Advocacy for Policy Change: Brandeis students work to reform Massachusetts law

While Massachusetts is fortunate to be home to some of the best colleges and universities in the world, the students who attend its schools are not immune to the nightmare of sexual violence.

H.632: “An Act relative to sexual violence on higher education campuses” aims to decrease the prevalence of sexual violence on college campuses, and empower victims of violence to better report and seek justice for what has happened to them. The legislation creates higher standards relative to sexual violence to which all colleges and universities in Massachusetts would be accountable. These standards include improving the information that is given to victims and to the general public regarding sexual violence, compelling universities to comply with Title IX policies, and providing better resources to victims, among other things.

The Bill
H.632: An Act relative to sexual violence on higher education campuses

Elevator Speech
Hi, my name is [______]. I’m a college student at Brandeis University, and I’m speaking with you because I believe that each student deserves the opportunity for a safe education. Right now, however, college students in Massachusetts are not safe, as sexual assault reporting and prevention procedures aren’t held to a high standard.

Currently, one in five women and one in 16 men are sexually assaulted while in college. These sexual assault victims rarely report the crimes committed against them, as most universities do not have sensitive and accessible reporting procedures.

A bill introduced by Rep Tricia Farley-Bouvier and Daniel Donahue, “An Act relative to sexual violence on higher education campuses,” is designed to ensure that universities in the Commonwealth provide the information that survivors deserve following an assault. It also ensures that our institutions provide students with effective and important resources such as

Sexual Violence on Higher Education Campuses

Confronting sexual violence on college campuses

Jacob Edelman ’18
Katarina Weessies ’18

Jacob Edelman ’18 and Katarina Weessies ’18
sexual assault crisis centers, which provide professionalized support to victims, and bystander intervention trainings, which prevent assaults from happening in the first place.

The bill is designed to finally confront the scourge of sexual assault on higher education campuses. The injustices that are committed on college campuses by assailants unfairly interrupt the education process, and unfairly interrupt the lives of survivors.

I hope that when you go to the Committee on Higher Ed, you give this bill special attention, and do what you can to push it on to the next stage of being heard, and reviewed. Thank you for taking the time to support sexual assault survivors.

Excerpt from the Storybook

Who is helped by the bill...

A student at Brandeis is a sexual assault survivor from two years ago on campus. She stated in an interview: “It was because of a lack of trust in the university police and counseling service that I remained quiet [...] More of me would have been lost by going to report. I didn’t know who I could trust to go to. If I had that, maybe I would have spoken up.” She felt even less confident about reporting this sort of incident due to employment by the university, for fear of losing her job.

“Based on our experience, I believe that the [Bill] provides for specific measures, tailored to suit the needs and characteristics of colleges and universities within the Commonwealth, to reduce the incidence of sexual violence on Massachusetts’ campuses and to address the needs of survivors when incidents do occur.” – Kim Dawkins, Executive Director, Pathways for Change Inc.

Op-Ed

Katarina

In recent weeks, sexual harassment has been all over the news. Bill O’Reilly was a serial sexual harasser for years at Fox News. Despite the numerous allegations against him, Fox News had O’Reilly’s back, ensuring that he faced no consequences for the harassment as long as he was making Fox money. As soon as advertisers starting pulling out of “The O’Reilly Factor,” Fox forced him out. However, O’Reilly never truly faced consequences. He was given a 25-million-dollar payout. Essentially, he was financially rewarded, given paid leave for being a sexual harasser.

Unfortunately, the lack of consequences for sexual assailants and support for survivors extends much further than the presidency. Sexual violence is the most common type of crime in the country, and it is also the most underreported. Sexual assault is particularly prevalent on college campuses, where one in five women and one in 16 men are assaulted.

If a student is assaulted on campus, she rarely receives the emotional support that she needs. I spoke to one student from Brandeis University who was assaulted in her bedroom during her sophomore year. Despite the fact that she thought her assailant might assault someone again, she never reported the assault. She told me that she did not report it because she was afraid that campus police would be rude and unhelpful. Brandeis staff would remove her from on-campus leadership positions, and psychological counseling resources would be condescending and unkind.

