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Emerson College develops survey to collect data on rapes on its campus

School is under US investigation

By **Matt Rocheleau**

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Emerson College said Tuesday that it will begin anonymously surveying students this fall to assess the prevalence of sexual assault on campus, a step many colleges have resisted despite pressure from lawmakers and advocates for victims.

The survey, scheduled to be rolled out in November, is one of several new measures the college will institute that are aimed at preventing and responding to sexual assaults, officials said.

“One can only improve if you’re open to improvement,” Emerson’s president, Lee Pelton, said in an interview. “The best way to improve what we do is to have data that shows us where we can in fact make improvements.”

Emerson said the anonymous questionnaires, known as campus climate surveys, will be administered every two years and used to gauge the level of sexual violence and students' knowledge of policies and resources, and to learn how they think the college is addressing the problem, officials said.

Results from the first survey are expected to be analyzed by the spring semester. The college plans to use data obtained from the survey to aid in developing new training and education programs.

Other colleges have resisted conducting such surveys out of fear that a more accurate measurement of the prevalence of assaults would make those campuses appear to have more of a problem than schools that only disclose tallies of formally reported cases.

As many as one in five women report being sexually assaulted while in college, according to anonymous national surveys, but an estimated 88 percent of college victims do not formally report assaults.

Emerson's new initiatives build on changes the downtown college has implemented the past few years.

Developed by campus safety consultant firm Margolis Healy & Associates, the overhaul is based on recommendations by a task force Emerson established last fall. The college created the task force after a group of students — one of whom recently filed a lawsuit against the school — submitted a complaint to the US Department of Education alleging the school downplayed and failed to fully investigate incidents of sexual assault.

Several weeks after that complaint was filed, the Education Department opened an investigation, which is still ongoing, into the college's handling of sexual assault reports. Emerson is one of nine colleges in Massachusetts, and more than 70 nationwide, being investigated.

Effective this semester, the college has updated how it adjudicates cases to “reduce the re-traumatization of survivors, support the timely resolution of cases, and ensure fairness and consistency in the disciplinary process,” Pelton wrote in a letter Tuesday to the campus, which includes more than 3,600 undergraduate and 800 graduate students.

Emerson said it has created a role for a professional investigator for sexual assaults, intimate partner violence, domestic violence, and stalking.

Effective Tuesday, the college established a comprehensive sexual misconduct policy. During new-student orientation in recent weeks, it rolled out a program that encourages students to intervene when they find themselves in troubling or uncomfortable social situations.

Emerson officials said the college will also develop training and education programs for students, faculty, and staff.

One of the Emerson students who signed on to the complaint to the Education Department praised Tuesday's announcement, calling it "a huge step forward" for Emerson.

The student, Sarita Nadkarni, has said the school threatened to revoke her scholarship and suspend her after she requested extra time to complete assignments after she was raped in a campus dormitory in spring 2013.

"This is exactly what I'd hoped would happen," the 22-year-old senior said.

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