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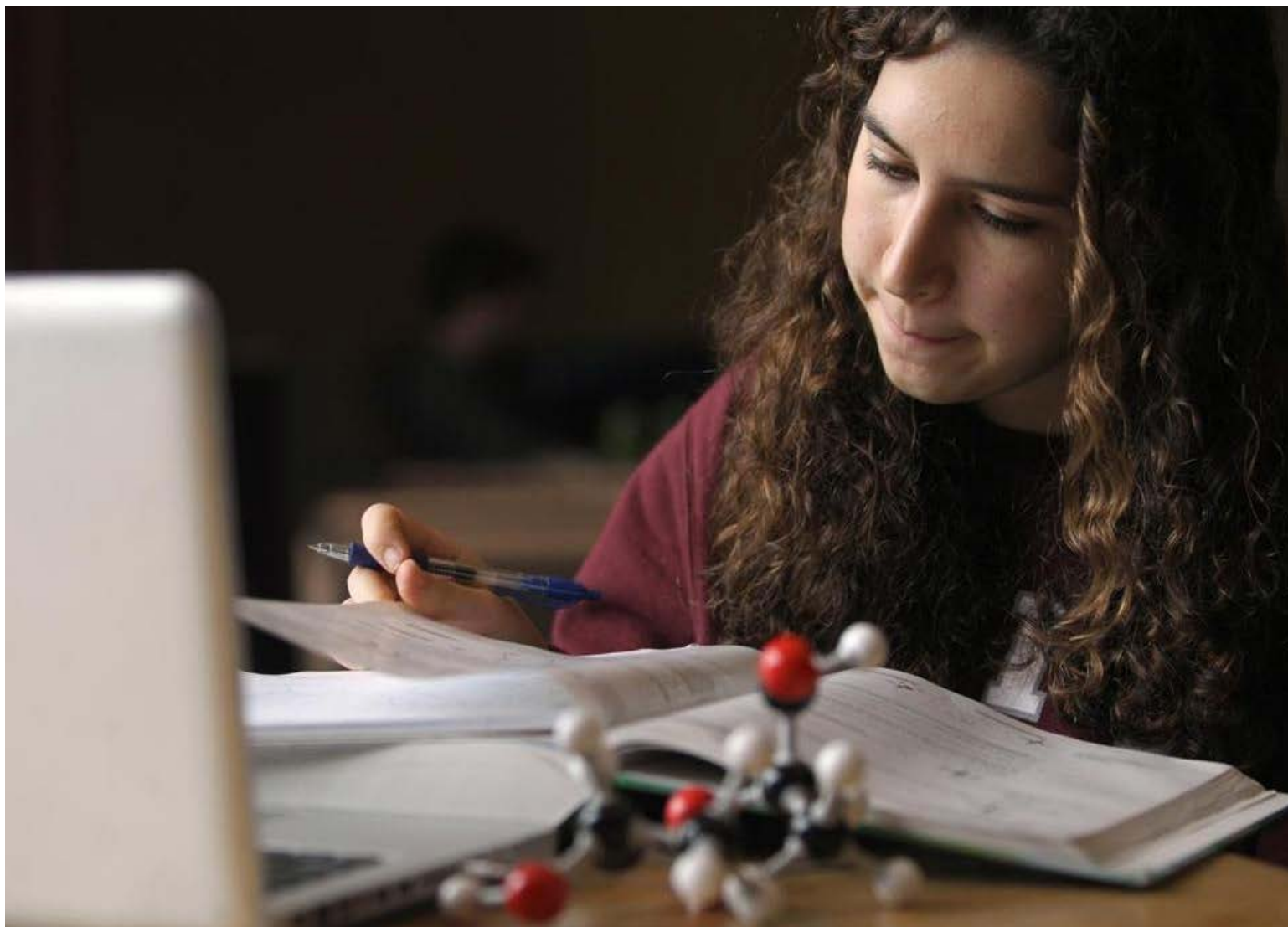
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Tension, then questions, from MIT gunman hoax

Over an hour delay in alert after gunman was reported

By **Travis Andersen, Evan Allen and Matt Rocheleau** | GLOBE STAFF | GLOBE CORRESPONDENTS FEBRUARY 25, 2013

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Mira Moufarrej and her MIT crew teammates sought refuge in a boathouse.