Sexual assault survivors like her deserve better. After an assault, victims require medical care, psychological support, and knowledge of their options for disciplinary action. Sexual assault survivors in college are often afraid or unable to pursue any of these services. However, the Brandeis incident occurred before the University established the Rape Crisis Center. The RCC has professional counselors and trained advocates who provide Brandeis students with emotional support and trauma-informed information about their reporting options. For many Brandeis students, the RCC is the only option for receiving advice and care after a sexual assault, and it’s a pretty good option.

However, many college campuses do not have a rape crisis center, leaving sexual assault survivors on campus to fend for themselves. “An Act relative to sexual violence on higher education campuses,” a bill sponsored by Massachusetts Representatives Tricia Farley-Bouvier and Michael Donohue, would require that all Massachusetts colleges have a sexual assault and domestic violence crisis center. The bill also improves mechanisms of reporting, disciplinary procedures, and transparency at colleges.

The bill’s parameters ease the psychological stress of the disciplinary process for both the victim and the accused. For the victim, the process of recovering from and reporting a sexual assault can be incredibly traumatic. The changes that this bill mandates for disciplinary procedures would make it easier for victims to recover from this trauma, without hurting the due process of the accused. Furthermore, the bill requires that higher education institutions have a sexual assault and domestic violence crisis center with a professional counselor, which would even further ease the psychological burden of coping with a sexual assault. It also mandates yearly bystander trainings, to prevent assaults from happening in the first place.

“An Act relative to sexual violence on higher education campuses” just had its hearing in the Joint Committee on Higher Education on April 13th. However, it’s not too late to call your representative and ask them to support sexual assault survivors.
Hello, our names are Katarina Weessies and Jacob Edelman. We are both college students in Massachusetts, and Jacob is a Massachusetts voter. We are both here to speak with you about “An Act relative to sexual violence on higher education campuses.”

Every college student deserves the opportunity to have a safe and high quality education. While Massachusetts is fortunate to be home to some of the best colleges and universities in the world, the students who attend its schools are not immune to the nightmare of sexual violence. One in five women and one in 16 men are sexually assaulted while in college. However, these numbers only express a fraction of the sexual assaults that happen to students every day, as sexual violence is the most underreported type of crime. Unfortunately, due to the lack of accessibility and clarity in universities’ sexual assault reporting and disciplinary procedures, sexual assault victims in college are left to feel alone, helpless, and powerless.

H.632: “An Act relative to sexual violence on higher education campuses,” aims to decrease the prevalence of sexual violence on college campuses, and empower victims of violence to better report and seek justice for what has happened to them. It requires that Massachusetts colleges and universities have a sexual assault crisis center with a professional sexual and domestic violence counselor. It also mandates that colleges make their information on sexual assault reporting public, and provide yearly bystander trainings for staff and student leaders. This will decrease the rate of sexual violence on college campuses, and will make the reporting and disciplinary procedures less traumatic and uncertain for sexual violence victims.

According to the Senate Ways and Means bill summary, the total cost of this legislation is estimated to be $1,000,000. Schools already receive federal funding to protect students from sexual violence, per 2014 Title IX guidelines. Furthermore, much of this legislation would hardly cost anything for a college or university to implement, as it would simply require the institutions to take advantage of already existing resources, such as the school website, office space, and counseling centers. Additionally, many universities already have some of the resources mandated by H.632, such as sexual assault crisis centers, they just need to improve the quality and accessibility of those resources.

Overall, H.632 is would require minimal resources from both the state government and from colleges and universities. The bill takes advantage of existing infrastructure to improve sexual assault prevention and resources at institutions of higher education without requiring that schools build these resources from the ground up.

