

Committee on Higher Education and Employment Advancement

S.B. 19: An Act Concerning Sexual Misconduct on College Campuses

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The Connecticut Women's Education and Legal Fund (CWEALF) is a statewide, nonprofit organization that advocates for and empowers women and girls in Connecticut, especially those who are underserved or marginalized. For forty-six years, CWEALF has been a leading advocate of policy solutions that enhance women's economic security and combat discrimination.

CWEALF encourages the Committee to support Senate Bill No. 19: *An Act Concerning Sexual Misconduct on College Campuses*, which will increase protections for victims of sexual assault, stalking, and intimate partner violence on college campuses and collect data on the climate of campus sexual violence policies. Senate Bill No. 19 is imperative to fortify the rights of all university and college students and employees, especially when considering the federal government's recent weakening of Title IX protections.

Many students who wish to report sexual assault, stalking, or intimate partner violence may not report their experience if it happened while the student violated a different policy of the institution. Students may fear penalization for their own policy violation if they choose to report. For example, many instances of violence may occur while a student is drinking while underage. Such students may feel apprehension about reporting violence against them if they fear disciplinary action for their drinking.

Senate Bill No. 19 grants such students amnesty for their violations of the institution's policy if they choose to report an instance of sexual assault, stalking, or intimate partner violence. This provision has three larger benefits for students and the community of the institution. First, amnesty will open up the avenue of reporting the incident for students who would otherwise be deterred from reporting. This gives the student another option to seek accountability from a perpetrator, that would have been curtailed if the student feared repercussions for their own violation. Second, amnesty encourages students to come forward and report sexual assault, stalking, or intimate partner violence because it eliminates the risk of disciplinary action against themselves. Third, amnesty sends a powerful message against victim blaming and demonstrates that a person impacted by sexual assault, stalking, or intimate partner violence is never at fault for the acts of a perpetrator.

Senate Bill No. 19 also establishes a Council on Sexual Misconduct Climate Survey to study the climate on college campuses surrounding sexual assault, stalking, and intimate partner violence. This task force of experts from both public and private institutions and disciplines

will write a survey that requires all institutions of higher education in Connecticut to assess student awareness of institutional policies, the institution's response to reports, and student's perception of safety on campus. This data, to be mandated as public information, will allow the institution as well as the general public to evaluate the procedures and responses of the institution in relation to sexual assault, stalking, and intimate partner violence. Transparency of this information assures the integrity of Connecticut's institutions of higher education, upholds the law, and protects students who experience sexual assault, stalking, or intimate partner violence.

Title IX alone cannot safeguard students' and employee's rights on college campuses with regards to sexual misconduct. Proposed changes by Education Secretary Betsy DeVos may potentially weaken protections afforded to survivors, bolster rights of accused students, and reduce liability of higher education institutions. These changes deny the nearly 12 percent of students who experience sexual violence on campus¹ equal access to their institution's education and procedures. Connecticut must step in to preserve the rights of students who experience sexual misconduct.

CWEALF urges the Committee to support Senate Bill No. 19: *An Act Concerning Sexual Misconduct on College Campuses*. Lawmakers must ensure that the rights of Connecticut residents who experience sexual assault, stalking, or intimate partner violence on college campuses are uncompromised by weakened federal protections and secure the ability of students to have their voices heard.

¹ Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network, *Campus Sexual Violence: Statistics* (Accessed Feb. 10, 2020) <https://www.rainn.org/statistics/campus-sexual-violence>.