

# Debate: Raised during discussion of campus sexual assaults

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mented on the topic.

UO interim President Scott Coltrane assured Ralph that the university will ask about provocative dancing as part of its \$500,000 effort to prevent sexual assault on campus. One part of the plan, Coltrane said, is to train and certify three Title IX deputies, including one assigned to the athletic department. The deputies would help train staff, and, in athletics, look at the messaging that the programs put out, Coltrane said. Title IX is the federal civil rights legislation that bans gender discrimination in education.

Cheerleading "is part of the athletic department," Coltrane said, "and how those (dance) routines get developed, who decides them — part of it is internally generated — it's something we need to look at."

The UO declined to make cheerleading Head Coach Dana Guthrie or any of the cheerleaders available for interviews with The Register-Guard.

In response to the request, Craig Pintens, the athletic department's marketing manager, wrote: "Our cheerleaders and mascot are nationally recognized and important ambassadors for the University of Oregon at sporting events and in the community.

"Our cheerleading and mascot program prides itself on monitoring the latest developments in uniform technology and choreography and implementing best practices from around the world. We welcome any discussion from our leadership on improvement of our program that will continue to develop the young men and women associated with it."

The UO cheerleaders — 14 dancers and 14 "stunt couples" — play a highly prominent visual role for the UO, but otherwise largely keep in the background.

Unlike UO athletes, the cheerleaders are seldom quoted in news or sports reports. The UO does not list their full names on team rosters — in contrast

to the UO practice in all other sports, including acrobatics and tumbling. Instead they're listed as Katelynn J., Annie R., etc.

Guthrie has no public voice, except when she serves as interpreter for the Duck mascot in, for instance, an ESPN video clip. Guthrie's annual pay at \$38,430 is tiny compared with most coaching or assistant coaching staff, according to a UO salary report.

## What message?

Ralph raised her cheerleader questions during a trustee discussion of sexual assault on campus, and the UO's efforts to curb the prevalence of such incidents. She said she is trying to understand feminist scholars and student activists who say policies at U.S. universities support a "rape culture."

Preliminary estimates are that 20 UO students a week face sexual assault, according to a UO Senate Task Force on Sexual Assault report. Two studies meant to establish actual incidence are in the works.

The problem is pervasive, Coltrane said recently: "It's huge and it's not OK, and we really need to be serious about stopping it."

Ralph said she's trying to understand whether any part of the campus community lends itself to a culture that gives permission to sexual assault.

"Where, if anywhere," she said, "does the overt sexuality with the bump-and-grind, pelvic-thrusting dancing that the female cheerleader and dance squads feature in their routines fit in this context?" she asked.

Cheerleading, athletics and an evolving definition of "rape culture" are a modern vein in gender studies; women and gender studies is one of the signature strengths in the UO College of Arts and Sciences, Bruce Blonigen, associate dean for social sciences, told the trustees recently.

UO graduate student Dana Rognlie is writing her UO dissertation on how cultural imagery on campus affects how students think about themselves

## MORE ON THE WEB

Here are more details about UO cheerleading activities:

**Knight birthday video:**  
bit.ly/1C1sbzn

**Cheerleading routines:**  
bit.ly/1GJKZFS

**Bang Bang lyrics:** bit.ly/1voBnes

and act toward one another — and what the university's role should be, she said.

"How cheerleaders and young women present their bodies to the world is a very difficult question to tackle. It's not one you can have a clean sort of line on," said Rognlie, who is active against sexual assault.

The cheerleaders' provocative dancing may help influence the cultural atmosphere surrounding sex on campus, she said.

"Women are just sexual objects that can be used and their way of being in the world can be dictated to them. That's just not acceptable," Rognlie said.

According to police reports, a provocative dance was one element in the alleged rape of a UO freshman by three basketball players last March, according to police reports and witness statements.

The event took place within hours of a Ducks basketball game. Three players met an 18-year-old freshman at a house party and ushered her into a bathroom, according to a police report. The young woman said she thought this was part of "college fun." The players asked her to "shake her butt," and she did so, according to the police report.

Sexual acts ensued. The freshman said it was rape; the basketball players said it was consensual. The university found sexual misconduct on the part of the players and banned them from campus.

Sexualized dancing is hardly unique to UO cheerleading. Cheerleading teams at other colleges have similar routines. The UO cheerleaders' moves would be at home in any Be-

yonce video. Still, the moves are troublesome to some. A national brouhaha arose last year when singer Miley Cyrus "twerked" (bent over and waved her posterior) on the televised MTV Video Music Awards program.

## Birthdays appearance

A more recent incident raised hackles among activists on the UO campus.

In late February, a squad of UO cheerleaders in uniform — with cropped tops and short skirts — cheered UO benefactor Phil Knight as he stood in a conference room at the Nike campus in Beaverton. A video of the birthday event was posted on Comcast Sportsnet; it shows the cheerleaders chanting in unison:

"Mr. Knight, we're here to cheer you, on your very special day.

"We appreciate your kindness, there's no way we can repay.

