, environmentally unsustainable systems, and more. But even if these issues are pervasive and do happen everywhere, there are ways that institutional decision-makers can champion institutional interventions.

After the death of Tim Piazza, Caitlin Flanagan documented large, cultural, and structural issues at Penn State — like the fact that Student Conduct services potentially did not investigate allegations until police were notified of the same allegations.¹⁰¹ Flanagan’s documentation of the events suggested that Penn State could be doing more to combat hazing and that financial and alumni interests pressure the institution into inaction.

But Penn State’s institutional decision-makers used the “individualize and nationalize” rhetorical technique to escape blame. President Barron penned a letter to the Penn State community. He wrote: “we know this is a national problem plaguing this generation of students at universities across the country” and “our students are adults and must accept responsibility for their actions.”¹⁰² The issue at hand becomes both too small and too big for Penn State’s decision-makers to be responsible for it, or to solve it. *There are no medium sized problems at Penn State.*

When it comes to sexual violence, decision-makers use rhetoric like “there will always be creeps” and current “prevention” efforts encourage the idea that potential victims should drink less to avoid being assaulted. At the same time, sexual violence is presented as a national, vexing issue that is seemingly intractable.¹⁰³ Comments on environmental issues either hyper focus on

¹⁰¹ Caitlin Flanagan, “Death at a Penn State Fraternity,” *The Atlantic*, November 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/11/a-death-at-penn-state/540657/>.

¹⁰² Eric Barron, “An Open Letter to Penn State’s Greek Community,” *Digging Deeper*, April 10, 2017, <https://diggingdeeper.psu.edu/2017/04/an-open-letter-to-penn-states-greek-community/>.

¹⁰³ Sims, “Commitment to addressing sexual misconduct.”

recycling, where poor recycling rates are something that individual students are personally responsible for, or terribly complex, international environmental issues. When Penn State institutional decision-makers respond to acts of racial hate, they do the same thing, writing that “we — like any institution of higher education — are not immune to the efforts of those who bring hate and prejudice to our community.”¹⁰⁴ Racist acts are presented as a national, inevitable issue (as administrators imply that they happen at every institution of higher education) and a personal one (it is implied that there are individuals that bring hate and prejudice to Penn State), but the idea that Penn State institutional structures could be flawed, or could be truly effective in solving them in our community, is never examined, despite poor recruitment and retention rates for students of color.

The second rhetorical tactic is *citing “ongoing efforts”* without acknowledging criticisms or shortcomings over these efforts. When responding to environmental activists, the institution shares that they are glad to “update them on the University’s ongoing sustainability efforts,”¹⁰⁵ despite the fact that these efforts are not responsive to student activist demands. They are eager to share “the University’s ongoing progress” about sexual violence¹⁰⁶ and their “ongoing efforts to address the challenges of racism, racial bias and community safety.”¹⁰⁷ When responding to student activists and external pressure in particular, University institutional decision-makers vaguely cite “ongoing” efforts and progress to make it seem like there has been progress, or indeed any intensification of action that would constitute an ongoing effort.

¹⁰⁴ Eric Barron, et al., “Our commitment will not falter,” Penn State News, November 14, 2017, <https://www.psu.edu/news/campus-life/story/our-commitment-will-not-falter>.

¹⁰⁵ Penn State, “University partners with students.”

¹⁰⁶ Penn State, “Barron to host virtual town hall on addressing misconduct on Nov. 8,” Penn State News, October 21, 2021, <https://www.psu.edu/news/administration/story/barron-host-virtual-town-hall-addressing-sexual-misconduct-nov-8/>

¹⁰⁷ Josh Moyer, “Penn State announces creation of a new Center for Racial Justice. Here’s what it will do,” Centre Daily Times, September 30, 2021, <https://www.centredaily.com/article254641282.html>.

Third, and in a similar vein, institutional decision-makers say things that *lack real meaning*, ambiguously and strategically vaguely condemning or supporting things. As George Orwell notes:

“when there is a gap between one’s real and one’s declared aims, one turns as it were instinctively to long words and exhausted idioms... prose consists less and less of words chosen for the sake of their meaning, and more and more of phrases tacked together like the sections of a prefabricated hen-house... modern writing at its worst does not consist in picking out words for the sake of their meaning and investigating images in order to make the meaning clearer. It consists of gumming together long strips of words which have already been set in order by someone else and making the results presentable by sheer humbug. If you use ready-made phrases, you don’t have to hunt about for words... People who write in this manner usually have a general emotional meaning — they dislike one thing and want to express solidarity with another — but they are not interested in the details of what they are saying.”¹⁰⁸

