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USC Paid Former Medical-School Dean, Accused of Drug-Fueled Double Life, Nearly \$1 Million in Severance

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Carmen A. Puliafito, former dean of the U. of Southern California's medical school, in 2014
Tibrina Hobson, Getty Images

Following a 2017 [bombshell report](#) in the *Los Angeles Times* on illicit drug use by the University of Southern California's onetime

medical-school dean, it took [less than a week](#) for USC to announce that it would strip Carmen A. Puliafito of tenure and dismiss him from the faculty.

Nearly two years later, *The Chronicle* has learned how much it cost to secure those objectives: [\\$850,000 in severance](#) to Puliafito, according to the university's most recent tax filings.

In addition to that six-figure severance, Puliafito [earned nearly \\$624,000](#) in base compensation in 2017, \$124,000 in bonus pay, and \$206,215 in unspecified remaining reportable compensation, as well as nontaxable benefits valued at just over \$20,000.

Altogether he earned nearly \$1.85 million in compensation from USC in 2017, according to the tax documents.

Along with the paychecks, the [filings disclose](#) that Puliafito still owed the university \$570,435 on a \$800,000 home loan at the end of June 2018. The loan was in good standing at the close of that fiscal year.

Since Puliafito relinquished his tenure and resigned from the faculty, a spokeswoman for USC said in a statement that it had “implemented significant reforms regarding what corrective actions must be taken when any employee violates university policies and the procedures that must be followed regarding their separation.”

According to the *Times*'s reporting, Puliafito's double life came to light in 2016, when the police were called to a hotel room in response to reports of an overdose by a young woman, whom the *Times* later learned was working as a prostitute. The police reported that Puliafito was in the room at the time of the overdose, and they also found methamphetamine there. Neither Puliafito nor the woman, who was rushed to a hospital and survived, were arrested at the time. Three weeks after that incident, Puliafito resigned as medical-school dean.

In addition to on-the-record statements by Sarah Warren, the woman who overdosed, the *Times* obtained photographs and video footage of Puliafito allegedly taking illicit drugs. In one video clip, Puliafito reportedly sticks out his tongue, which cradles an orange pill. "Thought I'd take an Ecstasy before the ball," he says to the camera, before swallowing the pill. Some clips and photos reportedly show Puliafito and others partying in his office at USC. Others allegedly show him with a pipe for smoking methamphetamine in his hands and then in his mouth.

Parade of Controversies

C.L. Max Nikias, the university's president at the time, [later acknowledged](#) that, "over the course of his nearly 10 years as dean, we received various complaints about Dr. Puliafito's behavior, which were addressed through university personnel procedures; this included disciplinary action and professional-development coaching."

At the time of Puliafito's resignation as dean, Nikias said the university was not aware of any illegal activities by the former

dean. Nikias announced [his own resignation](#) as president in May 2018, following a parade of controversies at USC that decimated his support on the faculty. Two months later, California [stripped Puliafito](#) of his medical license.

Costly separations are nothing new in higher education. From the locker room to the C-suite, severances have often propelled people working at America's colleges and universities to become the sector's best-paid employees. Just ask [Baylor University](#).

After the law firm Pepper Hamilton concluded that Baylor had [bungled its investigation](#) of and response to a series of alleged sexual assaults by varsity football players, the university [demoted its then president](#), Kenneth W. Starr, to the more ceremonial post of chancellor, in May 2016. Days later, [Starr resigned](#) from that position, too. Months after that, he also [stepped down](#) as a tenured law professor.

More than \$4.5 million of Starr's \$5 million in total compensation that year originated from his severance agreement. As expensive as that was for Baylor, it wasn't the university's steepest severance package of the year. A \$15-million package made the football coach Art Briles — whose firing accompanied Starr's demotion — the highest-paid direct employee of a private college in 2016. In total, Briles earned \$17.8 million from Baylor that year.