

Campus Happenings

Hobart and William Smith: A Safe Place?

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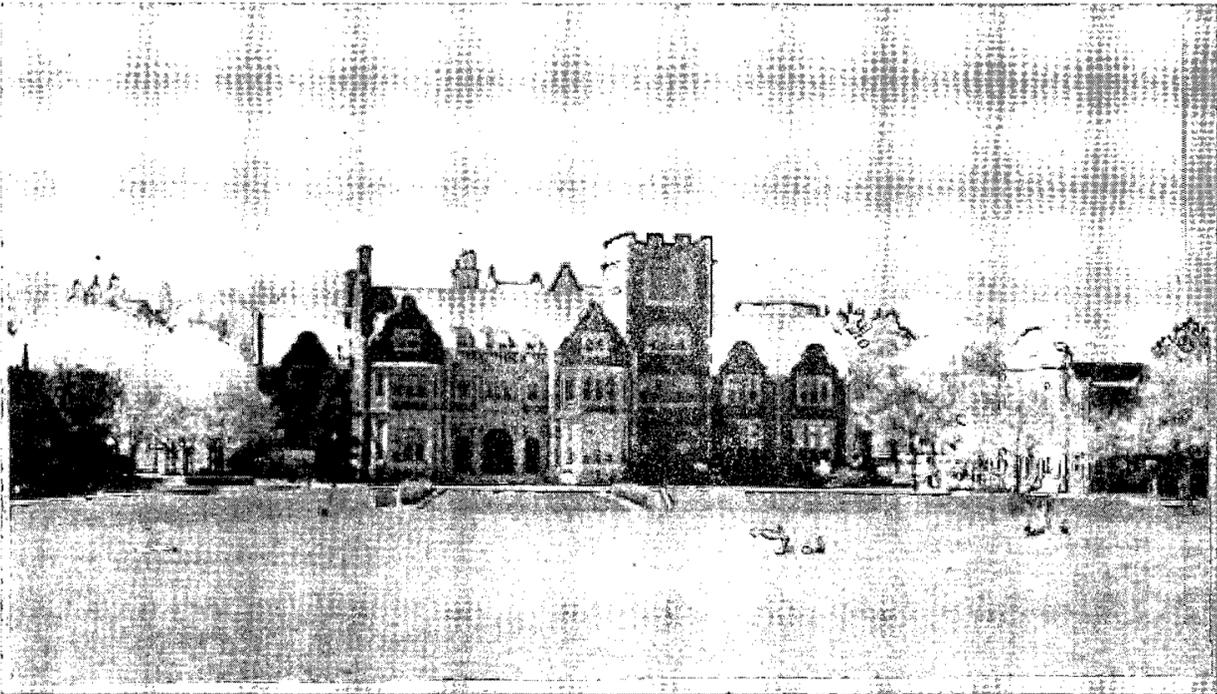


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Choosing a college is a difficult decision for any person. Everyone is looking for a college that feels like a home away from home. A place that they will feel safe for the next four years of their lives.

Andrea Proctor was 18 years old when she first arrived on campus at Knox College in Sept. 2010. "I was accepted at 7 colleges, applied to 8 colleges, researched 20 colleges carefully, visited 15 of them and then chose Knox," said Proctor. "I did not choose Knox lightly."

Proctor was initially very happy with her choice in colleges, but that all changed during her first round of final exams.

It all began with the final exam for Math 101. Proctor was thrilled to be finally done with her first trimester in December. During the exam she noticed two sophomore students whispering to one another, using their notes and looking information up online. After the exam was over she approached the professor and told her what she saw. She composed an anonymous statement that the professor then took to the Honor Board.

"The weekend after the hearing concluded, I was present at the same campus event as those two girls," said Proctor. "I didn't know they were also there until they came up to me, screamed in my face, and pushed and shoved me against the wall that I was near. Throughout the next thirty minutes, my group of friends and I were physically assaulted five more times by them doing the same action."

About a month later the two students approached Proctor again. "They tried to start a conversation by asking me questions to which I gave brief answers," said Proctor. "Both students made comments and statements to me such as, 'In the back of your mind, always be careful,' 'In the end, we will win,' 'Why would you mess with someone's life like that?,' 'Andrea Proctor, just know that we know' and 'Think about this when you're dead in a ditch.'"

Proctor determined that due to the circumstances she had experienced it would be best to withdraw from Knox College since she no longer felt safe there.

Proctor took the following semester off and spent that time looking at new colleges. She'd heard about Hobart & William Smith Colleges through Project Eye-to-Eye and decided to look into it more. She said she spent a lot of time reading about it, decided to visit, and ultimately fell in love with the campus.

In Jan. of 2012, Proctor made the decision to accept a spot in Hobart & William Smith Colleges' Class of 2015.

Proctor said that everyone she met at HWS seemed so nice, and the professors were so involved in the student's lives and were very understanding. She lauds the Center for Teaching & Learning, the shuttle system, the Center for Counseling & Student Wellness and Campus Safety as some of the greatest resources on the campus that helped to make her feel much safer there than at Knox.

