

New Policies to Combat Sexual Violence on Campus

Summer 2014

The University has announced a series of steps to help prevent sexual violence on campus and to make it easier for survivors to report such assaults. The moves were made during what may come to be seen as a watershed year in the way the country deals with rape at colleges and universities.

Some of the initiatives emerged from student criticisms and suggestions.

Survivors, at Columbia and around the US, had complained that reporting processes were unclear and humiliating, that penalties for those found guilty of sexual misconduct were too light, and that they feared encountering their aggressors on campus. Students at Columbia said that the University was not forthcoming in releasing information on the number of sexual assaults that had occurred on campus.

In a series of e-mails sent to the Columbia community beginning in January, and in public appearances, President Lee C. Bollinger emphasized the University's longstanding commitment to increasing awareness of sexual misconduct, to supporting survivors, and to holding accountable students who violate University policies. He also stated that the University, while being careful to protect students' privacy, would release aggregate data on assaults starting with the 2013-14 academic year.

Among the other actions Bollinger announced are enhanced mandatory training for staff and for incoming students; the expansion of the staff and hours of the Office of Sexual Violence Response; the opening of a second location for the Rape Crisis Center, in Lerner Hall (in addition to a Barnard College location); and the creation of the position of executive vice president for student affairs, whose responsibilities will include combating sexual violence. The new executive vice president, wrote Bollinger in a statement, will "help ensure that our campus culture does not tolerate

sexual assault and that our adjudicatory process is responsive, sensitive, efficient, and fair.” A search for the new executive vice president is underway.

A website, “Sexual Respect,” provides information on Columbia’s resources on sexual misconduct at titleix.columbia.edu.

The University held a town-hall discussion in March for students to ask administrators about Columbia’s policies and resources. Students also held demonstrations during the year.

Colleges and universities in the US are in a challenging position with regard to sexual violence because federal law requires them to investigate accusations of misconduct. The obligation is part of Title IX, usually associated with preventing gender-based discrimination. During the past academic year, the issue — and occasional confusion about the law — has drawn comment and calls for change from President Barack Obama ’83CC, Vice President Joseph Biden, members of the US Senate, and the US Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights (OCR). The OCR is currently investigating sixty-six colleges and universities for their handling of sexual assaults. (As of July 15, Columbia is not among them.) Students at several institutions — reportedly including twenty-three at Columbia and Barnard — have filed federal complaints that their schools did not adequately respond to their reports of having been assaulted.

“Columbia is rightly known as the place of strong and deeply held core academic and community values,” wrote Bollinger. “We have to deal with the issues of sexual assault and related misconduct consistent with those values.”



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