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Bands Gone Wild

The allegations sound like the exploits of Mötley Crüe:

Women and men stripping to their underwear on a tour bus.

Drunken band members urinating in elevators.

A drummer giving lap dances.

Such behavior was routine for the University of California at Davis' Cal Aggie Marching Band, according to the student group's director. And, as the [San Francisco Chronicle](#) reported Monday, Director Tom Slabaugh found he had little power to stop the madness, even after filing a sexual harassment complaint against his own band.

The allegations in California are the latest in a string of incidents that have raised questions about the behavior of athletic marching bands. The University of Wisconsin at Madison [suspended](#) its band Friday as a result of "serious hazing allegations," "alcohol use" and "sexualized behavior." Last month, the marching band at Prairie View A&M University was [suspended](#) after an anonymous person claimed band members had been hit and had their heads shaven during hazing rituals.

"It is a part of the culture [of marching bands], and it's got to stop," said George Edwards, head marching band director at Prairie View.

"It's not just the small schools," he added. "It's large schools as well."

Edwards suspended the band for the Prairie View's football game against Texas College, required members to receive training on hazing and removed several members from the organization. One member, who had reportedly stopped paying tuition and was therefore no longer considered a student in good standing, agreed never to return to the campus, Edwards said.

Edwards, who has led the band since 1984, said this was the first time he's ever suspended the entire band. He said he wanted to send a strong message of zero tolerance to the band, which has been selected to play at the Tournament of Roses parade in 2009. Absent a strong signal, Edwards said, he's worried students would be in danger.

"Somebody can lose their life behind it, and it's not worth it," Edwards said. "To lose a kid over some silliness is unacceptable. I just don't want it to happen on my watch."

California Takes No Public Action

While Prairie View and Wisconsin took public action in response to serious allegations about band behavior, it's unclear what – if anything – Davis has done since Slabaugh filed a complaint in May. Janet Gong, senior associate vice chancellor of student affairs, said privacy laws prevented her from discussing any specific action the university may have taken since Slabaugh's complaint was made.

"If students abridge the expectations of the university, whether they are part of an organization or part of a team, there are a range of behavioral sanctions that the university can employ, understanding again responsibilities for due process," Gong said.

What's clear, however, is that the band as a whole has not been suspended.

"They were at the football game this last Saturday night, and performed in a responsible way I might add," Gong said.

At Davis, the Cal Aggie band is a student organization, and Slabaugh did not have the authority to suspend or remove band members – even though he felt that was warranted in some cases, according to Chad Carlock, his lawyer. Slabaugh's requests for more authority haven't led to any changes, Carlock said.

"There's been so far mostly hand-wringing about whether to implement his suggestions," Carlock said.

In the four years prior to Slabaugh's 2007 appointment, the band had interim leadership that provided "advice and counsel," Gong said. While Gong acknowledged that student organizations like the band "have probably the most autonomy and freedom of any of our university entities," she stressed that such organizations are still subject to university rules.

Director Says He Felt Powerless

Slabaugh, who is directing media inquiries to his lawyer, has been on stress-related leave from the university since September, Carlock said. Prior to Slabaugh's hiring, university officials mentioned that they wanted to put someone in place that would have greater oversight of the band, his lawyer said.

"My understanding is that [increased oversight was] discussed to some extent," Carlock said. "I think part of the reason that he's a little frustrated is that he understood part of his charge was to see what needed to be done and do it, and he hoped to get the backing to do that."

California-Davis officials refused to provide a copy of Slabaugh's complaint to *Inside Higher Ed*, saying the document detailed a "personnel matter." Carlock, however, said the *San Francisco Chronicle's* story accurately portrayed Slabaugh's concerns. In the complaint, Slabaugh attached photos of band members with their pants down at an April picnic, and another photo with an equipment manager simulating oral sex on a trombone player, the newspaper reported.

Slabaugh also discussed a Christmas card he'd received from the trombone players. The card, which featured a picture of Santa Claus, read "I saw you masturbating," the *Chronicle* reported.

It is increasingly uncommon for college-level marching bands to be run by students, as is the case at Davis. Mark Spede, director of bands at Clemson University, said marching band is now administered as a for-credit course at most institutions.

"That particular band [in California] is one of only a handful around the country that operates under

those constraints,” said Spede, who directs the Athletic Band Task Force for the College Band Directors National Association. “Most of your band programs will be run by a director of the marching band; and they are a full-fledged faculty member, and certainly would have the authority to remove people from the course, to fail them or give them a lower grade based on behaviors.”

Spede said he views the recent allegations of hazing and harassment as isolated incidents.

“I think this is actually remnants from what things were like a long time ago,” he said. “My impression is you’re seeing the last vestiges of stuff like this. These are issues that colleges and universities have been dealing with pretty proactively in the recent past.”

But Susan Lipkins, a psychologist who studies hazing, says the practice is still going strong in just about any “hierarchical structure,” including marching bands. And in places where hazing happens, she says it’s getting worse.

“I have seen in the last 10 years that hazing has become more violent and more sexualized,” said Lipkins, who runs a Web site called [Insidehazing.com](http://insidehazing.com).

Lipkins, author of *Preventing Hazing*, said she was pleased to see Wisconsin officials suspend the band for hazing allegations. She called the sanction “a huge statement,” but she questioned whether colleges have created systems to truly deal with hazing and abuse.

“They don’t really give opportunities to report,” she said. “They don’t really encourage it, they don’t really have a system of investigating, they haven’t created an atmosphere where people are rewarded for reporting.”

Wisconsin’s band, which was still on suspension as of Monday, was placed on probation for similar allegations of sexual hazing and harassment in the fall of 2006. Asked if the university started any new educational programs or additional oversight after that incident, Wisconsin officials declined to comment.

— [Jack Stripling](#)

*The original story and user comments can be viewed online at
<http://insidehighered.com/news/2008/10/07/bands>.*

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