HWS became her safe haven and her home. A place far removed from the violence and distress she had experienced at Knox College.

Many students like Proctor feel like HWS is their safe place as well, and were then horrified when in May 2014, the U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights launched an investigation into higher education institutions that had potentially violated federal law over the handling of sexual violence and harassment complaints. 55 higher education institutions were implicated, including HWS, according to the U.S. Department of Education.

The New York Times article about HWS that was posted in July 2014, closely followed the

announcement of the investigation. The article detailed how the colleges handled one student's sexual assault complaint, and did not paint a positive image of what life was like at HWS.

The bottom line was that many students began to feel unsafe on a campus that had previously felt like home to them.

Many students, faculty and alums responded to the article demanding change from the colleges' president, Mark Gearan, and the Senior Staff at HWS. The Coalition of Concerned Students was formed in May 2014, with the goal, "to change institutional policies regarding sexual assault, to change campus culture and to fight for more administrative transparency," according to the group's official Facebook page.

The student group created a petition on change.org that asked President Gearan and the HWS Senior Staff to "take action to prevent further mismanagement of campus assault cases." As of December 2014, the petition has received support from 119,022 people.

The big question then is; has anything really changed regarding student's safety at Hobart & William Smith Colleges?

In comparison to last year's visitors from July to Sept., there was a 2% decrease in visits to HWS by women, and a 2% increase in visits by men, said President Gearan, according to the meeting minutes from the Oct. faculty meeting at HWS.

From July to Dec. 2014 it was reported that visits to HWS were down by 23-24%, according to Vice President for Enrollment & Dean of Admissions, Robert Murphy. The dip in visits has then resulted in a decrease in this year's applications as well.

"We're off 16% in applications," said Murphy. While he acknowledged that the reduction in visits was a direct result of the New York Times article at first, he also attributed some of the reduction to the switch from paper files to computer files in the Office of Admissions.

Murphy said that he would get calls from parents initially after the article was published who would tell him they would never let their children attend HWS, but the vast majority were calling to ask what the colleges were doing on campus to address the issue of their student's safety.

Murphy said he was very empathetic to the parents as he is a father himself. He then talked about the increase in security on campus, the inside out review of the judicial processes and the emphasis on educating incoming students about the issues of security during orientation.

President Gearan has also noted the creation of a Title IX office at the colleges, and the establishment of a hotline with Safe Harbors, a local organization assisting those who have been violated sexually.

"Those are things that you'd expect us to do," said Murphy. "Perhaps the most important thing that I told them, what is really going to go to the heart of this issue here, and across higher ed

and across America, is developing a whole culture of respect. In there lies, in my opinion, the answer."

Overall Murphy does believe that HWS is a safe campus for students. "From my experience walking around the campus, and talking to hundreds, and hundreds and hundreds of students, I believe we do a good job. Is it perfect? I don't think any place is going to be perfect."

Lucia Cardone '16, was also able to speak extensively about the progress the colleges have made regarding the safety of campus. Cardone is a founding member of the Coalition of Concerned Students, an executive board member for William Smith Congress, a member of the Sexual Violence Task Force and she is also a member of Women's Collective (HWS's feminist group).

Cardone believes that one of the most important changes regarding safety at the colleges is through the implementation of Bystander Intervention Training.

"HWS is currently holding Bystander Intervention Training for specific pockets of individuals on campus such as first year students, fraternity members and varsity athletes," said Cardone. "At the moment this training is being viewed as extra-curricular. My specific recommendations for the implementation of this program on the HWS campus would be to instead include this training as a core part of the curriculum."

"In order to create and maintain cultural change there needs to be systems in place at the institutional level enforcing certain norms, teaching what is and is not acceptable behavior on our college campuses," said Cardone.

The harsh reality is that in one year 300,000 college women will experience rape, according to RAINN (Rape, Abuse, & Incest National Network). The presence of a bystander makes a completed rape 44% less likely, which is why Cardone views Bystander Intervention Training as critical for all college campuses.

Students come from all over the world to attend HWS, and many students like Andrea Proctor were looking for a home away from home. In order for college to feel like a home it should be a safe place. Incidents like the one Proctor experienced at Knox College and the one detailed in the New York Times article don't foster that state of mind for students. That is why the students have demanded change at HWS.

Change has been happening slowly but surely within the HWS community these past few months. Students, alumni, faculty and administrators alike are all putting in an extensive amount of effort in order to improve the safety of the colleges' for the present and future students.

Hobart & William Smith Colleges has been extensively under the microscope of the entire country throughout the past year. While the press wasn't initially positive and the events themselves are horrifying, many people, including Murphy, believe that some good has come of it and that there is hope for the future.

"I think it's important to know that we are going to have a program here as a result of that article, we'll always have a result of that article, but as a result of that article we'll probably have one of the best safety programs, proactive programs, in the world here."

Title IX staff gather in their office in the Seneca Room Annex on South Main Street



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