

Improve campus sex-assault policies

By Ronja Steinbach

On Sept. 29, 2020, I received an email from the University of Hawaii-Manoa (UHM) Department of Public Safety informing me of a sexual assault on campus. The assault took place at a residence hall across from where I lived during my freshman year.

What happened was not an isolated incident. It is the tip of a very large, very underreported iceberg. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Office on Women's Health, a staggering 20% of female college students will experience sexual assault. I wish that I was more surprised by the pervasiveness of sexual assault, but it is a reality that too many of us have accepted. I am currently a rising junior and I am the co-president of the American Association of University Women at UHM club and I want to change those statistics.

In colleges, sexual assault and harassment falls under Title IX, a federal law that prohibits discrimination based on gender. On June 23, 2021, we will be celebrating the 49th anniversary of this law, which was part of the Educational Amendments of 1972. It was principally authored and sponsored by Patsy Mink, the first Asian-American congresswoman, who was born in Hawaii.

As we approach the anniversary and the 2022 legislative session, it is important that we critically examine its efficacy and advocate for necessary changes in its implementation,

especially at the University of Hawaii.

Title IX protections for sexual assault victims have long been inadequate. Cases are largely underreported and campus climate surveys from the UH system show alarming trends; from 2017 to 2019, there were statistically significant increases in the incidences of sexual harassment (5.7% to 8%) and dating and domestic violence (10.6% to 12.1%).

Furthermore, changes implemented by the U.S. Department of Education under Betsy DeVos and the former Trump administration undermined the objectives of the law with new rules that favored the perpetrators. One of the most problematic changes allows for the cross-examination of the person reporting the sexual assault. Many students fear reporting incidences and the prospect of being cross-examined further deters survivors from coming forward.

Other rules and guidelines continue to be problematic. One semester is around four months long, yet a case that is brought to the Title IX office has up to 90 days — around three months — to be investigated. A survivor may have a sexual assault case looming over them for nearly an entire semester. Academic performance may decline so the student may experience

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the setback of an entire semester. There is no question, 90 days is too long. An investigation should be thorough, but considering the severity of the situation, it should be completed, in full, in a timeframe that protects the survivor's access to their education.

During freshman orientation, we are briefly introduced to Title IX procedures and available campus resources. That is not enough. Most students do not remember or feel that it is relevant to them. As an employee for UH, I have also completed the

annual sexual assault training for the workplace. It is not effective.

Sexual assault awareness curriculum and training should be mandated for everyone in the UH system. It should be reviewed and designed in collaboration with students, so that it is relevant, and stops being viewed as an inconvenient but necessary task. Overviews of UH policies and information about campus resources should also be provided more frequently.

Awareness and support for better Title IX guidelines and a rollback of the toxic attempt by the previous administration to weaken its protections is imperative. We need to continue the fight to change the rape culture in which we live by having appropriate policies in place.