To see this at Penn State, one just has to look at the institution’s “diversity statement”:

“The Pennsylvania State University is committed to and accountable for advancing diversity, equity, inclusion, and sustainability in all of its forms. We embrace individual uniqueness, foster a culture of inclusion that supports both broad and specific diversity initiatives, leverage the educational and institutional benefits of diversity in society and nature, and engage all individuals to help them

¹⁰⁸ George Orwell, “Politics and the English Language,” *Horizon*, April 1946, <https://www.orwellfoundation.com/the-orwell-foundation/orwell/essays-and-other-works/politics-and-the-english-language/>.

thrive. We value inclusion as a core strength and an essential element of our public service mission.”¹⁰⁹

It is obvious that Penn State’s decision-makers want to encourage “diversity,” but they lack a clear, coherent foundation and an understanding of why this is necessary. Omitting the motivation is a good way to neuter meaning. Their commitment to “diversity” thus just manifests as virtue signaling — their words lack substantial meaning. But as Noam Chomsky notes, “the whole point of good propaganda is to create a slogan that nobody’s going to be against, and everybody’s going to be for. Nobody knows what it means because it doesn’t mean anything.”¹¹⁰ The strategic ambiguity within the institution’s diversity statement makes it good propaganda.

The final tactic administrators leverage to escape accountability is *lying*. Penn State administrators and institutional decision-makers often say things that are obviously untrue. But because getting accurate information is hidden, it is difficult to “fact-check” them. Further, with Penn State institutional decision-makers’ monopolization of media, grassroots “fact-checks” cannot gain traction. Sometimes, the lying is obvious. Flanagan’s documentation of the Piazza’s death reveals this, as she details her exchange with Penn State administrators; they wrote, “we don’t doubt the Piazza’s sincerity,” but then, as Flanagan notes, they began to “heap[] doubt on [the Piazza’s] assertion.”¹¹¹ Other times, the lying is more covert. The claim that sexual violence has been Barron’s priority or Damon’s statement that “it is impossible” to know why there is increased reporting of sexual violence become obviously untrue only if you are familiar with the situation.

¹⁰⁹ Penn State, “New statement underscores University’s commitment to diversity,” Penn State News, February 21, 2016, <https://www.psu.edu/news/administration/story/new-statement-underscores-universitys-commitment-diversity/>.

¹¹⁰ Noam Chomsky, “Quotations,” in *Media Control: The Spectacular Achievements of Propaganda* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2002).

¹¹¹ Flanagan, “Death at a Penn State Fraternity.”

The propaganda machine is possible because of the characteristics of the exclusive decision-making structure at Penn State; this structure hides information. Students are prevented from accessing information about institutional happenings. And the propaganda machine affects students' capacity to serve as citizens; it becomes a self-reinforcing cycle.

Chapter 4

Limited Imagination

In March 2022, a proposal was delivered to the University Park Student Fee Board requesting money to fund a student poverty unit which would provide centralized resources to students experiencing poverty. The unit, as proposed, would be funded largely through the by the student-initiated fee, which functions as a tax on students to fund various activities, services, and facilities. The University Park Student Fee Board is made up of 12-voting student members that recommends the student-initiated fee level and allocations to various University entities to the Penn State Board of Trustees.

The proposal to combat poverty using this funding source — a direct tax on students — was explained by part of the proposal: “funds are increasingly scarce within the University.”¹¹² A University Vice President wrote to the Board: “please help us help these students in need.”¹¹³ The written proposals and spoken explanations from those leading the proposal suggested that if the Fee Board did not fund this unit, the unit would not manifest. The reason? Penn State is hurting financially.

But an analysis completed just a year prior by an external financial auditor, hired by the Coalition for a Just University, revealed that this, in fact, is not the case. The auditor presented findings that demonstrated that the institution is doing quite well financially. Penn State’s reserves total over \$4 billion.¹¹⁴ In addition, the auditor presented findings that indicated that

¹¹² Damon Sims to Members of the Student Initiated Fee Board at University Park, March 18, 2022, Funding Request for New Food & Housing Insecurity Initiative.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Coalition for a Just University, “CJU Executive Summary of Bunsis Presentation,” Coalition for a Just University, 2021, <https://cjupsu.org/bunsis-executive-report>.

when compared to peer institutions, Penn State provides less support to faculty and students.¹¹⁵

The University does not provide raises to offset inflation in salary positions and the University provides relatively low financial aid and has relatively high costs for students; however, the University's revenue has consistently been higher than expenses.¹¹⁶ The auditor also concluded that Penn State's decision-makers have likely overstated financial losses due the COVID-19 pandemic.¹¹⁷