"One request from all of us students, can you put us in your will?"

"So a great big Happy Birthday, to our favorite Uncle Phil!"

Rognlie said she was disgusted by the video. She stood up at the most recent UO Board of Trustees with a sign that said: "UO Admin: Stop pimping UO cheerleaders."

Why?

"A case of young women wearing very (little) clothing going to beg an older man in his office for money adheres to a very old (story) of ... women's bodies being utilized as commodities for the purposes of getting more money. That is to reduce those young women and rob them of their freedom, really," Rognlie said.

The UO cheerleaders appear at a variety of business events.

The university hires them out by the hour, under strict rules, according to the cheerleading website. The rate is \$200 per hour for one to three cheerleaders; \$400 for three to six cheerleaders and \$600 for seven or more cheerleaders. The Duck mascot can be rented, too, for a higher per-individual rate. Proceeds help pay for the cheer

program.

The UO carefully evaluates where, when and why the cheerleaders or the Duck make appearances, the Web page says. Approval is at the discretion of the athletic department. "The Athletic Department will decide if any appearance conflicts with its best interests," the website says.

## Studies ahead

UO psychology professor Jennifer Freyd, meanwhile, has attempted on and off since 2007 to study the cheerleading program, but she said the athletic department has declined her requests to interview program participants.

In March 2014 — just before the alleged rape — Pintens replied to a set of the professor's questions by email:

"Is there any consideration of whether the uniforms and/or choreography might (or might appear to) convey or encourage exploitive sexuality?" Freyd asked.

"No," Pintens answered.

Freyd and a graduate student, Marina Rosenthal, are in the middle of a study that tries to measure the attitudes of college students after they watch UO sports. Participants watch a mix of 30-second video clips of UO teams: men's football, men's basketball, men's and women's volleyball and, finally, cheerleading.

"Is watching the highly sexualized dancing going to relate to increases in acceptance of rape or common misconceptions about what causes rape?" Rosenthal said.

"We think there's something important about community context. It's not just that you're seeing sexually suggestive dancing; you're seeing sexually suggestive dancing in your school context. It's sanctioned by your school. The institution is inherently saying, 'This is OK. We approve of this,'" she said.

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“Where, if anywhere, does the overt sexuality with the bump-and-grind, pelvic-thrusting dancing that the female cheerleader and dance squads feature in their routines fit in this context?”

— GINEVRA RALPH, UNIVERSITY OF OREGON BOARD OF TRUSTEES, ON CAMPUS CULTURE AND SEXUAL ASSAULTS

# SPIRITED DEBATE

A trustee questions the propriety of some cheerleading routines



ANDY NELSON/The Register-Guard

University of Oregon cheerleaders perform during a basketball game earlier this year at Matthew Knight Arena in Eugene.

By DIANE DIETZ  
The Register-Guard

**G**inevra Ralph hesitated when she brought up the subject to fellow members of the University of Oregon Board of Trustees recently.

She could imagine the reaction before she spoke: She's a prude. She's an enemy of free speech. Or she is the type of person who would blame the victim in a sexual assault.

But Ralph, who besides being a trustee is a prominent Eugene arts administrator, plunged ahead:

"I have watched people be incredibly uncomfortable with the U of O cheerleaders," she told the trustees, "and they actually leave the basketball (arena) during intermission because of the overt sexual dancing, or whatever you want to call it."

UO cheerleaders perform

traditional straight-arm leaps and cheers with pom pom shaking, but they also shimmy their shoulders and chests, roll their hips and pop out their bottoms.

The cheerleaders perform to overtly sexual lyrics, such as Jessie J's "Bang Bang," which goes:

"Back, back seat of my car — I'll let ya have it.

Wait a minute lemme take you there — ah

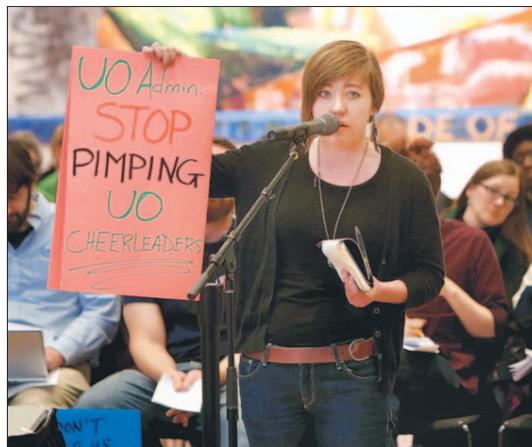
Wait a minute till ya — ah."

Cheerleaders serve as "official ambassadors for the University of Oregon," according to the UO athletic department's Web page.

"It's one thing if someone is doing any of that on their own," Ralph told the trustees, "but we are making a public statement. ... I'd like to see us analyze it a little bit."

No other trustee com-

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CHRIS PIETSCH/The Register-Guard

**UO student Dana Rognlie** holds a sign protesting the use of school cheerleaders to wish Phil Knight a happy birthday. She spoke during a public comment portion of a meeting of the University of Oregon Board of Trustees.