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President Carolyn Martin  
Office of the President  
Amherst College  
Amherst, Massachusetts 01002

October 27, 2012

Dear President Martin,

We are appalled and saddened by the information about rape seeping out from Amherst College. Angie Epifano's letter is heart-breaking. Based on this information, we were certainly neither surprised nor displeased to read in today's *New York Times* that the involved Amherst sexual assault counselor was fired. However, we doubt that the culture at Amherst will be changed by a single firing or a new policy statement.

Many issues have been raised about Ms. Epifano's rape and those of others. Specifically, we wonder: Will the accused assailants be investigated? What about the bystanders? What about the Dean and other administrative staff? How does a culture of alcohol, drugs, violent sports, and "boys will be boys" play in?

In addition, we wonder why Ms. Epifano, a child with no parents, did not have an experienced adult advocate appointed by the College when she was hospitalized without her consent, and in her subsequent grossly unequal and apparently uncaring interactions with the College. How differently events might have evolved if Ms. Epifano had had savvy parents (or an advocate) unquestionably on her side after she was raped! Maybe she should have been given an advocate at matriculation.

Further, what can be done to help Ms. Epifano and Amherst's other rape victims immediately? Even if they are no longer students, most of these victims are Amherst (or Five College community) alumni. Amherst should not banish and/or abandon them as if they are to blame. Alumni should be involved in generating ideas and helping.

Finally, how can the horrible and perhaps accurate impression that Amherst is a rape culture be reversed, especially since this may have been a problem at least since Amherst went co-ed? We agree with you that an intensive, extensive ferment of ideas will need to occur across the College, both inside and outside the curriculum. The teach-in format seems like a good start. We hope this ferment will include alumni. The depth of the problem does not reduce the urgency of the need to find solutions, or even



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interim fixes. Amherst has the tremendous advantage of being a small college with all the talent and resources necessary to effect rapid change for the better. Nevertheless, the response to date reads like the bureaucratic response of a too-large institution.

That we, as loyal alumni, learned about this yesterday from our niece, a student at Wesleyan, rather than from Amherst, is concerning. That we, on the same day, received a request for annual giving to Amherst, lacking any reference to these events, heightened our impression that Amherst is not responding to this situation with sufficient concern or urgency--of course, we will reserve judgment on giving until we learn more.

We await your response.

Sincerely,

Curt I. Civin, MD  
Amherst BA 1970, ScD (hon) 2001

Nancy B. Civin  
Smith 1970



# President Martin's Statement on Sexual Assault

October 18, 2012

Dear Members of the Amherst Community,

I write in response to the recent news about an incident of sexual violence and misconduct on the Amherst campus and to reports that the College has failed to treat similar incidents with adequate transparency or seriousness. A student's first-person account in this week's *Amherst Student* is horrifying—her rape, her painful efforts to deal with it on her own, and her subsequent experiences when she sought help on the campus.

In response to her story, still more accounts of unreported sexual violence have appeared in social media postings and in emails I have received from several students and alumni. Clearly, the administration's responses to reports have left survivors feeling that they were badly served. That must change, and change immediately. I am investigating the handling of the incident that was recounted in *The Student*. There will be consequences for any problems we identify, either with procedures or personnel.

Addressing sexual misconduct and violence has been and is one of my highest priorities. Reviews of our policies, procedures, and practices have been underway for several months and they continue. Some changes have already been made. More significant changes need to be considered and decisions about them will involve students and other members of the community at every step. Oversight of this process will be the responsibility of a special committee I will form that will be comprised of students, faculty, staff, administrators, and trustees. In addition, we will hold a series of open meetings in the next several weeks so we can share information and solicit input on the changes we need. One of those meetings will be organized as a teach-in, involving students, faculty, staff, and administrators that will be planned and coordinated by Dean O'Hara.

On the basis of what I learned during my first year at Amherst, I have made campus leaders and the Board of Trustees aware of several challenges and opportunities in the general area of Student Life, including the need to review and make changes in our Title IX and sexual misconduct policies. Indeed, the agenda for this week's board meeting, which was set some time ago, includes a report from a nationally recognized expert in this area who has been reviewing Amherst's policies since July 2012. The board is deeply concerned and supportive of our efforts.

Sexual misconduct and assault are among the toughest and most consequential



problems on college campuses and in the culture as a whole. Amherst is not alone in its struggles with it. But Amherst, given its values, its commitment to community, and its size should be a model of education, prevention, and effective response when violations occur.

