Sudden change in commencement speaker frustrates AS members
Jessica Arceo

The Board of Trustees decision to suddenly change speakers for the upcoming commencement ceremony was met with strong opposition by AS executive board members.

The board of trustees rescinded an invitation previously extended to Dustin Lance Black, a PCC alum who won an Oscar as the screenwriter for the movie "Milk," to speak in this years commencement ceremony after compromising pictures Black surfaced as a "revenge porn" by a previous boyfriend, according to AS President Jordyn Orozco.

Senior Vice President/Assistant Superintendent of Academic and Student Affairs Robert Bell announced that Dr. Eric Walsh, Director of Public Health and Safety for Pasadena, would be the new speaker.

"We have now turned away a family member and a PCC alumni," Orozco said.

Two of the major issues the board had with the situation had to do with the comparisons made between Black and former PCC Professor Hugo Schwyzer and Professor Warren Swil and that Dr. Walsh was not even on the list of potential speakers chosen by commencement committee members.

Vice President for Sustainability Sarah Belknap had a problem with the way that the board was framing the situation. She felt that it was wrong for the board to compare what happened to Black to the situation with Schwyzer, whose sex scandal last year made national headlines. Black was a victim of a boyfriend seeking out revenge, while Schwyzer used his authority to have inappropriate relations with students.

"As a person who myself has been harassed and as a queer person, that really hits me right where I live," said Belknap.

Belknap also said that the matter speaks to the way the board does business as the process to choose a speaker was pretty much overlooked by making a last minute decision to change speakers without regard to students or shared governance.

"We followed the process, we selected a commencenmet speaker, the speaker agreed to speak," stated Belknap.

Student Trustee Simon Fraser made it clear that he was speaking as an individual and said he could not support the decision that had been made. He felt personally betrayed and said that his community of community college queer students had been maligned and desperately needed role models like Black to show how the former PCC student transformed himself into to a Oscar winning screen writer.

“I can’t think of a better role model for any students, let alone queer students,” Fraser stated.

He also found the board’s claim that the pictures depicted unprotected sex to be homophobic because it was not viewed as intimate contact between two adults but as a promotion of unsafe sexual practices. Fraser said it showed a double standard as he pointed out that no one really points out the sexual choices a pregnant celebrity makes.

“We are held to such a different standard where any single misstep is a bad thing.” said Fraser.

Auriana Duffy, VP for Cultural Diversity, related the situation to the days when discrimination resulted in blacks and whites having to operate in separate facilities and that it would perpetuate the mindset that it was OK to treat another group differently.

Orozco pointed out his concern for the fact that there was no center for this issue to be sent to on campus and that it affects the board on a personal level as the burden fell to them to help fix the situation. He also said he no longer feels supported when he walks into committee meetings and would be looked at as the person who complained because of how the situation affected him personally.

Interim Associate Dean of Student Life, Hebba Griffiths, advised the members to exhaust all their options as timeliness was a major factor with commencement just around the corner.

The Executive Board voted to have Orozco and another member draft a memo to the Board of Trustees discussing their concerns on the matter and their support of keeping Black as the speaker before the next meeting.