

Faculty Votes No Confidence in Sonoma State President

Sonoma State president Judy Sakaki allegedly ignored her husband's sexual harassment of college employees. That triggered a no-confidence vote in which faculty raised numerous other issues.

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A divided faculty at Sonoma State University voted no confidence in embattled president Judy Sakaki on Monday, citing a range of issues that include a recent scandal in which her husband, Patrick McCallum, allegedly sexually harassed college employees.

In all, 173 faculty members voted in favor of the no-confidence resolution, and 105 voted against it. But only 278 of 629 eligible voters cast a ballot—fewer than half of the Academic Senate membership. Voting was conducted online and ran from Friday to Monday.

The no-confidence resolution emerged in the aftermath of a scandal in which McCallum was reported to have sexually harassed campus employees, prompting former provost Lisa Vollendorf to file a complaint. Women who reportedly witnessed McCallum's inappropriate behavior at a party at his house told Vollendorf he was "disgusting" and "perky," noting that he allegedly touched one woman's hair and made unwanted and inappropriate comments about her body. According to media reports, the California State University system did not conduct a formal investigation of the harassment claims, which were brought to light when CSU [paid out \\$600,000](https://www.insidehighered.com/quicktakes/2022/04/14/600000-not-investigating-provost%E2%80%99s-complaint) to Vollendorf after Sakaki reportedly retaliated against her by making defamatory statements and withholding a promised letter of recommendation.

McCallum has denied any wrongdoing. Sakaki [announced their separation](#)

[as the claims circulated](https://www.insidehighered.com/quicktakes/2022/04/19/president-leaves-spouse-accused-harassment).

But Sakaki's inaction concerning her husband's alleged sexual harassment of employees is hardly the only matter of contention for faculty members. The no-confidence resolution also accused the president of demonstrating poor leadership amid slumping enrollment, a campus budget crisis, low employee morale and a challenged Title IX office.

The loss of \$85,000 of university artwork hanging in Sakaki's home when it was destroyed in a 2017 fire is another issue that has [prompted criticism](https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2022-05-04/sonoma-state-president-judy-sakaki-art-fire-sex-harassment-scandal).

The Vote

Lauren Morimoto, faculty chair of Sonoma State's Academic Senate, noted that there was an appetite among some of her peers for bringing a no-confidence vote as early as December, but it never gained traction. But the claims against McCallum—and Sakaki's inadequate response to them—marked the tipping point.

"I think it definitely ratcheted things up, especially based on the comments I heard from people, where folks, a lot of times, were more focused on those two issues [alleged sexual harassment and retaliation] and not on the budget, not on enrollment," Morimoto told *Inside Higher Ed*.

A quick scan of the arguments for and against (<https://senate.sonoma.edu/referendum-no-confidence-president-judy-sakaki>) the no-confidence vote turns up a long list of issues that extend beyond McCallum to broader concerns about Sakaki's leadership. But the sexual harassment and retaliation scandal factor heavily into the arguments for the no-confidence vote, with many suggesting the incident broke their trust in Sakaki.

"I have lost all confidence that President Sakaki can successfully lead our university. This scandal has been met with excuses and deflections rather than concern for victims' well-being or acknowledgment of responsibility," one faculty member wrote in a statement explaining their reasoning for the no-confidence vote. "The university is now drawn into arguments and damage control since President Sakaki is refusing to step down; faculty and staff across campus are expending valuable time on this embarrassing and poorly handled issue, rather than attending to the exceedingly urgent budget crisis. President Sakaki's understanding of the role of leadership seems to be sorely lacking, a situation which unfortunately long predates this particular scandal."

Others suggested that the scandal harms an already vulnerable university, taking time, money and attention away from a multitude of important issues.

"I believe that the question before us is this: Do we have confidence in the leadership of this President? Do we believe that President Sakaki can lead us out of this? Do we believe she can bring us back from the brink? I don't see how the answer can be anything but 'No.' Platitudes are not plans. And Sonoma State needs a plan," one faculty member wrote. "Listening sessions won't fix our budget woes ... or provide stability to the offices, like Title IX, that have seen significant turnover during President Sakaki's tenure. Promises won't protect the victims of sexual assault and harassment on our campus who have been re-traumatized by processes that seem more intent on protecting the institution than them. We need real leadership, and I don't think we'll find that with our current President."

Defenders of Sakaki argued that she is being unfairly maligned and that both racism and sexism are at play, with the Japanese American president being held accountable for her husband's actions.

"Imagine if Dr. Sakaki were a white man and that her husband (the alleged perpetrator) was a woman of color how the press and the campus would have dealt with this issue. I just think it is important for us to consider this question," Karner Werder, a nursing professor, wrote in opposition to a no-confidence vote. "I believe that a white male Dr. Sakaki would not be as damned as the real Dr. Sakaki is currently. And I believe that his woman of color wife (as alleged perpetrator) would be the scapegoat in this situation. I would just like others to consider this."