No student should be discouraged from reporting offenses or seeking redress. All reports should be brought to the attention of the College administration. Every student should feel that the College will treat sexual misconduct and violence with the utmost seriousness. Every student should know that the failure to respect the integrity of others will result in punitive action. We will do what it takes to build confidence in the College's approach.

For more information on existing policy and procedure and on next steps, please read the text below.

Sincerely,

Biddy Martin

### ***Amherst College President's Statement on Sexual Assault: Additional Information***

#### ***Recent Action Taken***

This past Sunday evening, President Martin held an open meeting that gave students an opportunity to share their experiences, their frustrations and recommendations for change. At the end of the meeting, a series of action steps were agreed upon:

1. Student membership on the Title IX Committee.
2. Enhanced communication about the changes that are in play.
3. Improvements in support for survivors of sexual assault.
4. A review of penalties for those found responsible for sexual misconduct and assault.
5. Student representation on the Student Life working group that will be part of the College's strategic planning effort.
6. Consideration of the regulation or disbanding of off-campus fraternities as part of the longer term strategic planning discussion.

#### ***Next Steps***

In the next few weeks the College will continue to follow up with a series of meetings to obtain additional information and solicit the community's help with the re-design of policies, procedures and practices. One of those meetings will be organized as a teach-in involving students, faculty, staff and administrators. Dean O'Hara has volunteered to work with the community to organize the teach-in. At another meeting, Gina Smith, a nationally recognized legal and policy expert, will present her observations and recommendations



for Amherst.

### *Summary of Changes to the College's Disciplinary Hearing Process*

In Spring 2012 the College Council and Committee of Six approved the following changes to the disciplinary hearing procedures, specific to sexual misconduct:

- Alternative testimony options are available for Committee on Discipline hearings, such as Skype, providing students with full access to the hearing process.
- Complainant and respondent have the option of submitting Impact Statements to be considered by the Committee while determining sanctions.
- A trained investigator will meet with the complainant, respondent and relevant witnesses; gather evidence; and prepare a report for distribution to the two parties and the Committee. Using an investigator permits a more complete investigation and lessens the burden on the complainant and the respondent in preparing their respective cases.
- The Disciplinary Hearing Officer's role has been eliminated, except in complaints on behalf of the college.

Tags: [Biddy Martin](#) [President](#) [Sexual Harassment policy](#) [Title IX](#) [rape](#) [sexual assault](#) [sexual harassment](#) [sexual misconduct](#) [sexual respect](#)





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## An Account of Sexual Assault at Amherst College

By Angie Epifano, Epifano is a former student of the class of 2014

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**TRIGGER WARNING:** This content deals with an account of sexual assault and may be triggering to some people.

When you're being raped time does not stop. Time does not speed up and jump ahead like it does when you are with friends. Instead, time becomes your nemesis; it slows to such an excruciating pace that every second becomes an hour, every minute a year, and the rape becomes a lifetime.

On May 25, 2011, I was raped by an acquaintance in Crossett Dormitory on Amherst College campus.

Some nights I can still hear the sounds of his roommates on the other side of the door, unknowingly talking and joking as I was held down; it is far from a pleasant wakeup call.

I had always fancied myself a strong, no-nonsense woman, whose intense independence was cultivated by seventeen harrowing years of emotional abuse in my backwoods home. May 25th temporarily shattered that self-image and left me feeling like the broken victim that I had never wanted to be.

Everything I had believed myself to be was gone in 30 minutes.

I did not report the rape after it occurred. Almost immediately after the rape I flew off to California, got lost in the beauty of the redwoods, the phenomenal art, and meeting the most unique people I'd ever beheld.

I blocked the rape from my mind and tried to convince myself that it hadn't happened; that it couldn't have happened. But there was no denying the facts.

One week before I was supposed to fly back East, everything rushed over and consumed me. My memory had been restored and I wasn't sure how I would be able to hold myself together for that year, let alone for the upcoming three years.

When I returned to Amherst for my sophomore year, I designed a simple plan of attack for surviving: Business as usual combined with a new mantra I will NOT cry.

First semester passed relatively well, there were rocky times, but I kept it together. I masked fear with smiles. I mastered the art of avoiding prying questions. I drowned myself in work and extracurricular activities in order to hide my personal pain. I was unnervingly good at playing the role of well-adjusted sophomore.