Many of the Fee Board's members asked: why is the University offloading the cost of a student poverty unit onto students? While "high tuition, low stipends and wages, and other factors that the University controls all contribute substantially to student poverty,"¹¹⁸¹¹⁹ the institution fails to address these underlying causes, instead asking students to tax other students to fund a "band-aid" solution — a solution that does not interrogate the root cause and address it, but rather provides short-term, insufficient support to those in need. Ultimately, due to this and other concerns,¹²⁰ Fee Board members decided with a vote of 6-5 to not make an exception in Fee Board procedures (as this proposal was several months late) to grant this proposal a hearing.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Nora Van Horn, et al., "Community Content: Student Fee Board Members Explain Vote Against Exception For Hearing On Student Poverty Unit Proposal," Onward State, March 30, 2022, <https://onwardstate.com/2022/03/30/community-content-student-fee-board-explains-vote-against-exception-hearing-student-poverty-unit-proposal/>.

¹¹⁹ Also see the research of the Coalition of Graduate Employees; they found that a typical net pay leaves and average State College costs of living result in only \$215 for costs like car payments, student loans, childcare, medical bills, emergencies, and more and their collected testimonials from students – who the University pays – are that "I live paycheck to paycheck, one major expense away from a crisis." Coalition of Grad Employees (@cge_psu), Instagram Page, https://www.instagram.com/cge_psu/?hl=en.

¹²⁰ These other reasons included the fact that the request was three months late, with around a week left before the final recommendation needed to be made (so there was inadequate time to consider it); that there were two proposals submitted and the second submission increased the request by 150%, to \$200,000; and one of the key 'authors' of the initial proposal (who would have oversight of the unit) indicated that he had seen the proposal only a few hours before submission and did not approve it.

In response, two members of the University Park Student Fee Board — who were also co-authors of the proposal and members of the undergraduate student government — co-authored an op-ed that, in addition to providing factually incorrect information, revealed how the institutional structures of decision-making and institutional communication influence students. They wrote that “the university is strapped for cash” and that the Fee Board members were “ignoring student poverty.”¹²¹ They implied that the unit would have been able to get off the ground only with funding from the Student Fee Board. Further, *even* after an administrator committed to providing University funding for the project, the same students encouraged friends and other students to come to the subsequent Fee Board meeting to provide public comments. During this period, public commenters implied (and directly said) that the Fee Board members who voted “no” must have done so because they “hate poor students.”

At the same time, Penn State’s student government have failed to do substantial advocacy pointed at the University to address root causes of student poverty. Of course, I do not know fully all of the root causes to student poverty (and it would be irresponsible to pretend that I did), but it is obvious that current efforts from student government leaders fail to interrogate them. For example, in 2020, Penn State’s undergraduate student government “addressed financial insecurity” for students by funding \$20 gift cards,¹²² an initiative that was produced without first consulting with students who are the target audience for these resources. As Karen Washington points out, “it’s easy to write a check” by providing communities with food pantries, soup kitchens, and other short-term, apolitical resources, but broader, structural change is required to

¹²¹ Erin Boas and Najee Rodriguez, “Community Content: Ignoring Student Poverty Needs Won’t Solve Any Problems,” *Onward State*, March, 22, 2022, <https://onwardstate.com/2022/03/22/community-content-ignoring-student-poverty-needs-wont-solve-any-problems/>.

¹²² Ryen Gailey, “UPUA Approves LionCash+ Vouchers, Creates PSU Votes & Women’s Empowerment Roundtables,” *Onward State*, June 11, 2020, <https://onwardstate.com/2020/06/11/upua-approves-lioncash-vouchers-creates-psu-votes-womens-empowerment-roundtables/>.

actually address poverty.¹²³ Mark Rank writes about the paradoxical nature of American poverty: “the United States currently has the highest rates of poverty in the Western world... [but] America is the wealthiest nation on earth.”¹²⁴ He writes that, “our poverty is not the result of a lack of resources,” instead attributing it to “the result of a misrepresentation of the nature, causes, and solutions to poverty.”¹²⁵

True systemic solutions to student poverty require partnership with those affected by student poverty and a “broad range of community interaction that fosters... mutually beneficial exchange, exploration, and application of knowledge, expertise, and information.”¹²⁶ But this is not the way that the institution is structured. Instead, institutional decision-makers get to leverage the media apparatus to “define the causes” of poverty and other issues, “so as to be consistent with... preferred policy strategies.”¹²⁷ With a strong desire to make the institution look favorable and maximize profits, institutional decision-makers prioritize preferred policy strategies that externalize costs and enable the institution to escape accountability. This story reveals how students are co-opted by the institution. This creates devastating outcomes: without accountability and structural solutions to Penn State issues, we cannot adequately address these issues.

