

Jann S. Wenner
Chief Executive Officer
Rolling Stone
1290 Avenue of the Americas
New York, NY 10104

April 22, 2015

Re: An Open Letter To Rolling Stone

Dear Mr. Wenner:

My name is Nicole Eramo, and I am the University of Virginia Dean of Students featured prominently in the Rolling Stone article "A Rape on Campus: A Brutal Assault and Struggle for Justice at UVA." In recent weeks, much has been said about the inaccuracy of the article after the Charlottesville Police Department held a press conference announcing that it had no evidence to substantiate Jackie's allegations of rape, and after the Columbia Journalism School issued its report severely criticizing Rolling Stone's investigation and reporting. Understandably, much of the public's attention has been focused on the inaccuracy of the article's account of a sexual assault involving Jackie and the flawed journalistic processes at Rolling Stone that lead to the publication of the article. Much less has been said, however, about the article's false account of the University's attitude regarding sexual assault and, in particular, the article's false and grossly misleading portrayal of the counseling and support that I provided to Jackie, including encouraging her to report.

In the article and related media appearances, Rolling Stone and Ms. Erdely stated that I discouraged Jackie from reporting or discussing her alleged assault, that Jackie suffered "abuse" at my hands when she tried to hold the perpetrators accountable, that I called UVA "the rape school," that I did not "support" Jackie, that I did "nothing" in response to Jackie's allegations and did not report them to the police, and that I sought to "suppress" Jackie's alleged sexual assault. Rolling Stone celebrated these malicious and false allegations by accompanying the article with a cartoonish picture of me doctored to appear as though I was smiling and giving a "thumbs up" to a crying victim sitting in my office, while angry protestors marched outside with signs like "Stop Victim Blaming."

In February 2015, your attorneys flatly told us that, even though the information Jackie told the magazine about her assault had already been publicly

discredited, Rolling Stone “stood by” its reporting in the article about me and about the University’s “inaction” (their words) in responding to Jackie and other victims of sexual assault. Adding insult to injury, your attorneys said that the article’s portrayal of me – which cast me as an unsympathetic and manipulative false friend to sexual assault victims who is more interested in keeping assault statistics down than providing meaningful guidance to victims or holding perpetrators of sexual assault accountable – was “fair.”

The true facts are very different. The Charlottesville Police Department and the Columbia Journalism School have both confirmed that the University encouraged Jackie to take action – and assisted her in doing so – but she refused to proceed. Specifically, I encouraged Jackie to report the alleged assault to the authorities, and I arranged for Jackie to meet with detectives almost immediately after she provided information identifying that she had been victimized at the Phi Kappa Psi fraternity house. (To be clear, I did much more, but federal law prohibits me from discussing it with the media.) As the Charlottesville Police Department’s press release makes clear, Jackie met twice with investigators (at my encouragement) in April and May of 2014, but she refused to provide any specific details about her assault and chose not to cooperate with any criminal investigation.

These are all things that Rolling Stone would have figured out if its reporters, editors, and fact checkers had not made a calculated decision not to contact sources who would have contradicted Rolling Stone’s preconceived storyline. But Jackie’s story of being victimized by a brutal gang rape at the hands of a UVA fraternity was simply too enticing not to publish – and UVA, its administration, and its students were too easily painted as callous villains for Rolling Stone to be burdened by the facts.

I have spent much of my adult life working tirelessly on behalf of survivors of sexual violence. I encourage survivors to hold perpetrators accountable, while at the same time showing sensitivity to victims who believe they are not emotionally prepared for the rigors or perceived shame that often accompany reporting. Striking this balance – and many other aspects of the job – is not easy. The hours are long, the subject matter is difficult, and the conversations are emotionally wrenching – most especially for the victims reliving their assaults, but also to a lesser extent for the professionals who counsel and support them. Those of us who do this work

across the country are sustained by our passion for assisting young people through one of the most difficult experiences they will ever face, not by a desire to protect our institutions or “sweep incidents under the rug.”

There is no simple road map for working with rape survivors. Reactions to trauma are as unique as the victims who suffer it. I have worked especially hard to earn the trust and confidence of the survivors I have counseled. It is often a gradual process that takes many months – and even more conversations – to achieve. It is through taking this time and building trust that survivors often gain the strength to report their rape more broadly. Not all survivors, however, find that seeking justice is helpful to their healing, and forcing a survivor into an investigation often leads to a re-traumatized and uncooperative victim, frustrated law enforcement, and still no justice to be found. But the complex nature of supporting survivors, the structural and psychological barriers to reporting, and the difficult bind of higher education institutions who must balance support for survivors, due process for respondents, and community safety does not make for flashy headlines that sell magazines. Ms. Erdely squandered an opportunity to have a more nuanced and accurate conversation about this issue because she was busy filling in her preconceived narrative and ultimately setting back the cause of advocacy and support in ways that we are still only beginning to understand here in Charlottesville and across the country.

It is hard to explain how much damage the Rolling Stone article has caused the University of Virginia community. The article portrayed UVA students as callous social climbers, undermined the work of our student advocates, and made our administrators appear manipulative and uncaring. While the University has struggled with this issue, as most higher education institutions have, Ms. Erdely purposefully omitted information she received during interviews with President Sullivan and UVA students, as well as information she learned from attending a meeting of the Board of Visitors, about the University’s ongoing work to improve policies and procedures relating to institutional response and meaningful programming designed to prevent assaults.

Rolling Stone also deeply damaged me both personally and professionally. Using me as the personification of a heartless administration, the Rolling Stone article attacked my life’s work. I saw my name dragged through the mud in the

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national press, and have received numerous abusive, vitriolic, and threatening emails, letters, and phone calls. Inflamed by the false portrayal in the article, protestors showed up at my office, demanding I be fired. Perhaps most egregious and shocking were the emails that I received expressing hope that I be killed or raped, and commenting that they hoped that I had a daughter so that she could be raped. Equally distressing – not only to me, but to the students and victims with whom I work – is the fact that while the false allegations in the magazine were being investigated, the University had no choice but to remove me from working with the students with whom I had spent so much time building a relationship, forcing them to “start over” with someone else.

Rolling Stone’s recent actions are too little, too late. Although the magazine has finally removed the original article from Rolling Stone’s website (something we asked for months ago), my name – and the photo-shopped picture of me – remain forever linked to an article that has damaged my reputation and falsely portrayed the work to which I have dedicated my life. And although Rolling Stone has finally issued an apology of sorts (something we also asked for months ago), that half-hearted generalized apology (which did not apologize to anyone by name, including me) seems insincere. Rolling Stone has refused to hold anyone accountable, and the so-called apology came only after the Columbia Journalism Review issued its report criticizing the magazine’s reporting, which suggests that the magazine is more interested in currying favor with its friends in the media than truly making amends with those of us who have been hurt.

These steps are not good enough. The University of Virginia – and those of us who work for the University supporting victims of sexual assault – deserve better.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Nicole P. Eramo".

Nicole P. Eramo
Associate Dean of Students
University of Virginia