It was inevitable though that this masquerade would become too overwhelming and that my façade would shatter.

In February twisted fate decided that I had to work with him on a fundraiser. E-mails. Stopping me in the gym and at the dining hall. Smirks. Winks. Pats on my back. It was all too much.

My masquerade was over.

I broke down and for the next several months, he won.

I spent most of my spring semester an emotional wreck. I saw his face everywhere I went. I heard his voice mocking me in my own head. I imagined new rapists hiding behind every shower curtain and potted plant. I bandaged the situation by throwing myself into more work and by resolutely refusing to acknowledge that I was anything but well adjusted.



Eventually I reached a dangerously low point, and, in my despondency, began going to the campus' sexual assault counselor. In short I was told: No you can't change dorms, there are too many students right now. Pressing charges would be useless, he's about to graduate, there's not much we can do. Are you SURE it was rape? It might have just been a bad hookup...You should forgive and forget.

How are you supposed to forget the worst night of your life?

I didn't know what to do any more. For four months I continued wandering around campus, distancing from my friends, and going to counseling center. I was continuously told that I had to forgive him, that I was crazy for being scared on campus, and that there was nothing that could be done. They told me: We can report your rape as a statistic, you know for records, but I don't recommend that you go through a disciplinary hearing. It would be you, a faculty advisor of your choice, him, and a faculty advisor of his choice in a room where you would be trying to prove that he raped you. You have no physical evidence, it wouldn't get you very far to do this.

Hours locked in a room with him and being called a liar about being raped? No thank you, I could barely handle seeing him from the opposite end of campus; I knew I couldn't handle that level of negativity.

When May rolled around, everything finally came to a head. My "Anniversary" was coming up and all of the terror that I had intermittently felt that year became one giant ball of horror that filled my life. He was still out there. He could get to me again. If I told anyone he would find out and do it again. No, no, no, no, no.

For my independent studies photography course I produced a series of 20 self-portraits representing myself before, during, and after the rape.

I showed them to my classmates. Their words stung like hornets: You look funny...I don't get it, why are you so upset?

I went to the counseling center, as they always tell you to do, and spoke about how genuinely sad I was at Amherst, how much I wanted to leave, and how scared I was on a daily basis. "I should just drink darkroom developer or something..."

Twenty minutes later campus police was escorting me into an ambulance. They were even less understanding: There's something seriously wrong with you; you're not healthy and normal right now. No, you can't say no. You HAVE to go, but don't worry, you won't have to be there too long. This is for your own good. Amherst cares about you and wants you to get better.

On May 5th I entered Cooley Dickinson Hospital's Emergency Room. Three hours after sitting curled up and terrified on a hospital bed I was admitted into the Psychiatric Ward for depression and suicidal thoughts. The doctor was skeptical to say the least: I really don't think that a school like Amherst would allow you to be raped. And why didn't you tell anybody? That just doesn't make any sense...Your anger and sadness right now seem unfounded and irrational, someone your age should not be this sad—it's not normal. We'll be admitting you in a few minutes, they'll take good care of you. They'll get you some drugs and they'll make you feel happy again...If you don't willingly enter we'll have a judge issue a court order legally forcing you to stay there. Trust us, this is for your own good.

So much for not having to stay.

The Psychiatric Ward was a lovely place: the top floor of the hospital, bare white walls, Spartan furnishings, and two stainless steel locked doors at either end of the corridor making sure that anyone who goes in, stays in. Doctors and Nurse Practitioners wondered around the bare hallways checking in on myself and my fellow patients—every fifteen minutes they recorded where we were, what we were doing, and whether we looked happy. In the morning we were given our drugs; if you didn't take them you would have to be there longer. It was in our best interest to take them, so they told us.

During the day we discussed our thoughts and feelings, our inhibitions, our strengths, but more often than not we did nothing.

When you're forced to sit and think about yourself for hours on end, you go through four stages of existence.

Stage 1: Hysteria—Characterized by denying that anything is wrong, "I'm perfectly fine" and "I don't belong here," are common phrases during this stage.



Stage 2: Numb and Ornerly—You have finally realized that something is wrong with you, but you are overwhelmed and confused about how to go about fixing your problem. You therefore decide not to do anything.

Stage 3: Determination—You realize that the only way you're allowed to leave the Ward is if you "get better" and "solve your problems." Every fiber of your being thus goes into these two tasks.