¹²³ Anna Brones, “Food apartheid: the root of the problem with America’s groceries,” *The Guardian*, May 15, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2018/may/15/food-apartheid-food-deserts-racism-inequality-america-karen-washington-interview>

¹²⁴ Mark R. Rank, “Toward a New Understanding of American Poverty,” *Washington University in St. Louis Journal of Law & Policy* 20, no. 17 (2006): https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/law_journal_law_policy/vol20/iss1/3.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

¹²⁶ Jeffrey C. Bridger and Theodore R. Alter, “The Engaged University, Community Development, and Public Scholarship,” *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement* 11, no. 1 (2006): 170.

¹²⁷ Rank, “Toward a New Understanding.”

Noam Chomsky writes:

“The smart way to keep people passive and obedient is to strictly limit the spectrum of acceptable opinion, but allow very lively debate within that spectrum — even encourage more critical and dissident views. That gives people the sense that there’s free thinking going on, while all the time the presuppositions of the system are being reinforced by the limits put on the range of the debate.”¹²⁸

This is precisely what institutional decision-makers do. They allow students to participate at the margins. At Penn State, the ideal citizen is a “compassionate volunteer,”¹²⁹ who presents various forms of “band-aid” solutions; these students do not interrogate the society or the institution that lacks the social safeguards to prevent issues. Further, institutional sanctioned student leadership opportunities promote “outcomes like self-esteem, consciousness of personal values, and a sense of personal responsibility.”¹³⁰ Penn State defines civic engagement with an emphasis on volunteering and philanthropy, instead of citizenry. This promotes inadequate civic outcomes and limits students’ imagination about what is possible. Penn State’s “Center for Character, Conscience and Public Purpose,” has a mission of “offering programs and services designed to... equip students with the understanding, motivation, and skills of responsible citizenship.”¹³¹ However, the Center’s activities fail to offer students opportunities to participate in institutional decision-making (or, in other words, build the skills of citizenship). The Center’s employees help with voter registration; they host seminars, lectures, and workshops; and they have one issue-

¹²⁸ Noam Chomsky, “Selections,” in *The Common Good* (Berkeley: Odonian Press, 1998), 43.

¹²⁹ Henry C. Boyte, *Everyday Politics: Reconnecting Citizens and Public Life* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 12.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*

¹³¹ Penn State, “Center for Character, Conscience, & Public Purpose,” Penn State Student Affairs, <https://studentaffairs.psu.edu/thecenter#:~:text=The%20Center%20for%20Character%2C%20Conscience,responsibility%20for%20the%20public%20good>.

based initiative: supporting “students in need” with Project Cahir.¹³² But they “neglect to teach about the root causes and power relationships, fail to stress productive impact, ignore politics, and downplay the strengths and talents of those being served.”¹³³ This reveals how, as Giroux and Giroux note, “young people are increasingly devalued as knowledgeable, competent, and socially responsible... administrators demonstrate a notable lack of imagination, conceiving of students primarily in market terms and showing few qualms about subjecting young people to forms of education as out modeled as the factor assembly lines they emulate.”¹³⁴ If students are not invited to participate in institutional decision-making and not encouraged to practice citizenship, how can they achieve key civic outcomes?

As George Orwell notes, “language can corrupt thought. A bad usage can spread by tradition and imitation, even among people who should and do know better.”¹³⁵ The institutions’ propaganda, in concert with the exclusive decision-making structure prevents students from thinking critically about or addressing the root causes of structural university issues.

Institutionally recognized student leaders (like student government executives) often parrot the institution’s propaganda. They offer the insight that the University’s budget is really tight, without any specific evidence. Many institutionally recognized leaders, with their frequent engagements and conversations with administrators, end up repeating what institutional decision-makers say, instead of demanding that the institution creates structural and systemic solutions to University issues.

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Boyte, *Everyday Politics*.

¹³⁴ Giroux and Giroux, “Universities Gone Wild.”

¹³⁵ Orwell, “Politics and the English Language.”

For example, one student government executive recently said:

“the shared governance enacted by the University following the Sandusky sex abuse case has resulted in a very mutual relationship that’s very beneficial and fosters a positive dynamic between the student body, faculty, and alumni... when conversations pop up about any topic, we hear updates from the university that we can report back to students... there is a conduit of communication that is very transparent.”¹³⁶

But the decision-making patterns of Penn State do not prioritize “shared governance.” Students often do not hear updates from the institution unless they organize and demand them. Institutional decision-makers do not act transparently. This statement is false. Why is this student saying this?