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CAMBRIDGE — Students at MIT described the tense atmosphere that descended on campus as soon as they received an emergency text message informing them that a gunman might be on the school grounds — a report that turned out to be a hoax.

“It’s definitely unsettling,” Will Talbott, 29, a graduate student, said on Sunday. “Even though it was a hoax, it gives you more of a sense of what it would be like to have a school shooting — or any kind of shooting — happen here.”

Authorities have released no details about the suspected origin of the false report or its precise method of delivery to Cambridge police, though a spokesman has said it did not come through any of the department’s anonymous tip submission platforms.

Students were not notified of the threat for more than an hour, and MIT officials have yet to explain the

reason for the delay.

Campus Police Chief John DiFava said over the weekend that he would investigate the reason for the lag, and the school said Saturday in a statement that it will conduct a standard review of “MIT’s police and communications actions during this event.”

While many students interviewed Sunday said they were reserving judgment about the delay in sending out the text alert, one law enforcement expert was critical.

“It appears as though the officials at MIT — whoever was in charge of making the call [to send a campus-wide alert] — could be accused of being asleep at the switch,” said Thomas Nolan, a former Boston police lieutenant who is a part-time lecturer on criminal justice at Tufts University.

He said that while he applauded the general police response, the emergency alert “should have been sent as soon as [city] police were on campus, and that was within a matter of minutes. That should have been what prompted the alert, that’s the benchmark — police on campus.”

Asked about the potential for causing panic by sending an alert before the threat could be fully assessed, Nolan said, “It does no harm to send an alert that says something like ‘police are responding to an unconfirmed report of a gunman on campus,’ and then send updates as more information comes in.”

Cambridge police and an MIT spokeswoman would only say on Sunday that the investigation was ongoing when asked about the case. Representatives of the State Police and district attorney’s office did not return calls seeking comment.

Greg Comcowich, an FBI spokesman, said in an e-mail that the bureau had spoken with police, but since “it was determined there was no threat to public safety, we are not confirming or denying whether we are conducting any further investigation.”

Talbott, the graduate student, said that as soon as he read the text alert in his Central Square apartment on Saturday morning, he logged onto Facebook to warn people to stay away from the area and called his friends to make sure they were OK.

Meanwhile members of the women’s crew team were hatching escape plans from a boathouse on Memorial Drive if a shooter came their way.



Mira Moufarrej, 18, said she was returning to campus from a run with teammates around 9:30 a.m. when her coach shouted for everyone to get into the boathouse. She said the athletes began discussing possible escape routes once they learned of the threat.

“We were all in there, and there’s an exit to the rooftop from the locker room,” she said. “So the plan was that if the shooter came in, we’d take the exit up to the rooftop, and either stay there, or exit off another path.”

Cambridge police reported shortly after 10:15 a.m. that there was no threat to public safety.

Authorities have said they will seek criminal charges against anyone responsible for sending the false report, which triggered a heavy police response and a temporary lockdown of the area.

Moufarrej gave a measured response when asked how she felt about the delay in sending the text alert.

“Maybe they were trying to determine it was a real threat before having everyone panic,” she said. “I think it would have been more concerning if it were a real shooter, but I assume they’re looking into it, and they’ll act more quickly next time.”

Lydia Swan, 53, of Lexington, on campus Sunday to bring her daughter and stepdaughter for an SAT preparation class, said she was relieved when she learned that there was no gunman.

Swan said she trusts police to respond appropriately to potential threats involving firearms.

“The drills that schools and colleges and malls and airports and all public spaces are doing these days, I think that for the most part the police and the campus security are really very well versed in how to respond quickly,” she said. “If they thought it was safe to explore the situation for an hour and a half before they commented to people, I’m not going to second-guess that.”

Yihyun Lim, 30, a graduate student, said she was heading to a symposium on campus when she received the text, and that the school should have released more information after the threat was deemed a hoax.

“We need more explanation at the end,” said Lim, adding that “some were worried that the gunman was still around. Not on campus, but outside.”

Michael Dennis, an architecture professor, said he was also heading to campus for a symposium and encountered a police barricade near the building where the gunman was reported to be in. His office is also located in the building.

Dennis drove home when a state trooper informed him of a report of an armed man inside. He said he had no issues with the delay in sending out the emergency text.

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