Stage 4: Enlightenment—Everything falls into place. Your mind is no longer an oppressive hell and it begins to function again. The outside world no longer seems so daunting.

You are then permitted to leave.

My Enlightenment occurred when I least expected it. Four days into the Ward, I was sitting in on an introductory Substance Abuse and Mental Health Rehabilitation meeting since there was absolutely nothing better to do. To start us off, the meeting leader decided to have everyone go around and talk about why we were on the Ward. We went around the circle: hours in rehab, drug relapses, alcoholism, abusive boyfriends, being an abusive boyfriend, and escapism from the stresses of daily life. The stories weren't the superficial accounts that you read in a person's medical file; they were real life. Every problem, every ounce of frustration, every personal tick was laid bare that evening. And everyone was open, not proud, just blunt and sincere; the desire to improve their lives was palpable.

Over the past four days, I had yet to touch upon "what I was in for," my story was a mystery to everyone around me.

As my fellow patients went around the circle it all suddenly clicked. I realized why I never spoke about the rape, why I had refused to tell my school friends, why I had totally broken down, why I had steadily degenerated over the past few months. I was ashamed, and because of this shame I could not begin healing.

"Silence has the rusty taste of shame," a fellow survivor once wrote.

I had been far too silent, far too ashamed.

That night I told them everything.

For the first time I told my story and I was not ashamed.

Later that night, as I lay in bed—still in an adrenaline induced state of wakefulness—I heard my roommate whisper my name, and then, a question.

"Are you still awake?"

"Yes."

"Thought so..."

A long pause. She'd been in the meeting.

What was she thinking? What would she say?

"I just wanted to tell you, I...I know how it feels. My uncle raped me when I was 15. The police never arrested him. Rape "wasn't their top priority." It still hurts...You're incredibly brave to talk about it...I rarely do."

She was 42 years old.

I did not sleep. That night I realized that from then on I could not stay silent—if not for myself, then for my roommate.

I had reached the apex of Stage 4.

I decided that once I was released I would continue with my plans to study abroad that upcoming semester; I would be rejuvenated when I returned to campus in the winter, ready to take on the world and fight for survivor rights.

I would be strong again.

From the moment I woke, this plan hit one pitfall after another; a domino effect of roadblocks that continued for the next three months.



I sat at breakfast in bright spirits, attempting to carry on a conversation with a manic depressive woman who rarely talked. I was so genuinely happy that her lack of responses didn't even bother me—I just talked at her.

In the middle of my stimulating conversation my harried looking social worker suddenly strode into the dining room and headed purposefully over to me.

She looked grim and angry. "They're trying to prevent you from going back."

I was shocked.

She began rattling off the Administration's policy regarding students released from psychiatric care. In order for students to be allowed back they had to have parental supervision while on campus in order to make sure that the student did not relapse into substance abuse again (the most common reason for student admittance into the Ward). This meant that a parent would stay in a hotel near campus and would then follow their child around for two weeks until the "all clear" period was reached. "And since you don't have parents..."

She trailed off awkwardly and began to resolutely examine the upper left-hand corner of the dining room.

I must have been speechless for a good minute as a bizarre series of emotions plowed me over.

Shock to incredulity, back to shock, to sadness to anger, back to shock again, then back to sadness, and then an overwhelming amount of shame and embarrassment settled over me. I'm not worthy of even going back; that's how disgusting I am. I can't even step foot on campus...

Panic welled up inside of me.

Did this mean I was trapped on the Ward forever? God, no, I couldn't handle that. I wasn't crazy!

Claustrophobia and paranoia dropped on top of me and I wildly scanned the room. I met my roommate's eyes. She was looking at me with worry: What's wrong?

The room stopped spinning, the walls went back to their normal locations, I could breathe again, and now I was angry. I told her flat out: Let me get this straight. I was raped on their campus. I had an emotional breakdown because I didn't feel safe and felt harassed on their campus. I went to their counseling center, like they told me to, and I told them how I was feeling. They decided that I should be sent to the hospital. And now they won't allow me back on their campus? They allow rapists back on campus, but they won't allow the girl who was raped back? The girl who did nothing wrong.

She told me: Well, when you put it that way...

The maniacal grin on my social worker's face as she walked off was wonderful.

Needless to say, Amherst let me back on campus later that evening. Five days after being admitted, I was finally released from the Ward.