There are two possible reasons. Either this institutionally recognized student leader believes what they are saying, or they do not. If this student leader *does* believe that their statement is accurate, it demonstrates how student leaders are indoctrinated by administrators’ rhetoric. And, if this is true, that means that the students who work closely with administrators, who are supposed to “represent” the student body, are unable to interpret what is actually going on. It demonstrates the power of the propaganda machine.

And if this student leader does not believe what they are saying, if this student leader in fact is able to see the reality of institutional decision-making, then they are *lying*. In his work *The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon details how bourgeois intellectuals will spread “western

¹³⁶ Jeremiah Hassel, “How the Jerry Sandusky sex abuse case altered Penn State’s administration,” Daily Collegian, December 3, 2021, https://www.collegian.psu.edu/sandusky/how-the-jerry-sandusky-sex-abuse-case-altered-penn-state-s-administration/article_a7989b2e-539b-11ec-8958-ab205893719b.html

values” to the colonized elite in order to quell revolutionary violence; the most powerful co-opted those they recognize as leaders amongst a group without power.¹³⁷ Applied to Penn State, student “leaders” are encouraged to repeat administrative jargon to other students to quell student dissent and as a result, they are able to stay on good terms with administrators and retain their positions of power and their institutional recognition. And according to a recent Penn State alum, “[student government] leaders have continually... used their positions to obtain letters of recommendation from administrators and post-graduate jobs.”¹³⁸

Student activists’ imagination is limited by institutional rhetoric, too. Even student activists that attempt to address issues holistically fall into false tropes. For instance, an anti-sexual-violence student group created a list of demands that prioritized an individual, rather than a structural, conception of sexual violence.¹³⁹ This conception is the same as the one advanced by University administrators, which absolves them of accountability to address how sexual violence is incentivized by Penn State’s culture and administrative shortcomings; instead, both the student activists and Penn State administrators can blame sexual violence on individual “creeps.”

Student news outlets latch onto the information that is presented by the institution. Students are not equipped to present nuanced views on topics that are complex because the institution can set the terms of discussion and withhold relevant information. This means these outlets are hindered in their ability to encourage students to think critically about University issues. As such, they too repeat the institution’s language and display false or misleading

¹³⁷ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1963).

¹³⁸ Michael Miller, “The Code (Kinda) Changed, But Nothing Else Did,” Penn State Presidential Leadership Academy, March 7, 2021, <https://sites.psu.edu/academy/2021/03/07/the-code-kinda-changed-but-nothing-else-did/>.

¹³⁹ Students Against Sexist Violence (@sasvpsu), Instagram Page, <https://www.instagram.com/sasvpsu/>.

information. For instance, after Penn State's Town Hall on Sexual Misconduct, they ran a story with the headline, "Penn State President Eric Barron addresses university sexual violence climate."¹⁴⁰ However, during the town hall, President Barron served as the *moderator*, not a panelist; he did not "address" any questions about the University climate. Similarly, student news outlets use the language that the institution does, using the term "sexual misconduct" instead of "sexual violence," as we discussed.¹⁴¹ Lastly, student news outlets lack the time and resources to fact check information; they are willing to run articles that claim that "the University is strapped for cash."¹⁴²

The limited imagination affects "**student masses**" too; students become unable to hold the institution accountable. The debate that institutional decision-makers promote pits students against each other, like in the student poverty unit example, rather than allowing students to unite and demand institutional, structural change.

Consider one particular debate about THON. THON is a "student-run philanthropy" at Penn State with the mission of providing "emotional and financial support, spread[ing] awareness, and ensur[ing] funding for critical research" related to childhood cancer; the efforts culminate in a "46-hour dance marathon."¹⁴³ Most students view THON positively. However, THON does have flaws, as an op-ed titled "For Which Kids?" revealed. The sole beneficiary of THON is a division of Penn State; the money raised by the effort "only support[s] research by Penn State doctors and faculty members" and THON families can "only receive support from Four Diamonds as long as they stay at the Penn State Hershey Medical Center."¹⁴⁴ Further,

¹⁴⁰ Meleedy, "Penn State President."

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Boas and Rodriguez, "Ignoring Student Poverty."

