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MIT plans strategies to fight sexual assaults

By **Matt Rocheleau** | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT MAY 22, 2014

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Incoming MIT students, faculty, and staff will undergo mandatory training in the fall designed to prevent sexual violence, as the school explores strategies to combat a problem drawing heightened scrutiny at colleges across the country.

“We have identified a number of areas where we need to gather data, take action, or both,” said a campuswide letter Thursday from chancellor Cindy Barnhart, who was appointed in February by MIT president L. Rafael Reif and told to make confronting sexual assault a priority.

As part of the new guidelines, first-year undergraduate and graduate students must complete new and expanded online training about sexual harassment, assault, relationship violence, and stalking, Barnhart wrote.

A version of that training will be tailored for new faculty, staff, and postdoctoral researchers.

Charlie Andrews-Jubelt, a freshman and a member of the campus group Students Advocating For Education on Respectful Relationships, described the plan issued Thursday as “one of the bigger accomplishments we’ve achieved so far.”

“We’re definitely interested to see how effective it will be,” he said.

He said MIT’s renewed efforts to address sexual assault have been transparent and positive so far.

“The need for these kinds of steps has really been demonstrated,” he said. “I’m glad that we’re starting to make progress.”

MIT plans to review policies and procedures related to sexual violence, including disciplinary practices, to ensure they are consistent among students, faculty, and staff and to compare them to what other colleges are doing and to recent recommendations from a White House task force on sexual assault.

In efforts to make colleges across the country more accountable, the White House unveiled guidelines this month for campus administrators. The US Department of Education released a list of 55 schools in the United States under investigation for potentially violating parts of the Title IX law that address handling complaints of sexual violence and harassment. Title IX mandates gender equality in campus life.

MIT administrators said the training that will be required this fall is only a starting point, and they promised to explore ways to further improve education and outreach on the subject of sexual violence.

One idea Barnhart listed in her letter was to encourage fraternities, sororities, sports teams, and other living and social groups to develop their own prevention initiatives.

She also wrote about improving education on alcohol and drug use, civility, and issues around confidentiality, privacy, and obligations for reporting sexual violence.

In February, Reif declared confronting sexual assault a priority for MIT and asked Barnhart to deliver a report by the end of the spring semester to outline what more the institute could do.

That announcement came one week after an alumna wrote in the school newspaper about being raped as a student and several days after the Globe detailed how reports of sexual assaults at Boston-area colleges had risen nearly 40 percent over the past five years.

At MIT, reported sexual assaults rose from four in 2008 to 12 in 2012, according to the most recently available federal data.

Administrators this spring created an online survey to collect data and feedback to guide their understanding of what needs to be improved and how to do it.

About 12,000 students and alumni who have graduated within the past two years were invited to participate in the survey, and more than 30 percent have responded. The survey will close at the end of May.

“Now, for the first time, we will have solid, baseline data about the prevalence of sexual assault, attitudes around it, and obstacles to progress,” Barnhart wrote.

The results will be analyzed over the summer and reported to the campus in the fall.

Barnhart said she already has heard from dozens of students, faculty, and staff, and several themes stood out.

Students want practical strategies to prevent sexual assault and to change environments that can encourage misconduct, she said.

And students want clarity on what behavior constitutes sexual assault and about their rights and options for advice and support.

Campus safety expert S. Daniel Carter said all colleges in the country will need to provide sexual violence prevention education programs by this fall to comply with a federal law enacted last year that aims to eliminate sexual violence on campus.

“There is new and increased interest from consumers and from the White House about how colleges and universities can prevent sexual assault,” he said.

He also said MIT's ongoing survey of students is crucial "because you can't begin to address a challenge until you fully understand it."

Matt Rocheleau can be reached at matthew.rocheleau@globe.com.

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