The car ride back to campus with my dean was, also needless to say, the most awkward car ride of my life. I looked at her: You know, I'm really glad that y'all let me back on campus, for a while there I was pretty worried and I was actually preparing an argument for why I should be allowed back...

Her response: No, no, no! That's not what happened, you must have just misunderstood the situation! We're so happy to have you back! Amherst is just such a wonderful place, we know you'll be happy to be back!

A big misunderstanding, I was skeptical.

In the following days I decided that my best policy when dealing with Amherst at the moment would be "let's let bygones be bygones." I quickly forgave the Administration and focused on just being happy to be out. On the inside though I was still dripping with anger, shame, and embarrassment.

Several days after my release I had to defend my chance to study abroad. My chance to leave campus for the first time in 8 months, my chance to relax and heal in a new environment, my biggest chance to revive my love of Amherst, and my chance to move on in life by studying what I truly love. The prospect had gotten me through the most frigid hours on the Ward and I was convinced that it would be the perfect way to continue my healing process.



I half-heartedly murmured, Your actions were understandable. I understand your policy when dealing with depression and students coming out of the Psychiatric Ward...during the meeting that included my dean and several of the campus counselors. Relief instantly flashed across all of their faces and the atmosphere rose in friendliness.

Then: The Ward was the best thing that could have happened to me. I have re-found my love of life and my desire to heal. I will never be 100% better, but I no longer feel like a victim. I'm a survivor, I'm strong, and I think that studying abroad will help me continue healing. When I return in the winter I'll have a greater understanding of myself and a greater appreciation of Amherst.

They responded with enthusiasm: Of course! Very coherent explanation. You seem much happier, which is wonderful! We agree that going abroad and getting off campus will do you good.

Study abroad here I come!

I felt genuinely happy for the first time in a year, and I could not wait to head out.

At Amherst though, things are never that easy.

A few weeks after my release from the Ward I had a routine check-in with my dean to make sure that I was still doing well. I was excited to be leaving soon, and I must have looked quite content, sitting in her office with a million watt smile and bright eyes. I began to rattle on about how nice the warm weather was, how beautiful commencement had been, how great life was, on and on. She seemed distracted: Nod, nod...Mhmm...Well, excellent! I'm so glad to hear that you're excited about the upcoming summer here. I know how much you wanted to study abroad and how much work you must've put into it, but really, it's for the best. Africa is quite traumatizing, what with those horrible third-world conditions: disease...huts...lions! You'll be much better off here at Amherst where we can watch over you. It will give you some time to think about...you know...that...unfortunate incident...

My face was blank. "I'm supposed to go to Cape Town, South Africa..." Her response broke me down: Yes dear, I know. You were supposed to study in Africa. It's all for the best that you aren't though.

No one ever told me flat out that I would no longer be studying abroad. Not even the study abroad dean told me. I scheduled a meeting with her for two days after the meeting with my dean.

A few minutes after exchanging pleasantries she asked: What are your plans for the summer now that you're on campus?

For the month of June I was decrepit, nothing could perk me up. I returned to feeling the embarrassment and shame that had consumed me before going onto the Ward. If I hadn't told anyone about what happened I'd be abroad...If I had been stronger...If I wasn't such a failure...This is all my fault, I really am just a broken, polluted piece of shit...

Living was difficult. Each day I woke up and wandered around in a daze. At night I stared blank faced at a wall and curled up in my chair in a fetal position. I couldn't talk with people. If I talk with them they might become infected with my dirtiness.

I stopped eating. I stopped sleeping. I secretly hoped that one day on a run my heart would just stop and no one would have to see me again. I wasn't worth anything anyway.

I continued having to meet with my dean; she blamed my sadness on not being allowed to study abroad, but I knew that it wasn't that simple. I could live with not being allowed to go to South Africa at the moment, the country would be there for a while, but being forced to stay on campus in a dorm populated with men I did not know, that was the real psychological issue. Every time I told my dean that I didn't feel safe on campus, that I wanted to be allowed to leave, or at least be put in a different dorm, I received the same unhelpful responses that I had received in February. They told me: You were lucky to be given a room here this summer in the first place, housing is tight right now and you really shouldn't complain. All of your fear is ungrounded, Amherst is one of the safest places imaginable...If we let you leave campus we won't know what mental and emotional place you'll exist in when you return in September; you could become completely unstable! At Amherst we can monitor you, and, if need be, strongly suggest time off when the school year rolls around...