¹⁴³ THON, "Homepage," THON, 2021, <https://thon.org/>

¹⁴⁴ Jack Shean, "THON: For Which Kids?" Onward State, April 8, 2019, <https://onwardstate.com/2019/04/08/thon-for-which-kids/>

according to Four Diamond's "own financial statements, less than 20% of THON proceeds go towards patient care and family support."¹⁴⁵ But when students raise these concerns, or others about THON, other students respond with "crude remarks" and "blatant threats."¹⁴⁶ Ironically, on a Facebook post featuring the article with criticisms about THON, individuals expressed that they wished that the author's own future children get cancer. But students and Penn State community members with various perspectives about THON should be able to agree that THON should support children with cancer as best as possible, not be a money-maker for the University; unfortunately, students are not able to see the possibility of uniting to hold the University accountable to ensure that this case.

This occurs elsewhere, too; Penn State's decision-makers constructs a positive image of inadequate or flawed solutions and programs and inspires division amongst students; in the case of the poverty program discussed above, the rhetoric decision-makers used implied that if Fee Board members voted against granting an exception for a hearing for the student poverty unit, they must be against addressing student poverty. Institutional decision-makers incentivize individualistic leadership from student government executives. They provide students with inadequate and incomplete, but carefully framed information. These choices all limit student imagination and promote a conception of "civic engagement" that requires no participation as a citizen. And because of this limited imagination, institutional decision-makers escape accountability. By framing the discussion narrowly, institutional decision-makers exculpate themselves and pit students against each other, individualizing and fragmenting their power, while presenting student engagement under the heading of "volunteer."

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

Chapter 5

The Pennsylvania State University

I am fascinated by Penn State's history.

Penn State was “founded to make higher education more possible for the common citizen.”¹⁴⁷ From the beginning, Penn State contrasted other, more historically “prestigious” universities; portraits of Penn State revealed that it educated “enterprising, original, courageous, and indomitable” men.¹⁴⁸ Penn State and those educated there were “essentially American,”¹⁴⁹ success stories from the 1862 Morrill Act.¹⁵⁰ Penn State curriculum equipped students both with practical skills and a liberal arts education; educational outcomes had a social value; it was a “new kind of higher education.”¹⁵¹ Penn State's students were “serious and earnest-face[d]” common people, ready to leverage their education to make their communities a better place.

But in recent Penn State history, “at least two Penn State presidents renounced the Land Grant covenant, subordinating the University's public purpose to private gain.”¹⁵² Institutional leaders championed giving away Penn State's status as a public institution in order to prioritize private gain. Giroux and Giroux paint Penn State as undemocratic and corporation-like; the Sandusky scandal, they write, reveals that “university administrators cannot defend the

¹⁴⁷ Rosa A. Eberly, “It Occurs to Me That I Myself Am the Land Grant,” in *Towers of Rhetoric: Memory and Reinvention* (Intermezzo, 2018).

¹⁴⁸ George M. Graham, “A Tribute to Penn State College,” *Penn State Alumni Quarterly*, Vol. 2, No. 3, April 1912, accessed from Penn State Libraries Special Collections

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁰ Penn State's land-grant history, however, is not wholly idyllic; see Tristan Ahtone and Robert Lee, “As Who Paid for America's Universities,” *New York Times*, May 7, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/07/opinion/land-grant-universities-native-americans.html>.

¹⁵¹ Michael Bezilla, “Origins: The Land-Grant Vision,” in *Penn State: An Illustrated History* (University Park and London: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991).

¹⁵² Eberly, “It Occurs to Me.”

university as a public good.”¹⁵³ The exclusive decision-making structures, propaganda dissemination, and limited imaginations of students constrain students’ agency and educational outcomes. Students are not equipped with the skills to act as citizens and solve 21st-century problems.

And it is students — young people — who will bear the brunt of these crises: climate change, economic inequities, pandemics, student debt, and so many more. These issues are “wicked problems,” and wicked problems require an informed citizenry; they require civic participation in political processes in a way that transcends just voting and volunteering. They require individuals who can cut through institutional, corporate, and political marketing campaigns to see and address the root causes. But at Penn State, “students are not perceived as worth[y] of the kinds of financial, intellectual, and cultural investments necessary to enhance their capacities to be critical and informed individuals and social agents.”¹⁵⁴ Despite being “members” of the Penn State community, students are stripped of their political and social agency in relation to the University itself. This is important because it is the primary and governing institutional body to which they belong as students. Even students passionate about creating a better world are pointed towards volunteerism and philanthropy, not citizenry; they are encouraged to start businesses or go on international service trips. But modern crises are political in nature and require political solutions.

