Davidson College closes three rape cases

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Davidson College campus police have closed their investigations into three recently reported rapes on campus, saying the women who reported the assaults declined to pursue criminal complaints.

At the Observer’s request, the college released its single-page investigation reports of the incidents this week. Each of the second-degree rape cases was closed because the women declined to prosecute, the reports state.

College spokeswoman Cat Serrin Nie Kro said Thursday she had no reason to believe the reports by the women were false. She said campus police can always reopen the cases if the women at some point decide to pursue the charges.

Campus Police Chief Todd Sigler declined to say why the women decided not to pursue the charges in court. Generally, he said, and based on his three decades in law enforcement, victims in part opt out because of the long time it takes to get a conviction and because going to court makes the victims and their cases public.

“I’m going to be very cognizant of the desires of the victims and what they want,” Sigler said, adding that campus officials can still connect them to various support services.

“We try to be as accommodating to the victims as possible,” Sigler said.
In late September, the college issued two email warnings that two female students had reported being sexually assaulted in separate, unrelated incidents on campus. The women knew their assailants.

The college issued a third email alert on Oct. 7 that another female student reported being sexually assaulted in the early morning of Oct. 5 by someone she knew.

In the alerts, Davidson College said: “When we talk about sexual assault, it is important to be clear that the responsibility for the assault lies with the perpetrator.” The college recommended several ways to minimize vulnerability, including traveling with friends and calling campus police.

The college issued the alerts as required by the federal Clery Act, which mandates a “timely warning” when a crime has been reported and the nature of the reported crime “creates a possible serious or continuing threat to the campus community.”

Police have received no other sexual-assault reports from students since the three this fall, Sigler said.

The incident reports don’t name those involved in the cases, and Niekro declined to release the names of the women who said they were assaulted. She cited a law that allows a campus police agency to temporarily withhold the names and said it’s “standard practice not to release names of victims of sex assault.”

“The statute allows us to withhold the information for as long the circumstances that justifying withholding it exist,” Niekro said in an earlier email to the Observer. “That is a case-by-case determination, and I’m afraid we can’t predict when that will be.”

Davidson’s calls for action

Campus sexual assaults have been a nationwide issue, with calls for better investigations and action against perpetrators.

In May, about 200 people marched at Davidson College to show solidarity for on-campus victims of sexual violence. Hundreds more signed an online petition calling on the college to create a task force this year to change Davidson’s sexual misconduct policy.

The action followed the online publication of a 20-year-old Davidson student’s account of how the college failed her in a sexual misconduct case, and the release of a White House
report that said colleges and universities must step up their handling of a crisis in which 1 of every 5 women is sexually assaulted in college.

The task force is hosting multiple forums for feedback about the policy. The college also recently launched a bystander education and training program to heighten awareness, challenge social norms and provide skills to intervene effectively.

Anne Hedgepeth, a 2007 Davidson College graduate, addresses the issue of campus sexual assaults as government relations manager for the American Association of University Women in Washington, D.C.

Speaking generally about the issue, Hedgepeth said it’s important that students know they have other options under the law if they don’t want to pursue their cases in court.

By law, schools must provide support and accommodations to the students, including anything from adjusting their class schedules to finding other housing for them, she said. A student can also request an on-campus hearing, she said.

“It’s important that we create an environment for people to come forward,” she said.

It’s also important “to follow the path the survivor wants to pursue,” Hedgepeth said. “I do want to stress the importance of that.”

No prosecutor in America is likely to pursue a sexual assault case without the victim’s cooperation, even if police obtain incriminating evidence, said Monika Johnson-Hostler, executive director of the Raleigh-based North Carolina Coalition Against Sexual Assault.

That won’t change, she said, “until society recognizes that the rape victim isn’t a bad person.”

The victim, she said, doesn’t want the stigma.

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