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## SMC campus-wide walkout draws attention to sexual assault

By Vera Kochan



"SMC Survivors" holds campus walkout Oct. 28  
 Photo Vera Kochan

Last May, the anonymous group called "SMC Survivors" posted flyers throughout the Saint Mary's College campus in order to bring awareness to the school's sexual assault issues and lack of satisfaction for victims. On Oct. 28 the group staged a campus-wide walkout with approximately 200-300 students participating.

Still feeling that their grievances are not satisfactorily dealt with by the Title IX office and school officials, a rally was held on the Chapel Lawn where both event organizers and assault victims spoke to the assembled crowd.

Students were asked to sign a large purple banner that read: "One Message for the Campus Community" (to be posted at the Title IX office). Small purple flags were available for participants to place on the lawn in a show of solidarity. Purple is the color for domestic violence awareness. Pamphlets detailing support with regards to

mental health for survivors were also offered.

Days before the walkout, SMC's President Richard Plumb issued an Oct. 25 Title IX update and progress report listing the school's "recent developments and ongoing efforts." Pointing out that last spring several commitments were made in response to the group's demands, Plumb noted, "In the coming weeks, a daily crime log will be published on the Public Safety website in accordance with the Clery Act; we've enhanced communications with those involved in incidents by following up on a regular and consistent basis to answer questions and provide support; we continue to carefully review our current workflows for all incident-related processes and procedures, and will publish those updated workflows soon; we've hired an interim Title IX deputy coordinator and will share more in the coming weeks regarding ongoing efforts to ensure appropriate staffing and bolster support for this critical area; and we developed and implemented mandatory sexual violence and sexual harassment prevention training for all students, faculty, and staff - on an ongoing basis."

While wearing T-shirts with slogans such as "Feel My Rage," organizers gave impassioned speeches expressing their frustration with SMC's lack of duty and follow-through for the victims of on-campus sexual assault. One of the organizers, who doesn't want her name printed, reported an assault to campus authorities in the fall of 2021. The case was closed a year after the incident happened. Her assailant was found "unresponsible" through the SMC Title IX process. She is appealing the judgment. "There are a lot of loopholes in the system," she said. In the meantime, the man involved in the incident remains on campus.

Plumb arrived at the event, thanking everyone for showing up and, according to student advocate Lauren Kearney, let the crowd know that their voices were being heard. He was asked if he understood how big of an impact sexual assault has on an individual and if he'd ever personally experienced it. He replied in the negative. However, Plumb shared that a family member has had an experience. He left the group after answering a few more questions.

Kearney, who is a member of SCAAR (Student Coalition Against Abuse and Rape), was also assaulted on campus by someone who was never found culpable of the crime. He eventually moved to Toronto, Canada where he was arrested for assaulting another woman.

Another student who identifies as they/them was assaulted twice, explaining how difficult it has been emotionally. "We can only take so much! It keeps getting referred to the Title IX office, but they don't do anything. It's scary to tell someone what happened."

Sexual assault on campus, while usually occurring to women has had its small share of male victims. Encouraged to come up before the crowd and speak, there were moments of painful silence as victims summoned up the courage to tell a large group of strangers their most painful and private secret. One by one, through tears and anger, several students said this was the first time they'd ever spoken openly about their experience. They all expressed anger that not enough was being done on campus to protect them, let alone finding satisfaction and follow-through.

After the walkout, SMC issued the following statement: "Care for one another is a foundational component of the Lasallian core principals that guide the Saint Mary's experience. By proactively taking the initiative to

raise awareness around important issues such as the prevention of sexual assault, our students are practicing these values. At the same time, this national issue continues to be one that we must work on collaboratively, and we all have a responsibility as a campus to help create a culture of care and safety. We have taken specific steps forward on this issue [outlined in Plumb's Oct. 25 communication], and we are also mindful of the fact that these issues will take continued collaboration, so we look forward to continuing that work together as we seek to take additional steps forward in partnership with our entire campus community."

For additional information about "SMC Survivors" contact: [SMCSURVIVORS@gmail.com](mailto:SMCSURVIVORS@gmail.com).

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[back](#)

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