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Colleges raise awareness of sexual harassment

by Marylynn G. Hewitt by Catholic News Service

DETROIT -- As campuses across the country fill, and students learn of the schools' regulations regarding student fees, parking restrictions and library hours, they also must be made aware of school policies regarding filing complaints of sexual harassment.

Grievance procedures must be "prominently posted on school websites; sent electronically to all members of the school community; available at various locations throughout the school or campus; and summarized in or attached to major publications issued by the school, such as handbooks, codes of conduct and catalogs for students, parents of elementary and secondary students, faculty and staff," said Russlyn Ali, the U.S. Department of Education's assistant secretary for civil rights, in an April letter to all schools outlining how they are to respond to sexual assault allegations.

This summer, the University of Notre Dame entered into a voluntary resolution agreement with the federal education department's Office for Civil Rights regarding the university's policy on handling student-on-student sexual harassment, including sexual violence.

The agency's seven-month investigation included a review of previous cases against the university and articles in the media about the school's handling of cases, including that of Elizabeth "Lizzy" Seeberg, a freshman at St. Mary's College in Notre Dame, Ind., who committed suicide in September 2010, 10 days after reporting a sexual assault by a University of Notre Dame football player.

It wasn't until five days after Seeberg's death, on Sept. 15, 2010, that Notre Dame police interviewed the player who she said fondled her breast.

The Chronicle of Higher Education reported in July that the Office for Civil Rights said it began the investigation of whether Notre Dame was in violation of Title IX, a landmark 1972 law that prohibits sexual discrimination in higher education institutions receiving federal funds, because of earlier

complaints against the university. Title IX's anti-discrimination rules also cover sexual harassment and sexual violence against students.

Holy Cross Father Thomas Doyle, vice president for student affairs at Notre Dame, said the review "confirmed for us that we have outstanding initiatives in place, while also providing direction for several areas in which we can make modifications for improvement."

"Sexual misconduct can have no place at Notre Dame, and we are committed to continuing to protect the safety and human dignity of every student," he said.

Dennis Brown, Notre Dame spokesman and assistant vice president for public affairs, said the university has "implemented and commits to maintaining" a high set of standards related to combating sexual harassment, including: policies for conduct that create a campus environment "free from all discrimination on the basis of sex"; a comprehensive system that encourages the reporting of incidents of discrimination; a detailed definition of sexual misconduct, including a definition of consent; a clear explanation of how to report sexual discrimination; the prohibition of threats of retaliation; and appropriate privacy protections for all parties.

Seeberg reportedly made an initial report less than 24 hours after the Aug. 31, 2010, incident that occurred when she and the football player were alone in a dorm room after another couple left. On Sept. 2, she said she received a text message from one of the player's friends stating, "Don't do anything you would regret" and "Messing with notre dame (sic) football is a bad idea." She reportedly notified a campus detective about the message eight minutes after receiving it.

Known as a volunteer in various causes, Seeberg helped build houses for Habitat for Humanity and made and sold picture frames as a fundraiser for a low-income Catholic school in Chicago that, at her encouragement, her youth group had "adopted." She had hoped to become a nurse.

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A news release from the U.S. Department of Education said the university entered into the voluntary resolution agreement before the office concluded its investigation.

Other schools across the country are reviewing their policies as a result of the investigation.

At DePaul University, Robin Florzak, director of the news and information bureau, said the Chicago school's sexual harassment and discrimination policies "not only comply with the U.S. Education Department's guidelines, but also are regularly reviewed to ensure that they protect our students."

Students at Xavier University in Cincinnati are informed of the school's regulations, which go above and beyond the guidelines, in the student handbook. According to a statement by dean of students Luther Smith, dean of students, said his office has five business days to act once a complaint is received.

The school also offers the Xavier Advocate Program 24/7. The assigned advocate's role is to support the complainant throughout the process.

"Xavier always follows the wishes of the complainant," Luther said.

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