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Williams College roiled by report of rape

Students, alumni outraged, say case was mishandled

By **Matt Rocheleau** | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT MAY 24, 2014

ARTICLE

COMMENTS (32)

BACK TO TOP

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Allegations that administrators at Williams College mishandled a student's report of being raped and subsequently harassed has sparked outcry among students, faculty, parents, and alumni, some of whom have vowed to withhold donations until changes are made.

Hundreds have signed a petition calling for action by the liberal arts school in Western Massachusetts. On Friday, the school's president issued the latest in a series of statements assuring the community that it takes sexual assault seriously.

“This has gone off like a pack of fireworks in a pack of fireworks,” said Anne Lindsay Fetter, who graduated from Williams in 1985 and is vowing to withhold donations to the college. “I’ve never seen the alumni association so enraged over anything before.”

The uproar began when Lexie Brackenridge, a 19-year-old from Boston, wrote in a student newspaper column last week that she had been raped in October 2012 when she was a 17-year-old freshman.

Administrators, she wrote, persuaded her to not seek legal action against her alleged assailant, a 21-year-old student who played for the men’s hockey team. Instead, school officials had her file a complaint through the school’s judicial system, Brackenridge wrote.

During that three-month process, she said she was repeatedly harassed by other members of the hockey team.

“In one instance, they surrounded me, threw full beer cans at my head and chanted that I should have kept my mouth shut,” she wrote. “When I spoke to the deans about the incident, I was told that everyone was ‘exhausted’ from dealing with the case and that perhaps it would be better if we all just ‘took a little break.’”

She said her alleged assailant was ultimately found responsible for the act, and administrators suspended him for three semesters, a punishment she described as “a mere slap on the wrist.”

An attorney for the alleged assailant, who could not be reached Friday night, told WBUR previously that he denies the allegations against him.

Brackenridge has since transferred to Columbia University in New York, where she was a sophomore this year.

Brackenridge and her parents, who are Williams alumni, have launched a campaign to raise awareness about what happened and to try to stop it from occurring again. Hundreds of fellow students and alumni

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have backed the family's demand that the school take steps to improve.

An online petition launched this week by Brackenridge calls on the school to change how it investigates sexual assault and disciplines offenders. It has collected more than 650 signatures.

"I was really blown away by the response I received," Brackenridge said in a phone interview Friday, noting how classmates, alumni, friends, family, faculty, advocates and even strangers have expressed support.

"I was not expecting anything of this magnitude," she said. "I've had so many people say I'm proud you came out and told your story."

School officials, citing privacy laws, have said they cannot comment in detail about the case. Williams spokesman Jim Kolesar on Friday reiterated previous statements from the college that it feels "very confident" it has followed proper policies and procedures "in every case including this one."

"The college has been working intensively on this for years," he said. "It's urgent work that needs to be done, and we'll continue to work on this."

Administrators have issued numerous statements about the topic since Brackenridge's account was published. College dean Sarah Bolton wrote a lengthy reaction to the petition, responding individually to its demands.

On Friday, the college's president, Adam Falk, sent a letter to alumni and parents saying that Williams has a "culture of commitment to ending sexual assault."

"Sexual assault is horribly, devastatingly destructive," he wrote. "Williams is not immune from this destructive force."

He assured that battling the problem is a priority.

"Addressing sexual assault at Williams — through prevention, awareness, and education efforts; support and care of survivors; and the strengthening of our disciplinary processes — has been a primary concern of mine since I became president in 2010," he added. "We want more light on this issue, not less."

But many said they are not satisfied with the school's reponse.

"I view it as pure PR spin drafted by a lawyer to skirt any legal problems," said Fetter, one of the alumni upset with the sexual assault report. She is vowing not to give another penny to her alma mater "until I see some concrete action."

Fetter said she, too, was a victim of a sexual assault when she attended Williams some three decades ago.

She alleged that her complaint was dismissed by school officials.

“I see there’s a clear need to address the issue of social justice, and I think Williams is a premier school and it needs to take the lead on revamping the policies in place,” said Fetter, who now lives in California and is a researcher and teacher at Walden University. “I’m outraged. This is not acceptable.”

Brackenridge said she is “frustrated, offended, and hurt” by the school’s response and that no one from the college has reached out to her directly.

“If the school truly wants to reform their policies they should talk to the victims themselves,” she said.

But, she vowed she and her supporters won’t quit.

“The large amount of support I have backing me — whether it’s in the Williams community or the countless women from across the country backing me — it’s not going to go away,” she said.

Brackenridge’s father, Alex, said he has been inspired by his daughter coming forward and called the outpouring of support “tremendously heartening.”

He said the school’s response has been cold and lacking respect.

“We want a constructive dialogue and we hope something positive can come from this,” he said.

The controversy comes amid growing activism around the problem of campus sexual assault and three weeks after the White House unveiled new guidelines for schools to follow in their efforts to address the issue.

Federal officials disclosed this month that six schools in Massachusetts, one in New Hampshire, and another in Connecticut were among 55 nationwide under investigation for potentially mishandling complaints of sexual violence and harassment.

Since that time, the number of schools being probed has grown from 55 to 60.

The five additional schools under investigation by the US Department of Education for possible Title IX violations are: The University of Alaska, the University of Delaware, Elmira College in New York, The University of Akron in Ohio, and Cisco Junior College in Texas, according to an updated list the US Education Department provided to the Globe Friday.

Meanwhile, in the past several weeks, administrators from at least two other local schools have been accused of failing to address rape reports appropriately.

A former Northeastern University student who said she was raped there filed a federal complaint with the

Department of Education two weeks ago against the school alleging that administrators improperly handled her case and violated Title IX, a law that mandates gender equality in campus life.

Another alleged rape victim, a student at Brown University in Providence, this week filed a federal complaint against her school, accusing administrators there of similar violations.

As of Friday, neither of those schools, nor Williams, are under investigation for their alleged violations. But federal officials have said that they review directly filed complaints as well as public allegations before determining whether to launch a probe.

Northeastern spokeswoman Renata Nyul said in a statement that while privacy laws prevent the school from commenting on specific cases, “we take reports of sexual assault very seriously and we investigate every allegation promptly.”

Brown spokeswoman Marisa Quinn said the university has not been formally notified of a complaint, but administrators “recognize the seriousness of our obligations under the Clery Act and Title IX.”

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 COMMENTS (32)

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