



## **BJU'S Response to GRACE Report Recommendations**

**President Steve Pettit**

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In November 2012 Bob Jones University contracted with an outside organization to conduct an independent review of the university's nearly forty-year record of responding to disclosures of sexual abuse and assault. This review was completely voluntary—it was not undertaken in response to a specific incident or issue—and it was unprecedented.

As a member of the higher education community, we want to ensure we have appropriate and loving policies and procedures for responding to individuals when they disclose abuse or assault. Sexual abuse and assault are growing challenges for society. They are heinous crimes and perpetrators must be brought to justice by our system of law. We are all awakening to the magnitude of the issue and more publicly addressing it and the trauma it inflicts on victims.

When the report of the independent review was released in December 2014, I committed to respond in more detail within 90 days. I also committed to meet with an advisory committee. We have reviewed the report, met with outside professionals—from the fields of biblical counseling, higher education, legal counsel, and human resources—and today I am prepared to continue our discussion regarding ways we can continuously improve to make Bob Jones University a safe and loving environment for victims of sexual abuse and assault.

### **Before we focus on the future, I want to address some critical areas where we as a University fell short of reasonable expectations:**

Over the years, we have had a number of students come to BJU who had experienced sexual abuse prior to their association with BJU. Many of these victims reached out to our faculty and staff for help and were lovingly served and comforted. However, there were some who came to us and did not experience the loving and comforting environment they deserved in their time of need.

I was personally grieved in my communication with one of the victims who had suffered immeasurably at the hands of her perpetrator. I was also grieved to learn that when she came to us for comfort and guidance she left disappointed, deeply hurt, and confused. In her case we did not understand the depths of her trauma.

Sadly I have come to realize that some others had a similar experience. So, for just a minute let me address all who suffered. We want you to know that we are deeply sorry that you were hurt and that we did not help you by our response. This was wrong and unacceptable! Please forgive us. We don't want this to happen again. We pledge to you, that by God's grace, we will use the things we have learned to further improve what we are doing to help sexual abuse and sexual assault victims. Thank you for your courage to speak out on behalf of those who will attend BJU in the future.

Over the years our system of discipline created barriers with many of our students. Some students reported that they were afraid to share their problems out of fear of facing discipline. A part of our culture placed too much emphasis on policies and not enough emphasis on people. At times we were too focused on our rules and not our relationships. I believe in my heart that we have always loved students, but we did not always discipline in love. This should never happen. We are sorry and that's why we are changing. The greatest sin of all is to not love!

We want to learn from the past. Our students deserve this. Our faculty and staff desire this and our God demands this. We want to serve our students by showing that we value relationships. This is something that we have been working on for some time and will continue to work on. We want every student, and especially victims of abuse, to feel that they can be transparent without fear and that we are providing a safe environment for those who are seeking help. If former students who are victims of abuse visited BJU today, I truly believe they would see and feel for themselves the love we have and the safe campus we provide for our students.

Let me also say to those former students who participated in the review—we want to hear your story. You matter to us. You can help us change and improve. We want the opportunity to have a connection with you. If you will contact my office, we will do all we can to make that connection happen. You will be our welcomed guest. We would like to meet with you and better understand your personal experience and how we could have done better.

Some people would like for us to put this experience behind us. I want to keep it before us. I don't want us to forget what happened because I—and I know you—never want this to happen again.

**This is why we are committed to taking the time to change. I want you to know that there are three key areas in which we are making changes:**

**First**, we began to take action beginning in 2012 to improve our policies concerning sexual abuse. BJU's initiatives are consistent with society's growing understanding of the problem of sexual abuse. What are some of the things we are doing today? Details of our response to the report will be posted on our website shortly after chapel today. You can go online at [bju.edu](http://bju.edu) and see the many ways we have enhanced how we are currently educating, training, and influencing our students, faculty and staff in sexual abuse awareness. I've also directed the provost and dean of students to lead a comprehensive review of our student experience and the discipleship training we provide our student life staff and student leaders. Their review is well under way, and they will be delivering me their findings with recommendations in the coming months.

