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Third Emerson student speaks publicly about federal complaint over college mishandling sexual assault cases

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By Matt Rocheleau, Town Correspondent

An Emerson College student says the school threatened to revoke her scholarship and suspend her after she requested extra time to complete assignments while she tried to recover from being raped in a campus dormitory.

Sarita Nadkarni, a 21-year-old junior, is the latest to sign on to a federal complaint filed by a group that includes at least two other Emerson students who [have spoken publicly](#) saying they too were raped and that the school downplayed and failed to fully investigate the incidents or to provide adequate rape survivor support to afterward.

In the wake of the allegations, leaders of the college have promised to investigate the claims and to explore ways to improve sexual assault education, prevention and support programs available at the campus.

“The college takes sexual assault very seriously,” Emerson President M. Lee Pelton said in a phone interview Monday.

Nadkarni said in a phone interview Friday that she was raped in an Emerson dormitory on March 12 – her 21st birthday – by a man, who does not attend Emerson and who Nadkarni had never met before, was signed into the building by her roommate.

Two days later, she said she reported the rape to police as well as to school officials.

In the weeks after, she felt she was struggling academically. Nadkarni said her grades did not slip noticeably, but “toward the end of the year, I realized that I was having a hard time concentrating and I was just not giving it my all like I usually do.”

She said she then asked to receive an incomplete for three courses, which required getting approval from her professors and some academic administrators.

They agreed and said she could have the summer to finish up the work for those courses. Nadkarni said she handed in all of the work for two of the three courses and finished the work for the third once she returned in the fall and could access the college’s film editing equipment.

But at the start of the fall semester, the college sent Nadkarni a letter saying she had been placed on academic probation for not completing work for the incomplete courses. She said the letter said that if she did not finish the work soon, she could lose

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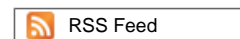
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her \$14,000 scholarship and could face suspension.

Eventually, after the college sent two more similar letters, administrators wrote back to say all of her work had been turned in all along and they took her off academic probation, according to Nadkarni.

“I felt like I had to run around to get the help I needed and that just added to the stress,” she said. “And then, I felt so angry because I felt people were helping me in the spring semester, but then when I came back [in the fall] I felt like no one was. I thought I was getting help so I could work at my own pace and instead I received backlash for even taking time to recover.”

“There was definitely a lack of communication somewhere that was very disturbing and I’m sure I’m not the only person this has happened to,” Nadkarni added. “There needs to be some sort of advisory sent to the people who need to know that some sort of trauma happened – and from there without asking questions those people can come up with a plan to help that student succeed.”

She said that the school also failed to properly advise other students that an assault had occurred on campus immediately after she reported the rape.

“I think that gives students the false realization that the campus is 100 percent safe,” she said. “It almost to me feels like they don’t want people to know these things happen on campus.”

Nadkarni noted that other colleges and universities have in recent years faced similar accusation of trying to cover up or otherwise improperly handling sexual assault cases and not providing adequate resources to victims.

“It sickens me that it happens all over the country,” she said. “It’s heartbreaking. These are supposed to be the best years of our lives and I feel like I have this giant inkblot on my experience.”

“No one reached out to me when I came back in the fall. But it’s not something you can just get over by going home for a summer. It’s still taking its toll on me and this happened in March. And, still no one has reached out to me,” she added.

The complaint that Nadkarni signed onto about a week ago was filed with the U.S. Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights in early October and alleges that Emerson administrators violated the students’ rights under Title IX and the Clery Act in handling investigations into their claims of sexual assault.

The three complainants who have spoken publicly – Nadkarni, sophomore Sarah Tedesco, and junior Jillian Doherty – have declined to specify how many other students have joined them on the complaint or to provide a copy of the complaint, citing the others’ requests for privacy.

Pelton, the Emerson president, said in a phone interview Monday that federal privacy laws prevent him and other college officials from discussing any of the student-specific cases.

He said even though the college has received no formal copy of the federal complaint or any formal notice that it has been filed, the college “is moving forward vigorously” to conduct both internal and external investigations of the claims to ensure the school has complied, and continues to comply, with Title IX and Clery Act regulations.

Hours after the filing of the complaint was publicized in a Huffington Post report last month, Pelton [vowed to improve](#) how Emerson handles investigations of sexual assaults and to provide more help for rape survivors.

“We can and we will do better,” Pelton said in a campus-wide email at the time.

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

Pelton and other administrators also held a [campus community meeting](#) to discuss the [issue](#) and [related concerns](#).

Nadkarni said she is pleased that the college is trying to do more and appreciates the concern Pelton in particular has shown.

“I feel like he understands it and he’s trying to shake everyone to wake everyone up and get things in motion,” she said.

But, she added, “I wish they could move faster. I feel like they’re just doing it now to cover their tracks from our complaints. Why did they not have more resources for assault victims before.”

Matt Rocheleau can be reached at mjrochele@gmail.com. Looking for more coverage of area colleges and universities? Go to our [Your Campus pages](#).

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