

ARIZONA

'Important step towards justice': UA student, faculty groups support campus safety report

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Arizona Republic

Published 5:02 a.m. MT Feb. 10, 2023

Just days after a faculty report calling out the University of Arizona for its response to the Oct. 5 shooting of a hydrology professor and to other incidents impacting safety on campus, faculty and student groups responded with their unanimous support.

Committee of Eleven, the oldest elected faculty governance group founded in 1947, and the faculty senate both voted unanimously to endorse the report earlier this week.

Thomas Meixner, professor and head of the UA Department of Hydrology and Atmospheric Sciences, was shot and killed by a student as Meixner walked from a class to his office on the Tucson campus on Oct. 5, 2022. Police later apprehended Murad Dervish, 46, on suspicion of Meixner's death. Dervish is a former student of Meixner, according to UA police.

The shooting occurred after almost a year of harassment and intimidating and threatening behavior not only geared toward Meixner but four other faculty members in the hydrology department, a female undergraduate student and a dean of students administrator, the report said.

The Associated Students of University of Arizona published a joint statement with the Hydrology and Atmospheric Sciences Student Association on Saturday, calling the report an “important step towards justice.”

“This interim report makes one fact clear: the murder of Dr. Meixner was not a random act of violence, but a result of glaring institutional failures to sufficiently protect the students, faculty, and staff of the Department of Hydrology and Atmospheric Sciences for nearly a year prior to the murder.”

The report, released on Feb. 1, titled “Oversight and Response Failure: Broken Trust,” investigated several instances of violent threats, sexual harassment and non-violent harassment, and the university’s responses to the situations. The report included testimony from victims, university offices, and law enforcement, among others.

The report found that the university failed to implement an effective risk management system to assess and communicate threats to safety on campus.

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Meixner and the others who were targeted persistently contacted the dean of students, the Office of General Counsel, which provides legal counsel for the university faculty and staff, and the University of Arizona Police Department to report the threats and harassment, the report said.

The offices failed to address the harassment, focusing instead on how the evidence could violate law or policy, the report alleged.

The subjects of the threats eventually took it upon themselves to protect their own lives by “purchasing a bullet-proof vest, relocating offices, temporarily changing residences, installing home security systems, possessing non-lethal weapons while on campus and keeping a loaded gun while at home,” the report said.

In an email to The Arizona Republic, the university said the report “reached sweeping conclusions” and that while the administrative and service units did meet briefly with the faculty committee about general processes, “they did not engage in detailed discussions about the events leading up to the October shooting as the report implies.”

At a faculty senate meeting on Monday, Faculty Committee Chair Leila Hudson who oversaw the committee that put together the report, said she was “beyond disappointed” at the university’s response to the report.

At the meeting, Hudson said her disappointment stemmed from the university continuing to “delegitimize the faculty’s expertise” and the committee’s statutory role of governance at the university.

At the senate meeting, University President Robert Robbins said he is taking this issue seriously and reiterated that the university hired an outside group, PAX Group LLC, to conduct its own investigation of campus safety.

“The idea that I wouldn’t take this very seriously. It’s my number one job, my absolute one job,” Robbins said in response to faculty’s comments of the report. “There are many other

people that are threatening faculty members and others on campus. I am frustrated that I don't have the tools to be able to do something about that.”

He said he hopes the two reports together will impact change. The final report from the committee is expected to be released in May, while the investigation conducted by the Group is ongoing.

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Other situations raise concerns

The committee also looked into sexual harassment allegations in the university's James E. Rogers College of Law between male law students and two female law students in 2019 and 2020. One female law student was harassed, while the second was raped, both by male law students, according to the allegations.

Another situation investigated by the committee involved a Black student who uses a wheelchair. The student had an encounter with the interim associate vice provost of diversity and inclusion that made the student feel uncomfortable.

The report also discussed the harassment of a student journalist after she wrote a story about a TikTok influencer who attended the university.

Coverage of southern Arizona on azcentral.com and in The Arizona Republic is funded by the nonprofit Report for America in association with The Republic.

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