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# Occidental College probe: School agrees to reforms in handling sexual misconduct complaints



Attorney Gloria Allred, seated, left, with Occidental College professor Caroline Heldman and backed by Occidental students and others when they announced the April 2013 filing of a federal civil rights complaint over the college's handling of sexual assault allegations. (Irfan Khan / Los Angeles Times)

By **Teresa Watanabe**

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**O**ccidental College failed to address some sexual misconduct complaints in a timely manner but otherwise did not violate federal civil rights laws and has agreed to reforms, U.S. education officials announced Thursday.

The long-awaited findings by the U.S. Department of Education's civil rights office came three years after 50 then-students and faculty members filed federal complaints that administrators at the Eagle Rock liberal arts school had fostered a hostile environment for victims of sexual assault.

The complaints alleged that administrators discouraged victims from reporting sexual assault, failed to inform them of their rights or process their complaints promptly and imposed inadequate sanctions against known

assailants. They also charged Occidental with retaliating against whistle-blowers, conducting biased investigations with interrogations that traumatized victims and “woefully inadequate” education and prevention efforts.

The complaints drew national attention when they were announced in 2013 at a high-profile news conference with several of the victims and prominent women’s rights attorney Gloria Allred.

Occidental voluntarily resolved the investigation before it was completed, addressing concerns that arose in the course of the probe. For those issues they reviewed, federal officials said they found insufficient evidence of violations other than the college’s failure to promptly review several cases during the 2012-13 school year.

The federal office’s investigation “found a campus actively engaged in important work to satisfy Title IX responsibilities for all students,” said Catherine E. Lhamon, the Department of Education’s assistant secretary for civil rights. “Where we had concerns, Occidental leaders committed to taking appropriate steps to ensure student safety. I am grateful for Occidental’s responsiveness during the course of the investigation, as well as its commitment to its students.”

Lhamon said investigators did find some problems. College administrators discouraged students from speaking up about their experiences with sexual violence, she said. Officials were also concerned that sexual assault was being under-reported.

Lhamon said the college’s revamped sexual misconduct policy fully complies with Title IX, which bars sexual discrimination on campuses that receive federal funding.

In the resolution of the probe, Occidental pledged to:

- Develop and provide mandatory annual training for staff and faculty on the grievance process and on retaliation.
- Provide the civil rights office with three years of complaints to ensure that the college is providing a prompt and equitable process.
- Continue to conduct an annual survey regarding the campus climate toward sexual assault.

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