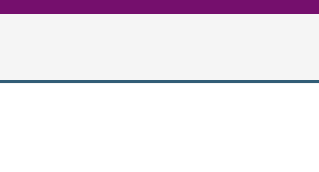


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NEWS

Air Force Officials Ignored Warnings About Sexual Assaults at Academy for a Decade, Report Says

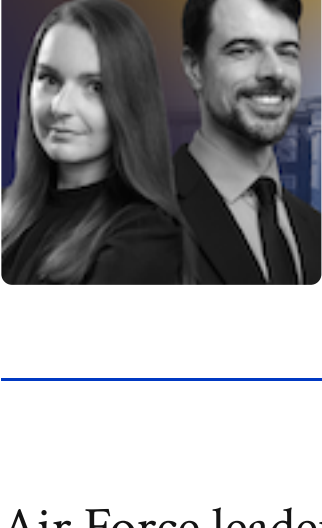
By Alice Gornstyn

September 23, 2003

Top U.S. Air Force officials repeatedly ignored indications of a growing problem of sexual assaults at the Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs over the past decade, according to a report released on Monday by a civilian panel led by Tillie K. Fowler, a Florida Republican and former member of the U.S. House of Representatives.

In the sharply critical report, the commission faulted the Air Force for “a chasm of leadership” that “helped create an environment in which sexual assault became a part of life at the Academy.” According to the report, the Air Force had previously received warnings about the academy’s procedures for handling sexual assaults from its own Office of Special Investigations and the Air Force surgeon general, as well as from the Senate Armed Services Committee.

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Air Force leaders have known about “serious sexual misconduct problems” at the academy since at least 1993, the report says, but they failed to conduct investigations or make long-range plans to deal with the issue.

The civilian commission, formally known as the Panel to Review Sexual Misconduct Allegations at the U.S. Air Force Academy, was created by Congress to investigate accusations raised by female cadets. Its seven members were chosen by the secretary of defense, Donald H. Rumsfeld.

The panel’s findings challenge the validity of an internal report released by the Air Force in June, which found “no systemic acceptance of sexual assault at the Academy” or “institutional avoidance of responsibility.”

“The Panel cannot agree with that conclusion based on the substantial amount of information regarding the sexual assaults and the Academy’s institutional culture available to leaders at the Academy, Air Force Headquarters and the Office of the Air Force General Counsel,” the civilian report says.

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Members of the panel believe that Mary L. Walker, the Air Force general counsel who prepared the internal report, failed to hold the Air Force accountable for sexual misconduct at the academy in an attempt “to shield the Air Force Headquarters from public criticism,” according to the report.

The panel did praise an initiative unveiled by Air Force officials last March called the “Agenda for Change,” which is partly intended to improve the “gender climate” at the academy through new courses in character development, more rigorous procedures in selecting cadet leaders, and greater security at dormitories, among other measures. But the panel also concluded that the plan “does not go far enough” in effecting lasting change at the academy and that further steps should be taken to improve the institution’s “gender climate.”

No one at the Pentagon or the academy would comment on Monday about the “chasm of leadership” alleged by the panel, but Air Force officials are “looking forward” to reviewing the commission’s recommendations, according to a prepared statement.

Secretary Rumsfeld is also reviewing the commission’s findings. It is unclear when he will speak about the issue publicly, a spokeswoman said. “He needs time to review and digest it,” she said.

The civilian panel itself came under fire early in the summer, after Anita K. Blair, a deputy assistant secretary of the Navy and founder of the conservative Independent Women’s Forum, was appointed as its director. Ms. Blair was criticized by feminists for her opposition to the admittance of women to the Virginia Military Institute in 1997. She later resigned from her post with the panel. Activists also criticized the appointment of Amy McCarthy, a graduate of the academy who once said that the allegations from female cadets were suspect because some engaged in “high-risk behavior.” Ms. McCarthy also later resigned from the panel.

Officials at the Department of Defense said that the panel had taken an even-handed approach to its investigation. A spokesman for the panel, Tom Alexander, agreed with that assessment. “Mrs. Fowler all along has stressed a thorough investigation, a fair look into the matter,” Mr. Alexander said.