Others opposed to the no-confidence vote suggested that more information was needed before such a measure should be taken, and that Sakaki is merely a scapegoat in a broken system.

“I believe that the incident at hand represents a failing of Title IX, both on our campus and at the Statewide CSU level—and that this is being conflated with other challenges on our campus (some of which are due to fires and COVID),” wrote Wendy Ostroff, a cognitive and developmental science professor. “I am troubled by the ease with which we vilify and desire to take down individual scapegoats in a corrupt and broken system. I am also deeply troubled by sensationalized news reporting being regarded as truth when we have not been given all of the information; when full investigations have not happened. In both cases, before full and fair investigations could be carried out, persons of color and first-generation/in higher education folks, President Sakaki as well as our former Chancellor [Joseph] Castro, are going to take the fall after being put in impossible situations by systems of hegemony and hierarchy (i.e., forced to sign documents and make deals by corrupt lawyers and power structures).”

Castro resigned in February amid criticisms that he mishandled sexual harassment (<https://www.insidehighered.com/quicktakes/2022/02/18/chancellor-joseph-castro-resigns-california-state-univ>) and bullying by a subordinate while he was president at California State University, Fresno.

Sonoma State did not respond to multiple requests for comment, but Larry Kamer, a spokesperson for Sakaki, provided a statement regarding the vote.

“While most of the faculty did not vote on this referendum, Dr. Sakaki is heartened by the support she received from a significant portion of the faculty and continues to receive from supporters on and off the campus,” Kamer said in an email. “She is also very mindful of the concerns expressed by the majority who did vote. She has in recent days shared plans to improve Sonoma State’s Title IX programs and enforcement, improve its budgetary situation, and generate sustainable enrollment. The vote is evidence that there’s work to be done to improve the tenor of conversations and sense of collaboration, and she is committed to that work.”

Outside Voices

Beyond the Sonoma State community, others have weighed in on the no-confidence vote.

Asian Pacific Americans in Higher Education defended Sakaki in a letter of support.

“As the first Japanese American woman selected to lead a major university in the United States, we are proud of Dr. Sakaki’s many accomplishments. We stand in solidarity with Dr. Judy Sakaki. She has worked tirelessly to contribute to the field of higher education and to continually focus our collective efforts on embracing equity and diversity, justice and inclusion,” APAHE stated in a letter that noted Sakaki’s mentorship, awards and commitment to social justice.

The letter goes on to call Sakaki “an accomplished professional and a role model and an exemplar to many young professionals, providing access to budding leaders to learn from her. She is a mentor and confidante to many faculty and administrative leaders in higher education.”

Local politicians have also weighed in.

“The faculty has spoken and it’s time for the healing process to begin,” Democratic state senators Bill Dodd and Mike McGuire, representing local districts, said in a statement reported by the *Los Angeles Times* (<https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2022-05-09/sonoma-state-president-should-step-down-amid-sex-harassment-scandal-lawmakers-say>). “President Sakaki should step down for the greater good of the university.”

What Happens Next?

Sakaki has made no mention of resigning in the limited public statements she’s made since the vote. And according to experts, a no-confidence vote doesn’t pack the punch it used to.

“A no-confidence vote used to be, historically, pretty much the kiss of death for a presidency,” said Terrence MacTaggart, a senior consultant and senior fellow for AGB Consulting.

MacTaggart suggests that growing discord between faculty and administrators has seemingly increased the number of no-confidence votes in higher ed, which has also reduced the sting. While he notes that a no-confidence vote will get the attention of trustees and the Cal State system, in this case, it’s up to the governing body to determine if the vote has real consequences.

“If it turns out that the board, upon investigation and assessment, feels that there’s room for improvement, but that the presidency is salvageable, they may well seek some reconciliation measures, seek changes on behalf of the behavior of the president,” MacTaggart said. “I know several presidents who, after a vote, continued to serve for another five to 10 years because they patched things up. In other cases, the other extreme is if the board feels the faculty are right and they should have caught things earlier, that may lead to the resignation of the president.”

If Sakaki survives the no-confidence vote and continues to serve, she would be following in the footsteps of her predecessor, Ruben Armiñana, who survived his own no-confidence vote in 2007. Armiñana, who had been president since 1992, continued to serve until his retirement in 2016.

And memories of system leadership overlooking Armiñana’s no-confidence vote in 2007 are still fresh at Sonoma State, where Morimoto wonders if something similar will play out with Sakaki.

“I don’t think this vote of no confidence will inspire trustees to take action unless they’ve already decided they want her out for their own reasons,” Morimoto said. “Frankly, I don’t think they give a damn what we think, and they proved that during the Ruben Armiñana no-confidence vote.”

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