H. 632 is currently in the Joint Committee on Higher Education. You can help us make colleges and universities safer and more equitable for students by reporting on it favorably. Thank you for your time and for the opportunity to speak with you.

Our names are Katarina Weessies and Jacob Edelman, and we live in Waltham as students at Brandeis University. We are writing to ask you to make colleges and universities in Massachusetts safer for students like us.

We understand that you attended college in the Boston area, at Northeastern University. Northeastern, along with many other colleges and universities in Massachusetts, is at the forefront of sexual violence prevention. However, there are flaws in the way that sexual assault is handled in Massachusetts schools. Sexual violence is the most underreported type of crime in the nation, although it is estimated that among college students, one in five women and one in 16 men become victims of an assault. For these students, underreporting is so common because there is no professionalized or clearly accessible means of reporting sexual assault.

“An Act relative to sexual violence on higher education campuses” (H.632) ensures that both sexual assault victims and the accused receive fair and humane treatment on college campuses. It requires that institutions of higher education have a sexual assault crisis center with a professional sexual violence and domestic violence counselor. It also mandates that schools have mandatory bystander and sexual violence prevention trainings.

H.632 would be incredibly beneficial for students at Massachusetts colleges. With transparent and accessible resources for sexual assault survivors, students who are victims of sexual assault will not feel alone or helpless in their quest for justice and safety.

H.632 is currently in the Joint Committee on Higher Education. While you are not on this committee, you can help us improve safety and equality of opportunity on college campuses by speaking favorably about H.632 to other legislators. Thank you for your time and for considering our request.

On April 13, I made my way into the state house in order to testify on behalf of H.632. Before the hearing, I met with Representative Farley-Bouvier, two interns of hers who were
also going to be testifying, and the College Democrats of Massachusetts Women’s Caucus. ...I came prepared with my testimony in hand, as well as that of other Brandeis students who had submitted written words. Upon arrival to the hearing room, I signed up for a slot of speaking time, and took a seat to listen as the senators and representatives on the committee went through the bills that were being discussed. The air was civil and the speakers were thoughtful. It was very interesting to hear so many points of view around certain issues, and while two individuals spoke out against H.632, the concerns that they raised were typical topics for discussion when speaking about sexual violence legislation (i.e. protecting the rights of the accused, and protecting students with disabilities (who would be protected under the ADA).) The senators and representatives listened to my 3 minutes of testimony with a fair amount of attention. They nodded along, and seemed as though they were actually listening to what was being said. Afterward, I got to speak with a reporter from Channel 7, and a few legislators, including one briefly who discussed how the budget was moving forward to better fund sexual violence services and got a follow up request from a member of the Brandeis staff who works in conduct-related issues who wished to discuss how to advance student advocacy efforts on campus.

Katarina

My interaction with Rep. Whelan taught me a lot about interacting with Massachusetts Republican legislators. A difference that I did not anticipate between Whelan and the Democratic legislators involved the exact reasons they supported the bill. Most of the legislators I spoke to were enthusiastic about the requirement for a sexual assault crisis center, so I led with that requirement when explaining the bill. Rep. Whelan didn’t care for that requirement, but what he said was the “sticking point” regarding this bill was the fact that it required colleges to partner with local sexual assault resources. He said that the requirement for a third-party observer in the form of the off-campus resources would ensure that schools take care of assault survivors. This taught me to focus on different elements of the same bill when speaking with liberal versus conservative legislators. Large bills like H.632 have elements that fit members of either party, and it’s important to focus on elements of the bill that fit the ideas of the legislator to whom you are speaking.

■ Update

The bill became part of a new draft, S.2081. On June 8, S.2081 was reported favorably by the Joint Committee on Higher Education and referred to the Committee on Senate Ways and Means. On July 24, S.2081 was reported favorably by the Committee on Senate Ways and Means.

For more information

View the Bill:
malegislature.gov/Bills/190/H632
malegislature.gov/Bills/190/S2081

College Democrats of Massachusetts – Women’s Caucus:
macollegedems.org/womens