Changes to sexual misconduct policy

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During the 2008-2009 school year, student frustration with the sexual misconduct policy was brought to the attention of faculty and staff through a student email campaign, the Campus Climate Assessment, a community workshop and report to the Dean of Students and individual reports of hurtful experiences. The message expressed through these divergent modes was consistent and clear: significant refinement and change to the sexual misconduct process was necessary.

In response to these concerns a committee was formed in September 2009 to review the current policy and draft potential strategies. After meeting weekly to review the history of sexual misconduct at Carleton, comparing the policy to that of similar institutions and evaluating current statistics and student reflections on the process, the Committee presented a report of recommendations to the College Council in March of 2010. The College Council has now approved the Committee’s suggestions and are awaiting the approval of funding for a fifth year intern who would be designated to concentrate on implementing the recommended changes.

The central issues the Council sought to improve include the transparency of the process, consolidation of the resources offered through the school, an increased effort towards prevention through education and enhanced support for students during the process. Associate Dean of Students Julie Thornton explained that on top of the enormous emotional and psychological burden of making the choice to report an assault, students repeatedly report difficulties simply locating directions to begin the process.

For example, information regarding sexual misconduct can be found in various forms in several different pages of the Carleton website including that of the Wellness Center, the Gender and Sexuality Center and the Associate Dean of Students. In order to remedy such inconsistency, the Committee suggests a thorough consolidation of information into one easily accessible document and a redefinition of terms to clarify students’ roles and responsibilities.

However, once the complaint process begins, student reviews reveal that much confusion remains. In light of this concern the Committee has proposed creating a pool of trained faculty that will advise and support students. Additionally, the Committee recommended the designation of an individual adviser to be assigned to each student interested in filing a complaint. The current process makes students place a complaint with several different individuals who may not necessarily have the training to handle their specific issue. This shift requires removing associate deans from their previous role in the investigation process and allows them to focus all their attention on advocating for students.
With the dean of students removed from the role of investigator, the refined policy will include an individual investigator who will submit a report of their findings to a trained community board responsible for the initial decision.

Furthermore, the appeal process, which has previously prolonged the original adjudication in the majority of cases, will be more specifically defined. Ideally, this shift will avoid groundless retrials based on the same information.

Finally, although “Not On Our Campus,” an New Student Week (NSW) event that addresses sexual misconduct, does provide some preventive education, the Committee determined that further education beyond NSW is a critical step in reducing sexual misconduct on campus.

In general these changes do not amount to a significant shift in Carleton’s policy on sexual misconduct but instead seek to rectify the complaint process itself. Despite the pending approval of a fifth year intern the refined process is set to go into effect next September.