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Alumni unite to press colleges on sexual assaults

By **Matt Rocheleau** | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT JUNE 12, 2014



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Alumni from more than two dozen colleges and universities across the country, including several prominent local schools, have formed a national network to pressure their alma maters to step up efforts to combat campus sexual assault.

Alarmed by reports of assaults at dozens of schools, the group says it may rank college presidents based on how responsive they have been to sexual assault allegations, and then urge alumni donors to withhold gifts

from schools that don't measure up. They would urge donors to send money to a fund to fight college sexual assault.

“College administrators who are taking this seriously will receive our help and support, and we will be a formidable force against those who are not,” said Elizabeth Amini, who helped launch the national network and has urged her alma mater, Occidental College in Los Angeles, to step up efforts to address sexual assault.

Members of the as yet unnamed group include alumni from Amherst, Brown, Dartmouth, Harvard, Tufts, Wesleyan, Williams, and Yale. The alumni are a mix of more than 60 women and men, some recent graduates, some older, and some assault victims.

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The group is finding its voice as colleges face intense scrutiny from the Obama administration and critics who complain administrators are not taking sexual assault reports seriously enough.

In response, numerous colleges have announced measures to show their commitment to keeping their campuses safe.

For example, Harvard University has taken steps that include adding resources to its Office of Sexual Assault Prevention and Response and establishing a pair of task forces to recommend additional ways the college can better prevent and respond to assaults.

Harvard's spokesman, Jeff Neal, said the university “takes the issue of sexual harassment and sexual violence extremely seriously.”

Susan Struble, a member of the alumni network who graduated from Dartmouth in 1993 and has been active in advocating for change at her alma mater, said every administration is handling the problem differently.

“Some are digging in their heels and saying they have no problem, while others say, ‘This is a serious problem and we want to work with you to address it,’ ” she said.

By conference call, e-mail, social media, and documents shared online, members of the grass-roots group have brainstormed policy recommendations they can make to campus leaders and strategized on ways to pressure administrators if their pleas are ignored.

They are working to research best practices around topics such as sexual assault prevention education,

support for victims, bystander intervention, and student judicial practices. They plan to create a website where they will post their findings and recommendations. And they're inviting alumni of dozens of other colleges across the country to join them.

Founders of the network say that mobilized alumni wield a unique ability to influence administrators even beyond the obvious power of their collective donations.

The alumni network is seeking to build on the advocacy work of student-run groups. But unlike those student groups, alumni face no fear of retaliation for speaking out and are not challenged by the constant turnover that graduation poses.

"We're parents and grandparents who influence where our kids and friends' kids choose to go to college," Struble said. "And some of us are lawyers or work in public health and higher education."

"We also bring institutional memory," she added. "The problems now and the promises from administrators are the same as they were when we were students. In 20 years, there's been no progress. I find that embarrassing and tragic."

Last month, the White House unveiled new guidelines for schools to follow in their efforts to address the issue, and federal officials disclosed 55 schools nationwide — including Amherst, Boston University, Dartmouth, Emerson, Harvard, and UMass Amherst — were under investigation for potentially mishandling complaints of sexual violence and harassment.

Meanwhile, Tufts this spring initially denied, then accepted findings from a federal education department investigation that the university was not complying with rules governing how colleges handle sexual assault cases.

According to a Globe review of Boston-area campuses in February, the number of reported forcible sex offenses rose by nearly 40 percent between 2008 and 2012, which specialists said signaled that more victims were reporting what is typically a vastly underreported crime.

Concern over campus assaults has prompted alumni to call and write administrators and to circulate petitions calling for reform. Some alumni, including at Williams, have even said they will stop donating until changes are made.

But, others want to take a less drastic approach with administrators at their schools, for now at least.

"Many alumni are worried because not donating will directly hurt students and they don't want to give them a double whammy," Struble said.

The national spread of alumni advocacy largely mirrors how assault victims and student-run advocacy

groups have made [intercampus connections](#) in recent years.

Dana Bolger, who graduated from Amherst College this year, was on the first national conference call of the national alumni network's earlier this month. Bolger said that after she was raped and stalked by a fellow student in 2011, during her sophomore year, a dean recommended she take time off until her attacker graduated.

She ultimately returned to campus feeling safe, she said. Since then, she has become an activist, helping to launch Know Your IX, a Web-based campaign that aims to educate students about Title IX, a law mandating gender equality on campuses. She is thrilled to see other alumni speaking out.

"When you're fighting against a power as big as American higher ed you need all of the help you can get," she said.

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Correction: An earlier version of this story mischaracterized Harvard's actions to curb campus sexual assaults and Dana Bolger's complaint over an alleged rape when she was an Amherst College student.



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