Students’ possibilities are limited by Penn State’s structure; ironically, students are then accused by institutional decision-makers of being apathetic and uninvolved. But this is a *symptom*, not a cause, of their lack of institutional power. But paradoxically, when young people

¹⁵³ Giroux and Giroux, “Universities Gone Wild,” 271.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid, 272.

mobilize around social issues like school shootings, climate change, economic inequality, and sexual violence, their concerns are dismissed. Activists are “impatient with progress” but institutional decision-makers are annoyed when students do not want to participate in focus groups and surveys.¹⁵⁵ To make matters worse, our modern universities raise future university administrators. The apathy, disillusionment, and lack of civic educational outcomes for students will only worsen.

How do we move forward?

I feel the need to remain hopeful here. I think of those who may be reading this thesis.

There are reasons to be hopeful.

First, the first step to addressing issues is identifying and understanding them. As I suggested earlier in this thesis, because discourse about community problems occurs at the margins of the issues themselves, they frame issues incorrectly. Reframing and understanding these problems can bring myriad benefits and new solutions. We have an opportunity to transform current discourse and enable it to move from the margins to the root of issues. We can leverage this to create a better Penn State.

Second, it brings me hope that young people “are mobilizing all across the country and around the world as part of a broader effort to reclaim a democratic language and political vision.”¹⁵⁶ This is in spite of and in response to structural barriers that discourse speech and participation. Young people still, despite these barriers, envision and work towards a better, more just, more participatory world. What if we could harness the power of *everyone’s* imagination — the wonderful diversity of the Penn State community — to address our community issues? And

¹⁵⁵ Sims, “Commitment to addressing sexual misconduct.”

¹⁵⁶ Giroux and Giroux, “Universities Gone Wild,” 272.

with over 700,000 living alumni, and a huge class size, transforming educational outcomes for those at Penn State and encouraging citizenship has a value that transcends Penn State.

These are the reasons for hope.

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ACADEMIC VITA

Nora Van Horn

Education

Schreyer Honors College, at The Pennsylvania State University *Graduation: May 2022*
Bachelor of Arts (B.A.) in Philosophy, B.A. in Global and International Studies, B.A. in Chinese

Selected Penn State Academic Awards

2022 Penn State Liberal Arts College Marshal
2022 Penn State Philosophy Department Marshal
2022 Janssen Family Prize in Asian Studies
2021 Evan Pugh Senior Scholar Award
2021, 2020 Philosophy Department's Shibley Award, Dotter Award
2019 Foreign Language and Area Studies Fellowship
2018 Academic Excellence Scholarship, Provost's Award

Significant Academic Projects

Honors Thesis, "Free Speech? Exclusive Decision-Making, the Propaganda Machine, and Limited Imagination at The Pennsylvania State University, Institutional Champion of 'Free Speech'" *Sep. 2021 – Apr. 2022*
Area of Honors: Philosophy and Civic and Community Engagement
Supervisors: Dr. Mark Sentesy and Dr. Rosa A Eberly

Capstone Project, "Culture of Impunity: Violence, Administrative Inaction, and Student Advocacy at Penn State" *Sep. 2021 – Dec. 2021*
Area of Study: Civic and Community Engagement
Supervisor: Dr. Rosa A Eberly

Instructor – Smeal College of Business, "Act Now for a Sustainable Future" *Jan. 2021 – May 2021*
Description: co-designed and co-taught 3-credit, 11-person sustainability course (BA 397)
Supervisor: Dr. Paul Shrivastava and Dr. Beate Brunow

Student – CET Beijing: Intermediate High Chinese, at 首都师范大学 *Jun. 2019 – Aug. 2019*
176 in-class hours with 'language pledge' commitment to speak only Mandarin for program duration

Professional Experiences

Internship (Research) — Public Citizen *Jun. 2021 – Aug. 2021*
Corporate Crime and Wrongdoing Research Internship (remote), supervised by Rick Claypool

- Researched corporate government contractors and political contributions in potential violation of Title 52 §30119 of US Code using data from government databases, with focus on energy, fossil fuel companies
- Performed qualitative research about trends of corruption amongst government contractors

Internship (Student Engagement) — Penn State Sustainability Institute *Jun. 2021 – Sep. 2021*
Student Engagement Internship (remote), supervised by Douglas Goodstein

- Redesigned Sustainability Institute's student affiliate organization, meeting with faculty, staff, administrators, and deans to promote student representation in University decision-making
- Created proposal to gain \$60,000 in partnership with Sustainability Institute staff members

Internship (Programming) — Penn State Sustainability Institute *Aug. 2020 – May 2020*
Programming Internship (remote), supervised by Douglas Goodstein

