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Emerson vows to improve sexual assault investigations

By **Matt Rocheleau** | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT OCTOBER 10, 2013

 ARTICLE

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Emerson College vowed to improve its investigation of sexual assaults after a group of students filed a complaint with the federal government alleging that the school downplayed and failed to fully investigate at least two recent incidents.

“We can and we will do better,” president M. Lee Pelton said in a campuswide e-mail Wednesday afternoon.

Pelton announced a number of steps, including the hiring of a “sexual assault advocate” who will support sexual assault victims and oversee the college’s response and prevention programs.

Pelton will also hold a campus community meeting soon to discuss the issue and related concerns.

Students filed a complaint last week with the Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights, according to Emerson sophomore Sarah Tedesco, 19, and junior Jillian Doherty, two of the complainants who have spoken publicly.

Tedesco said hospital test results showed she had been drugged one night last October while at an off-campus MIT fraternity party in Cambridge and then raped by an MIT student, whom she had never met before.

She said she was also sexually assaulted by a fellow Emerson student, whom she knew well. Officials at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology declined to comment Wednesday, citing federal privacy laws.

Tedesco said she told Cambridge police, who began to investigate.

But she said their questioning became overwhelming, and she decided to seek help from school staff and administrators.

Tedesco said they encouraged her not to talk to police, and instead go through the school's judicial process. But she said the school mishandled her case.

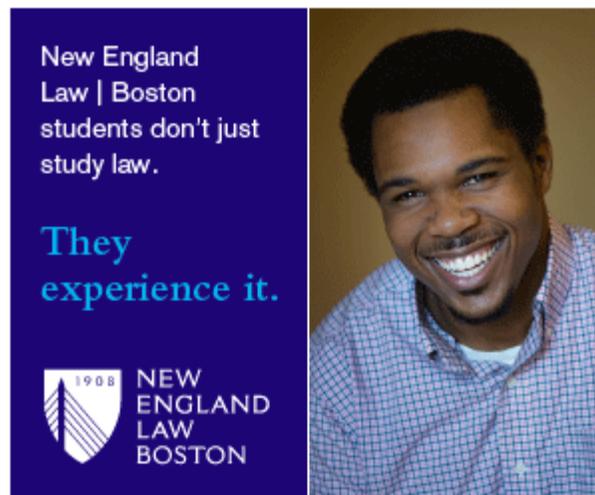
After several months, the case was closed because, she said, administrators said it did not warrant a hearing that would fully review the allegations.

Tedesco said before the school completed its investigation into the first incidents, she was sexually assaulted again by the same Emerson student who allegedly assaulted her in October. She said she reported the more recent case to campus administrators, who again allegedly downplayed her complaint.

Tedesco said both of her alleged assailants remain at their respective schools.

Neither person has faced any punishment, Tedesco said.

In an interview, Tedesco praised Emerson's encouragement of a "culture of consent" among students —



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Sexual assault victim Sarah Tedesco said the reason for filing the complaint 'is very clearly and very passionately to make changes on campus and to raise awareness that this happens.'

meaning that consent must be established by both individuals before engaging in any sexual activity. But, she said, “they aren’t going anywhere near actually investigating cases.”

The complainants allege that Emerson administrators violated their rights under Title IX and the Clery Act in handling investigations into their claims of sexual assault. The act requires colleges and universities that participate in federal financial aid programs to keep and disclose information about crime on and near their respective campuses.

Tedesco said a number of students in addition to her and Doherty filed the complaint, but she declined to specify how many or provide a copy of the complaint, citing the others’ requests for privacy.

“This isn’t about us. This is about future victims,” Tedesco said in an interview Wednesday, before Pelton’s letter was circulated.

The reason for filing the complaint “is very clearly and very passionately to make changes on campus and to raise awareness that this happens,” she said. Tesesco has become an advocate and spoken publicly about her allegations over the last several months.

The Huffington Post first reported on the federal complaint Tuesday night. The Boston Globe generally does not print the names of alleged sexual assault victims unless they wish to speak publicly.

In his letter, Pelton said he could not comment directly on many aspects of the complaint because of federal privacy laws. Instead, he discussed broader policy changes.

He appointed two administrators to lead a review to submit a report by March that will include recommendations for how to improve sexual assault response and prevention at Emerson.

His letter also described a number of measures — including new programs designed to create a “culture of consent” and to support rape survivors — the school has already taken since last spring when an outcry from students over reports of an off-campus student rape prompted administrators to vow to review school policies regarding sexual assault cases.

“Sexual assault occurs too often on college campuses, and it is critically important that we redouble our efforts to combat incidents that harm our students and undermine what we stand for as a commonwealth of learning,” Pelton wrote.

“Incidents of sexual assault are often highly complex and difficult to resolve in college communities that do not benefit from the investigatory and adjudicative resources available in criminal legal proceedings,” he added. “Nevertheless, there are measures that we can take that will have the effect of strengthening support for our students, providing clearer paths of adjudication and resolution, while

enhancing students' sense of control and self-worth through a process that is too often fractured, confusing, and emotionally challenging.”

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