

Senate Higher Education Committee
Legislative Hearing on Campus Sexual Assault

September 17, 2018

Testimony on behalf of Ramapo College of New Jersey c/o:
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Thank you, Chairwoman Cunningham, Vice Chair Pou, and the Committee, for the opportunity to contribute to this important discussion. I am Peter Mercer, the President of Ramapo College of New Jersey; and I am joined today by my colleague, Katherine “Kat” McGee, our Director of Title IX. I will make a brief formal presentation, as will Kat; and then we would open ourselves to questions, at your leisure.

Sexual assault is a violent crime and an unacceptable affront to the educational mission of Ramapo College. Our highest priority is to provide an academic environment that is safe for all students to live and learn.

Today marks a return for me to come before this Committee on the topic of campus sexual assault and I would like to highlight a few developments that have taken place at Ramapo College since I last spoke with you in 2016. Around that time, Ramapo College had invited two external entities to our campus to conduct thorough, objective assessments of our campus culture, policies, and resources as they pertained to student safety and sexual assault. That transparent exercise, which had the full support of our Board of Trustees, yielded a concrete action plan titled Ramapo Advance and pursuant to that plan, we have taken steps to respond to and prevent sexual violence and misconduct on our campus. I will describe a few of these steps for you now. For example, Ramapo College has:

- Increased the number of our Public Safety Officers by over 20% from 28 to 34 and we increased the presence of these officers in targeted areas of campus as well as the hiring of two retired police officers to manage the campus from 5PM to 4AM.

- Implemented annual training for all Public Safety Officers on Trauma-Informed Responses to sexual assault reports.
- Expanded the training for our Title IX investigators and Deputy Coordinators. Through collaboration with national groups like ATIXA and the “It’s on Us” campaign, we ensure that we are employing fair and balanced practices in our investigation and adjudication procedures.

While strengthening our response efforts, Ramapo College has also expanded our focus on awareness and prevention, and this is, I believe, where the additional resources we have invested over the years have yielded the greatest fruit. To be clear, in 2016, our external evaluators advised that we should anticipate an uptick in reporting as a result of our awareness initiatives. As a College president and as a father, I accepted this advice with mixed emotion. An uptick in reporting, on one hand, demonstrated that our awareness efforts are fostering a culture in which survivors and allies feel safe and empowered to report (i.e. that Ramapo College of New Jersey is actually making a dent in the known statistic that roughly only 30% of sexual assaults are even reported). On the other hand, though, an uptick in reporting also meant that the root cause of these incidents still required treatment, so, to this end, we launched a series of initiatives of which I am only highlighting a few here:

- We established an Office of Violence Prevention and just last week celebrated its one year anniversary. This Office is located in the center of our campus and it runs a peer education program for students to become Violence Intervention Peer (or “VIP”) Educators. I cannot overstate the importance of peer education as a best practice in prevention. Peers can talk about the nuances of campus culture and consent in ways that are highly influential in creating a culture of respect.
- We participated in the national “It’s on Us” bystander intervention campaign and people are taking notice of this: Student athlete and Greek Life videos produced for Ramapo’s “It’s On Us” campaign have been viewed over 10,000 times on YouTube.

- As advocated by the New Jersey Task Force on Campus Sexual Assault, Ramapo College also uses campus climate survey data to shape and develop strategies for campus safety, balanced investigative and adjudication procedures, and survivor well-being.
 - For example, our data showed how deeply academic careers were hindered as a result of a sexual assault. We learned that 50% of survivors reported having missed class and 47% considered transferring or dropping out of college. It is unacceptable to me that any student be deterred from realizing their full potential due to the impact of sexual violence. As a result, the College moved to increase awareness among faculty and students of available academic accommodations designed to support survivors.
- Ramapo College also expanded mandatory training for all new students to include a focus on addressing root causes of “rape culture,” meaning a culture that normalizes and excuses sexual violence. In fact, our first year students complete an on-line module focused on sexual assault education and, in 2017, we saw the percent of our first year students reporting that they know how to report a sexual assault increase from 57% to 85%, which is above the national average of 79%
- Students are not the only ones being educated. Title IX and sexual assault response training also now occur during each New Faculty Orientation, and annually for all employees.

Finally, we continue to strengthen relationships with our community partners:

- In 2018, the College established a Memorandum of Understanding with the Bergen County Prosecutor’s Office that established protocols to best meet the needs of students impacted by sexual assault and ensure campus safety. We also updated our protocols with the Mahwah Police Department and continue to work with them and the Mahwah Municipal Alliance on fostering safe community standards.

- Ramapo College has been a member of the NJCASA College Consortium since its establishment ten years ago. The Consortium meets regularly to develop thoughtful responses to timely issues impacting campuses and creates a collection of best practices in sexual assault prevention and response. I thank NJCASA Executive Director Patricia Teffenhart and her colleagues for their tireless advocacy for our students.
- Additionally, our longstanding partnership with healingSPACE, the Sexual Violence Resource Center of Bergen County, continues to grow. Ramapo College has collaborated with healingSPACE for well over a decade to educate and assist us in providing crisis intervention, counseling, and accompaniments for survivors through medical, legal, and other related proceedings.

Ramapo College is still navigating this complex landscape as are our peers but we are doing so from the standpoint that increases in reporting, while troubling to accept, are moving us, step by step, toward our goal of eliminating sexual assault on our campus. We remain committed to the continuous improvement of our programs and services that are designed to protect, educate, and support our students until we reach this goal and we appreciate this Committee's support in understanding and potentially championing those efforts.

I thank you for the support and leadership of this Committee, and our community partners in law enforcement and sexual assault prevention. With that, I thank you for listening; and turn now, with the Committee's approval, to introduce Director Kat McGee, a Ramapo alumnae and our Director of Title IX.