- Planned and execute 20-person Friday sustainability speaker series with 40-80 person weekly audience
- Coordinated with nationally-recognized activists and faculty to highlight interdisciplinary topics like food apartheid, justice-centered pedagogy, environmental racism, and Indigenous storytelling
- Managed series' \$20,000 budget, analyzing engagement to track budgetary outcomes

Selected Leadership Experiences and Community Service

Founder and Executive Director — Penn State Forward *May 2021 – present*

Organization supporting candidates for Penn State’s Board of Trustees (remote)

- Recruit and support a slate of three young, forward-thinking candidates for the 2022 Penn State Alumni Trustee election on climate action, educational equity, student safety, transparent governance platform
- Plan and execute campaign strategy with help of The Boarding School, a 501c(3) non-profit
- Organize volunteer team to execute outreach across Penn State alumni and student communities

At-Large Member and Steering Group Member — University Park Student Fee Board *Apr. 2020 – Apr. 2022*

12-voting-member board tasked with evaluating \$20M+ of funding requests (University Park, PA)

- Researched and designed materials for annually-accruing \$250,000 Environmental Sustainability Fund, proposed in March 2021 and approved by Board of Trustees summer 2021
- Proposed graduate student government and Student Farm funding levels as subject matter expert
- Chaired environmental sustainability and zero-waste subcommittees

Vice Chair and Director of SHO TIME — Schreyer Gender Equity Coalition *May 2021 – Apr. 2022*

Organization working to stop sexual violence and fight for reproductive justice (University Park, PA)

- Obtained release of 2018 Sexual Misconduct Survey data by writing open letter signed by 700+ people
- Coordinated 25+ page analysis of survey data, discussing institutional misconceptions and policies
- Organized orientation (SHO TIME) programming for 50 orientation mentors and 300+ incoming Schreyer students about consent, rape culture, intersectionality, and other similar topics
- Served as sole student representative on University Town Hall, watched by 1000+ community members
- Worked with community experts and advocate to administrators to advance new initiatives and policies

Executive Director of Sustainability — University Park Undergraduate Association *Sep. 2019 – Jul. 2020*

Undergraduate student government for approximately 40,000 students (University Park, PA)

- Founded UPUA’s Department of Sustainability, expanding sustainability positions from 1 to over 10
- Fostered an open, cooperative environment for Department members’ success: 100% of members indicated they *strongly* agreed Department was safe space for new ideas and creativity; 70% of members indicated they *strongly* agreed the work they did was impactful
- Mentored members on natural resource and environmental theory including topics like food systems, waste systems, climate justice, and how global environmental justice issues manifest at Penn State

Policy Director — McKay-Pathickal UPUA Campaign *Feb. 2020 – Apr. 2020*

Winning student government campaign for the undergraduate student govt. at University Park (remote)

- Constructed 80+ page platform with plans to address sexual violence, racial discrimination, sustainability, etc. by performing multi-mode research, including literature reviews and key informant interviews

Council Member — Student Sustainability Advisory Council *Aug. 2019 – May. 2019*

Advisory board researching, proposing sustainability initiatives to senior admin (University Park, PA)

- Researched how waste management is affected by corporate contracts and procurement policies
- Proposed renegotiation of purchasing contracts with external vendors to promote corporate accountability and apply ‘polluter-pays’ environmental economic principles to Penn State’s waste management

Related Speaking Experiences

2022 TEDxPSU Speaker

2022 Penn State Sustainability Institute Spotlight

2021 Penn State Sexual Misconduct Town Hall

Selected Leadership, Community Service Awards

2022 Rock Ethics Institute Stand Up Award

2022 Neil C. Patel Memorial Changemaker Honors Scholarship (Inaugural Recipient)

2021 Penn State Homecoming Court Member

Selected News Coverage and Writing

2022 *The Nation*, “We Can’t Wait for Our Institutions to Take Action on Climate Change,” Nora Van Horn

2022 *Philadelphia Inquirer*, “New Penn State Groups Wants Younger, More Diverse Trustees Elected,”

Susan Snyder

2021 *Philadelphia Inquirer*, “Why Penn State students are rising up against sexual violence,” Joshua Moyer

2021 *Penn State News*, “Paterno Fellow fight for a more sustainable university,” Renata Carlos Daou

2021 *Penn State News*, “University Park Student Fee Board approves new \$250k Sustainability Fund,” Matt

Long

2021 *The Daily Collegian*, “Penn State President Eric Barron addresses university sexual violence climate during virtual town hall,” Jenna Meleedy

2021 *The Daily Collegian*, “Penn State Schreyer Gender Equity Coalition virtual panel weighs ‘structural, institutional problems’ of sexual violence on campus,” Olivia Estright