

# Hesston College students walk out in protest over handling of sexual violence

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**HESSTON**—A large group of Hesston College students walked out of a service Friday morning at Hesston Mennonite Church in a show of protest against the college's response to sexual violence on campus and to show support of victims who have been affected.

Michele Hershberger, Bible and ministry professor, had just welcomed students to ponder the birth of Jesus and to hope for peace of all people. Candles were being passed out to students when Alexia Coburn rose and invited students to join her in the walkout to the monument by the administration building.

"This is using our voice," Coburn said.

Once a group of about 80 students gathered outside, Kara Longnecker said, "Numerous students have been hurt by Hesston College administration and staff, and we will not tolerate it any longer."

Longnecker said it was time for action and read a list of 13 demands that previously were posted on the "Into Account" website.

Another student said she had walked among numerous friends who had been hurt by the college and that Hesston seemed to care more about the image of the college and donors, not the students.

Sammy Fatka, who said she was one of the victims, exclaimed that sexual violence was not a joke. She said she reported her account to the Title IX office and avoided going to the Office of Student Life because Vice President Deb Roth pushed her away. She said she was an advocate for anyone who dealt with sexual violence.

"I hope this walkout will bring change to Hesston and that we will finally be heard," she said.

Madison Higdon became emotional while reading her account of being a victim. She said multiple students were assaulted on the second floor of her residence hall last year. She said



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**Hesston College students walk out of Hesston Mennonite Church on Friday morning to protest the college's handling of sexual-assault reports and to show support for victims.**

she was assaulted four times in one semester in the living space. She said she told her account to Roth, and all she did was put a camera in the stairwell, which she said didn't work half of the time.

"We created this walkout because we are tired of not being a priority," she said.

Coburn said afterward that more students than what organizers expected participated in the walkout. She said she knew it took a lot of courage for Higdon to tell her story.

"She amazed me getting up there with the story that she had," she said.

Coburn said the idea for a walkout came from a professor after she and Higdon talked to him after Into Account posted a story about sexual violence at Hesston College in September. She said the group who planned the walkout decided she should announce the walkout because she could project her voice.

Larry Ruffin of Choctaw, Oklahoma, said those who participated showed their hearts in support of victims. He said love for one another could go a long way and hopefully make changes for the better.

"I think it's important that the college knows that our demands are not out of hatred but rather out of a love for students and what the college can be," he said. "I don't think we would have done this if we didn't think it could change."

Ruffin said the male students needed to listen and reflect on what was said at the protest and that men needed to hear the other gender's

side.

"Males are the only ones doing these sexual assault things," he said. "It makes us accountable, and hearing these things makes us realize the hurt it can cause people."

Hesston College announced in November that it was conducting a review of its Title IX policies after Into Account reported that it received numerous reports from students and employees about sexual violence on campus. The report, which was written by Erin Bergen, noted that a clear pattern emerged from the seven reports her organization received, and that pattern was Roth and other employees purposefully minimized survivors' experiences to keep them from going through the Title IX complaint process. Bergen said her organization received eight additional reports of sexual violence after it put out a call for other victims to come forward.

Stephanie Krehbiel, executive director of Into Account, said the students who organized the walkout came up with the list of demands on their own. She said her website posted those demands at the students' request so that they could have a link they could easily share with others.

"The students put up posters announcing their demands and the date and the time of the walkout all over the Hesston campus, but those posters were repeatedly taken down, even after they were replaced," Krehbiel said. "We're aware that at least some of the posters were removed by students on the [Hesston College] baseball

team, where several players are under investigation for sexual assault by both the college and the police."

The list of student demands are:

1. Hire a second campus counselor who is a woman.
2. Create a permanent nonmandated-reporting faculty advocate position.
3. Contract with Into Account as an outside advocacy organization where students can report.
4. Take down school founder/predator Daniel Bender's portrait.
5. Immediately hire a second full-time resident director to fill the vacant role, and meet with students about creating a third full-time resident director.
6. Remove the vice president of student life as an alternative to Title IX coordinator for making reports of sexual misconduct in the Title IX policy.
7. Make campus pastor Micah Hurst a mandated reporter and require he goes through additional training to the Title IX process and trauma-informed ways of interacting with students. Additionally, release the job description of campus pastor.
8. First-year experience must include a standardized (the same across all professors) intensive/comprehensive curriculum unit to educate all students on Title IX policies, sexual violence and bystander training.
9. Conduct a rigorous student climate survey every two years, starting in the spring semester of 2023.
10. Expand supportive measures to include: no contact orders enforced for both parties, leaves of absence granted for survivors, and having the option of attending classes online for survivors.
11. Never have a survivor be in a room with her perpetrator during the Title IX process or for an informal process.
12. Release the complete findings of the Cozen O'Connor review to the Hesston College community.
13. Fire Vice President of Student Life Deb Roth.