I felt like a prisoner, or, more accurately, like a harem girl. My jail was luxurious and openair, I was free to move about, the ruling power judged my worth on a weekly basis, and I was constantly reminded how lucky I



was to be there.

One night, after a particularly rough meeting with my dean (I just don't understand why you've been so angry throughout all of this. You have no reason to be angry about anything.), I was curled up on my floor—I wasn't thinking, I didn't feel anything.

I went over to the mirror on the back of my door and stared. What had happened to the girl who had come off of the Ward so empowered and strong; the girl who decided to no longer be silent and feel shamed? Where had she gone?

I went over to my desk and picked up a brochure I had been given about a survivor center at UMass Amherst. I gave an exaggerated sigh. Might as well...I called the number and made an appointment for the next day.

I went back to the mirror and stared at myself again.

For the next 15 minutes I repeated: "Silence has the rusty taste of shame."

I walked over to my computer, typed up an email, hesitated for a second, and then pressed send.

I had just sent my entire sports team an email-rant about my rape and subsequent breakdown at the end of spring.

It was about time people began to realize that Amherst wasn't just majestic dorms and world-class professors.

It was about time I resumed the silent pact that I had made to my roommate on the Ward.

I will not be quiet.

The next few weeks were a blur of unending days spent resolutely working to feel better (A friend told me: You can't help other people if you feel like shit).

I was able to sleep again. I ate more. I went to free therapy sessions. I wrote and mindlessly colored in order to ground myself. I obsessively made lists of all the things imaginable. I joined a survivor group. I cried less and smiled a bit more.

I started healing.

It took a month of hard work until I was noticeably doing better. My friends, my therapist, my coworkers, and my fellow survivor group members all started commenting on how much healthier and happier I looked. I still felt uncomfortable and oppressed while surrounded by men on campus, but I was no longer afraid to leave my room after 7 p.m. I was determined to love Amherst again.

Life was tolerable.

Early July and I had another meeting with my dean: You look like you're doing better today. Well done, I'm so glad to see this kind of improvement! I think it's safe to assume that you can come back next semester, and in that regard I think that it's time that we talk about your time at Amherst over the next two years...I know you want to do African Studies through the Five Colleges, but I don't think I can support that decision. Africa is very traumatizing and I think that studying Africa is just a way for you to relive your real-life traumas; it's just not a good place to be studying.

Over the next thirty minutes several more restrictions were laid out: no Five College classes this upcoming year, no study abroad in the spring, definitely no senior year thesis, I would have to meet with a counselor twice a week, and friends off campus would have to be pushed to the wayside. She told me: Amherst is the only place that matters, and, really, you don't have a family, so where else would you go? Amherst is the only place that you can be.

At the end of our conversation I grunted out a vapid response and headed straight to my room. I sat on my bed, million-mile-gazed at the wall, and thought.

What was the point of staying at Amherst? I had been stuck on campus for eleven months straight; each day had been more challenging and emotionally draining than the previous one. I had been feeling better recently, but each time I met with my dean I felt more emotionally distraught than I had beforehand. Her comments reminded me that in the Administration's eyes I was the most base individual: a poor and parentless



humanities major who was the school's token-Deep-Southerner. I was sullied, blameworthy, and possibly insane.

I made a Pros and Cons of Amherst List.

The Pro List had seven items.

The Con List had twenty-three items.

On July 14th I made one of the hardest decisions of my life.

I was going to withdraw from Amherst.

That next week I threw myself into finding a way out. Plans were made, plans were broken, Plan B was made, and finally Plan B was successful!

I did not tell the Administration for fear that they would somehow sabotage me. It was probably paranoid, but after being prevented from leaving campus multiple times I was not going to take any chances. The conversation went similarly to this:

"I'm withdrawing from Amherst."

That was my greeting to my dean when I met with her in late July.

The look of complete shock on her face was priceless. When she recovered: So you're taking a semester off? That's perfectly ok, many survivors do, I think it's best that you do what you...

No, I'm withdrawing, permanently. I ain't planning on ever coming back. I'm going to transfer to another school after taking a semester off to travel around.

You can't...You...Nobody withdraws. Where are you going to go? You don't have parents. What are you going to do?

I'm working on a Dude Ranch in Wyoming.

