

The Times

“Reporting of sex offenses improves at TCNJ”

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By KEVIN SHEA

Four years ago, The College of New Jersey was fined by a federal agency for covering up the number of crimes, including sex assaults, occurring on its campus.

Now, statistics show the school is reporting more forcible sex offenses than many other colleges in New Jersey, including some far larger institutions.

In 2004, for example, there were 17 incidents reported at the school of 5,900 undergraduates - 3,500 of them women - up from the nine offenses reported in 2003 and two in 2002.

College officials say the spike in sex offenses does not mean there is a crime wave at a school that has been building a reputation as academically exclusive.

Rather, they say, it is a result of a more aggressive safety and reporting program that has made the campus safer for the thousands of young women who study and live there.

Underlying the statistics is the sad fact that sex assaults are more common on college campuses than the numbers show - more than many institutions care to admit - said Catherine Bath, executive director of Security on Campus, a nonprofit campus watchdog organization.

"Rape is a silent epidemic on our campuses," Bath said. "It's a sweep-it-under-the-rug mindset."

Indeed, some studies show that 3 to 5 percent of college women will be sexually victimized during their college years, said Matt Golden, a spokesman for TCNJ.

One federal justice report issued in 2000, which surveyed 4,400 college women, estimated that a college with 10,000 female students could experience 350 rapes a school year.

At the area's two other four-year institutions, Princeton and Rider universities, forcible sex offenses were lower than TCNJ's during the same reporting period.

Princeton University, which has about 4,700 undergraduates - 2,200 of them women - reported three last year, down from 11 in 2003 and eight in 2002. Rider University, with 3,600 undergraduates - 2,100 women - reported three forcible sex offenses in 2004 and 2003, and two in 2002.

By comparison, Rutgers' New Brunswick campus, where 26,800 undergraduates study, about half of them women, reported 19 forcible sex offenses in 2004. And Montclair State University, the state's second-largest public college with 11,800 undergraduates, 61 percent women, reported eight forcible sex offenses last year.

Higher-education institutions are required by federal law to report a variety of criminal offenses and other crime totals to the U.S. Education Department. The law, passed in 1990 and updated in 1998, is called the Clery Act, after Jeanne Clery, the daughter of Security on Campus founders Connie and Howard Clery. She was raped and murdered at Lehigh University in 1986.

The act requires colleges that receive federal aid to report and publish three years' worth of crime statistics. The numbers are compiled from complaints reported not only to campus police but to any authority, such as a health or counseling center or a faculty member.

Bath is skeptical of colleges that report few crimes and praised TCNJ's reporting efforts. "Lower numbers should give parents pause, and a high number, like TCNJ, should be a welcome (sign) that women are given options," Bath said.

Security on Campus had harsh words for TCNJ in 2001 when the college was fined by the U.S. Department of Education for underreporting crime numbers, including sex assaults, in the late 1990s.

In 2002, TCNJ kicked off a plan to bolster its reporting and its support of victimized women with a sexual assault task force created by college President R. Barbara Gitenstein.

Gitenstein warned the campus community that the numbers would likely go up, Golden said. Then the college set out to revamp its approach to meeting women's needs, from awareness campaigns to how the college reacts after a reported rape.

In 2003, the effort led to the awarding of a federal grant from the Justice department's Office on Violence Against Women to fund the campus' new Office of Anti-Violence Initiatives.

Now, Bath says, TCNJ is at the forefront of a trend.

"They have broken the culture of rape on their campus," Bath said.

TCNJ sociology professor Howard Robboy, Ph.D., who tipped off federal officials and Security on Campus in 2000 about artificially low TCNJ numbers, said he is impressed. "They have really turned things around," Robboy said.

"We don't feel that we're better or worse than any other school," Golden said. "Our interest is in real student safety, not artificially low numbers that paint an inaccurate picture. . . . Our students can only be truly safe if they are adequately educated.

"Our goal is to assure none of those barriers to reporting exist on this campus. We want the truth and we want to keep our students safe," he said.

Bath said comparing the Trenton-area universities is interesting.

She said, generally speaking, low single-digit sex assault numbers are a "red flag, to be honest."

Anthony Campbell, associate vice president and dean of students at Rider, said the university is in full compliance with the Clery Act.

"We report everything that's reported to us," Campbell said.

Campbell said Rider has a variety of health, counseling and student life offices where a woman can report a sexual assault, including the security department, and noted that a woman, Vicki Weaver, runs the department of safety and security.

"We go out of our way to make it easy for students to report," Campbell said.

At Princeton, the university's public safety department notes on its crime statistics that their sexual assault numbers can include incidents reported to their SHARE office, Sexual Harassment/Assault Advising Resources and Education.

On any campus, that type of office "is where you'll get your most reporting of sex assaults," said Duncan Harrison, the university's assistant public safety director.

Harrison said there is one basic tenet in campus crime reporting: "You can't get in trouble for overreporting, but you can for underreporting."

The 2000 Justice Department study, *The Sexual Victimization of College Women*, reports that fewer than 5 percent of attempted and completed rapes are reported to police. But that in two-thirds of rape incidents, the victim did tell another person of the incident.

Bath, of Security on Campus, believes that just one person in the right position can make a difference for women at the average college campus.

And at TCNJ, Golden said, that person is Jackie Deitch-Stackhouse, the Office of Anti-Violence Initiatives coordinator, who was hired last summer.

"The ultimate goal is to create an environment on this campus so that (victims) can have access to the resources and abusers can be held accountable," said Deitch-Stackhouse.

Sexual assault victims can take their case as far as they want, from talking to calling the police or prosecutor's office, Deitch-Stackhouse said, and she personally sees to it and tracks the cases. "The most important thing is that they get healthy and safe," she said.

Sexual assault victims have a lot of blame issues, she said. "We're doing everything we can to avoid that outcome. We're looking to empower our victims and survivors on this campus."