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MIT makes confronting sexual assault a top priority

By **Matt Rocheleau** | GLOBE STAFF | FEBRUARY 08, 2014

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MIT's president, L. Rafael Reif, announced Friday that he has directed the institute's new chancellor to make confronting campus sexual assault a central priority, a week after an alumna wrote in the school newspaper that she had been raped while a student.

"The community deserves a rigorous assessment of the nature and extent of the problem of sexual assault at MIT," Reif said in a letter to the campus community.

"We all need to be aware of what MIT is doing as an institution to try to prevent sexual assault, to respond with understanding and fairness, and to provide survivors with the help they need," he added.

"And we need to decide where we should do more."

He asked Chancellor Cynthia Barnhart to deliver a report to him by the end of the semester to outline what more the institute needs to do to tackle the problem.

With his letter, Reif thrust the Cambridge school more deeply into an issue swirling across college campuses in Boston and beyond. A Globe story on Monday said reports of sexual assaults at area colleges have risen nearly 40 percent over the past five years.

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

In her column in The Tech, the alumna, writing anonymously, described how she was raped by an older, higher-ranked colleague in her research group nearly three years ago, when she was a junior.

The woman wrote that because of a mix of fear, confusion, and depression, she did not formally report the episode for more than a year and a half. When she did, campus and local police and officials from an MIT sexual assault response program were supportive. But she wrote that a prosecutor she met with was “unsupportive.”

In response, the Middlesex district attorney’s office issued a statement saying it had investigated the alleged assault and defended its handling of the case and the decision not to file charges.

MIT officials had declined to comment, citing student privacy rules, until Reif’s letter Friday.

“The suffering she describes breaks my heart,” he wrote. “And — as we know from years of campus reporting about sexual assault and from the [online] comments posted on her letter — she is not alone.

“That such betrayals occur in our community makes me profoundly sad and angry,” he added. “I admire her bravery in breaking the silence for all rape survivors in our community. Just as important, she has brought this topic to the center of our public conversation.”

He wrote that he was proud and grateful that the school over the last several years has worked to raise awareness of sexual assault and harassment and to improve the support the campus offers to survivors.

“I believe we should use this moment to improve and expand our community efforts further still,” Reif said.



Mitali Thakor, a 26-year-old graduate student studying anthropology at MIT, said she was “really impressed” by Reif’s response to the issue of campus sexual assault. She noted how it is rare for the top leader of a campus to publicly address the problem.

“I think his heart is in the right place, but, like he said, there’s a lot more that needs to be done on campus,” said Thakor, a member of the campus group Students Advocating For Education on Respectful Relationships. “There are things that really need change.”

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