...I didn't think you'd be able to figure out a plan...Well, we technically won't withdraw you from the school until three years have passed. After three years we'll double-check to make sure that you really want to withdraw and then we'll remove you from our current-students system.

No, I just want you to withdraw me. I don't want to come back, I don't want to be affiliated with your school anymore. I'm sick of this place.

I think you need to meet with our sexual assault counselor again, you're way too angry right now and not thinking clearly. I have a feeling you'll change your mind and come back. Amherst is one of the best schools out there, it will be a transfer down unless you go to an Ivy...

You know, I have I feeling that I won't want to come back, but that's just a hunch.

As my dean suggested, I met with our sexual assault counselor a few days later. The meeting was uncharacterizable by one word, but bizarre might be the closest description: This is a bad idea, you're not thinking straight.

I didn't understand this. I'd been thinking about this for quite a while; I was unhappy at Amherst and I didn't understand why I should stay at a place where I was absolutely miserable. There are other places in the world.

The next two hours was a hodgepodge of topics: Your lack of parental support makes you emotionally volatile and prevents you from following through with decisions that you make.

Apparently I had decided not to study abroad. Then there was bizarre 'concern:'You don't look very healthy. Have you been eating? I think you might have an eating disorder. You know there's a great clinic in Northampton where we can send you for in-patient eating disorder treatment.

I don't have an eating disorder; I used to have one, I know what they're like. I don't eat a lot because I can't afford to buy food.



Then the ranch came up: Do you realize how difficult working on a Dude Ranch will be? The people in Wyoming are different from the people at Amherst, they won't be well-educated, and they won't understand you. You're going to a backwards place. Do you realize how bad it will be?

Yes, because the rest of the US is filled with ignorant savages who haven't been saved by the light of Amherst. How would I ever survive?

To the counselor's great surprise, these stellar arguments did not convince me to stay at Amherst. I became even more resolute about my decision to leave, and decided to talk with the Victim Rights Law Center, a pro-bono law firm based in Boston that my survivor group had recommended to me several weeks earlier. My preliminary intake with the VRLC was quite eye-opening: Oh Amherst? Yeah, unfortunately I know Amherst all too well. I've been down there many times to deal with the administration and their constant mistreatment of survivors. Our law firm keeps trying to force them to change but they just don't seem to understand, they keep doing the same old thing.

Amherst has almost 1800 students; last year alone there were a minimum of 10 sexual assaults on campus. In the past 15 years there have been multiple serial rapists, men who raped more than five girls, according to the sexual assault counselor. Rapists are given less punishment than students caught stealing. Survivors are often forced to take time off, while rapists are allowed to stay on campus. If a rapist is about to graduate, their punishment is often that they receive their diploma two years late.

I eventually reported my rapist.

He graduated with honors.

I will not graduate from Amherst.

The stories and statistics are miles long in regards to sexual assault on campus. My story is far from unique, and, compared to some of the stories I have heard, is tame.

The more that I learn about Amherst's policy toward sexual assault and survivors in general, the more relief I feel in deciding to transfer. How could I stay at a school who had made my healing process not just difficult, but impossible? How could I stand knowing that the Administration promotes silence? How could I spend the next two years made to feel dirty and at fault?

I could not.

At one point I hated Amherst with an indescribable amount of fury, but I do not hate the school anymore. Amherst took a lot from me, but they gave me some of the greatest gifts imaginable: self-confidence, my closest friends, intellectual curiosity, and endless personal strength. For these things I am forever grateful. For everything else, I stand back and behold the college with a feeling of melancholia.

The fact that such a prestigious institution could have such a noxious interior fills me with intense remorse mixed with sour distaste. I am sickened by the Administration's attempts to cover up survivors' stories, cook their books to discount rapes, pretend that withdrawals never occur, quell attempts at change, and sweep sexual assaults under a rug. When politicians cover up affairs or scandals the masses often rise up in angry protestations and call for a more transparent government. What is the difference between a government and the Amherst College campus? Why can't we know what is really happening on campus? Why should we be quiet about sexual assault?

"Silence has the rusty taste of shame."

There is no reason shame should be a school's policy.

**UPDATE: President Carolyn "Biddy" Martin has released a statement concerning this article and the follow-up steps being taken by the administration regarding sexual assault:**

[https://www.amherst.edu/campuslife/letters\\_president/node/436469](https://www.amherst.edu/campuslife/letters_president/node/436469)

**Tags:** rape Sexual Assault

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Comments