Background articles from *The Chronicle*:

- [Quarter of Female Air Force Academy Cadets Say They Have Been Sexually Assaulted](#) (9/12/2003)
- [Senator Criticizes Air Force Academy for Handling of Sexual-Assault Cases](#) (7/11/2003)

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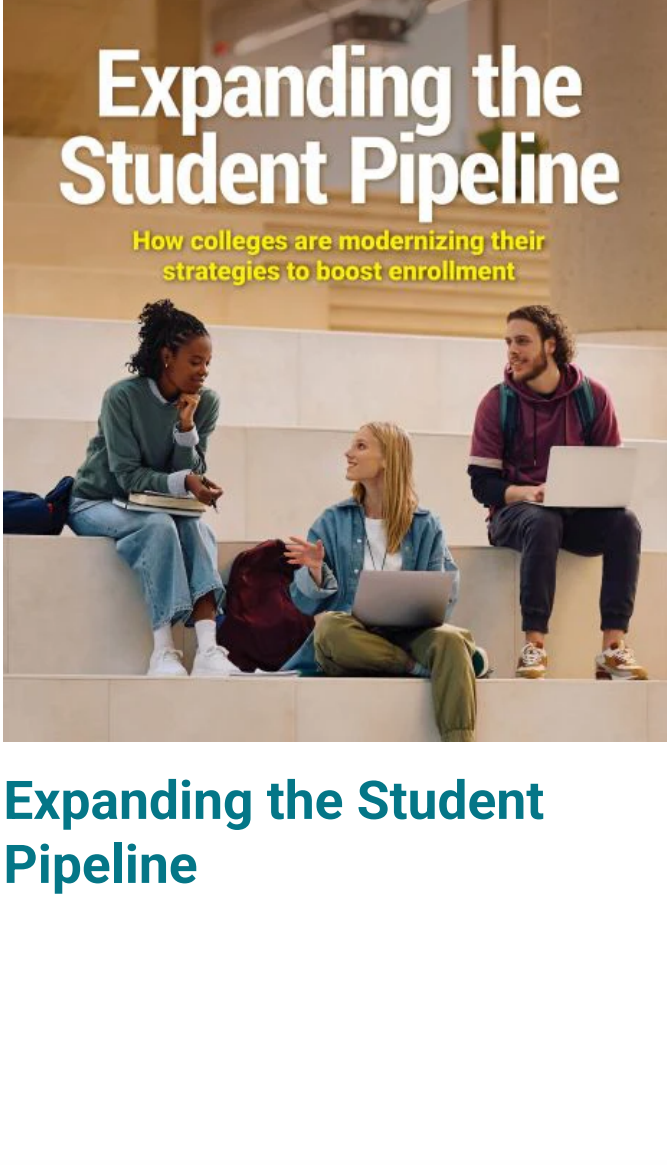
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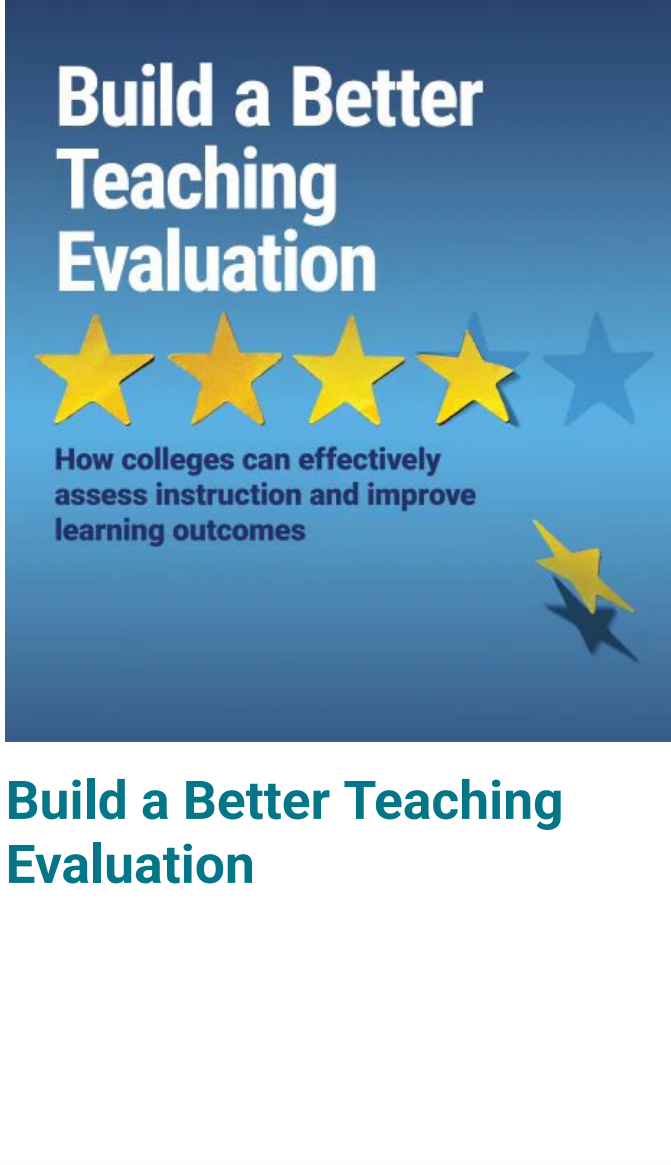
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