**Second**, the culture of our student experience has been a point of struggle for some of our students. The primary point of struggle was not so much the rules but the way they were handled or enforced. We know this. Many people have communicated this to us. It's time to adjust so that we can carry forward our mission in ways that advance God's purposes and serve our university community well. Most students who come to BJU accept the standards of our code of conduct but they want to be treated like adults. We are not going to change our belief that the Bible is our authority and guide for spiritual life and growth, but we are going to become more Biblically focused on our student experience at BJU. Our student code of conduct and the accountability we

provide will be rooted in a more intentional Scriptural foundation. We will be focusing on student outcomes and developing our training of student leaders to be more effective disciple makers.

**Third**, we realize that, while many have been helped through our counseling process, we need to make some changes in our counseling structure. A commitment to biblical counseling to help believers is not the problem. God's inerrant and authoritative Word is completely sufficient to address any problem believers face in their spiritual life. We believe that Jesus is the Wonderful Counselor. He is the One who is ointment for our souls. This is why we are and will continue to be totally committed to a philosophy of Biblical counseling at BJU.

One of our problems has been a discipline system that too closely juxtaposed discipline with counseling. It is hard to give counsel to those you discipline unless the relationship is between a parent and child. Well, we are not the parents of our students and I don't think our students want to be our children. This is why we are making adjustments in our student counseling structure and are providing a place where students can go for spiritual care apart from discipline. These are things we should have seen and fixed before now, but we were too slow in responding to the need.

I know that what I have said is difficult for some of us. I understand! I know many of you are saying to yourselves that what I've said about our discipline culture and counseling response isn't a fair reflection of BJU as a whole. I know it's not. But we have to own this problem, and we have to have the courage to deal with it in the right way for God's glory.

The only thing for us to do is to do the right thing—for the victims, for our students, and for the individuals we serve.

As I said earlier, we did not initiate the investigation in response to any incident or known pattern of problems. Higher education officials around the country recognized that sexual abuse and assault on college campuses is a problem that is finally getting the attention it deserves. With this awareness we decided to review our policies and our record. We also made a commitment that we would endeavor to become a leader in higher education in the prevention and proper counseling and assistance of sexual abuse and sexual assault.

In my remarks today I have tried to present a straightforward and candid assessment of the report and how we are responding to it. Having said that, and in the spirit of candor, it should be noted that the reviewers to date have found no evidence that the University protected any perpetrators or failed to comply with its reporting obligations. I am relieved by these conclusions. They are important. But they do not make up for the fact that we did not serve our students as well as we should have.

I'm sure there are those who believe that initiating this review was a misguided move. I believe we were providentially guided by God's hand. I also understand there may be those who wish we would defend ourselves more aggressively. The reason we have been silent is that we do not want the focus to be on us. We wanted our former students who were victims of sexual abuse to know that they were more important to us than even our own institutional reputation.

Let me say that this attitude is truly the BJU of today! This is who we are. I believe if you came to the campus you would sense an atmosphere that is humble, transparent, and loving. Let me say to our alumni—I look forward to your coming back to see BJU today. I was just on a 7-city tour out west and met scores of alumni who are living out the biblical values they learned while students here at BJU. We all felt a bond in being a part of the BJU family.

I would like to express my love and respect for our faculty and staff. Throughout this entire report process, you have been patient, kind and hopeful. This has not been easy for anyone. It has been particularly hard on a few. But I truly believe that God has meant it for good. We are going to be a better university because of today. To our student body, I want you to know that we love you and are committed to your well-being—you are the BJU of today! Finally, I would like to give thanks to our Sovereign God who works all things together to accomplish His purposes and plans. It is His presence here at BJU that we truly seek and His grace that we humbly desire.