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ADMINISTRATION

# How a 'Defunct' Title IX Office and a Culture of Hypermasculinity Fueled a Sexual-Misconduct Problem at Morehouse College

By *Grace Elletson* | SEPTEMBER 06, 2019

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John Everett for The Chronicle

Beverly Gooden

When Beverly Gooden became Morehouse College's Title IX coordinator in January 2017, she had plans.

She knew about the frequent turnover of coordinators who had come before her. She told the student newspaper at the start of her tenure that she would be different. She wanted to protect students. And she wasn't going anywhere.

But 30 days into the job she resigned.

She felt she had no choice. The office was overwhelmed with cases, and what she called a culture of hypermasculinity among the mostly male leadership that felt stifling. Over the course of a month she had lost 11 pounds from the stress of it all, she said.

Gooden is one of at least six Title IX coordinators — three of them interims — to have worked at Morehouse College in the past three academic years. Former students and others who have worked on the campus say this turnover, coupled with the all-male HBCU's masculine culture, has allowed sexual misconduct and homophobia to persist at Morehouse.

Morehouse has recently come under public scrutiny, again, for mishandling cases of sexual misconduct. In July, two Morehouse students, Michael Key and Bryson Hill, posted videos online accusing a staff member, DeMarcus K. Crews, of sexual assault and harassment. Crews, who could not be reached for comment, was put on leave shortly after Key and Hill shared their videos. It's part of a larger pattern; in recent years Morehouse has faced a string of sexual-misconduct crises that have come into public view.

In a statement provided to *The Chronicle*, Morehouse called Title IX “an essential part of addressing sexual misconduct and assault on college campuses” and said the college is “doing more than ever” to hire its next coordinator, a process that includes student input. The college did not respond to repeated requests for comment from *The Chronicle* about such frequent turnover in the coordinator position, nor did it make any of its administrators available for an interview.

Morehouse did not respond to specific questions about its campus environment, but said it is pursuing multiple initiatives to prevent sexual misconduct on campus, like dialogues and events about masculinity; student leaders being trained to lead conversations about sexual misconduct; and a new, recurring campus-climate survey.

## **A 'Chaotic' Title IX Office**

Morehouse brought in its first Title IX coordinator, Doris Coleman, in 2011. She left in 2016, after the Department of Education announced that it was investigating the office over a student's claim that it had mishandled complaints. Crystal Lucas, who was working in the general counsel's office at the time, became the interim coordinator, according to an email sent to the college community.

Next, Gooden was hired. The anti-domestic-violence activist gained fame two years earlier when she created the #WhyIStayed movement, which called attention to the plight of victims of domestic violence.

In an interview with the Maroon Tiger, Morehouse's campus newspaper, Gooden said the Title IX staff who came before her were "overwhelmed, overworked, not really knowledgeable, and not really capable."

Gooden told *The Chronicle* in a recent interview that she was shocked by the amount of unresolved cases. Some had been open for so long, she said, that the students who filed them had graduated without their complaints being resolved.

"We had victims of assault with no resolutions for years, and that is just unacceptable," Gooden said. "To me, as a person, as a survivor, that's just not something that you do because you perpetuate the trauma."

But her plans to make lasting change in the office, Gooden said, were upended by senior administrators' lack of urgency to invest in proper sexual-misconduct prevention training and other resources needed to end the backlog. She continually requested money for speaking events about sexual-assault topics and training sessions for faculty, staff, and students, only to eventually learn that her office didn't have a budget for training and events.

That inertia was heightened by what Gooden called a hypermasculine culture at Morehouse that also permeated the administrative leadership, which was mostly male, she said. She said she felt the male leadership didn't want to cede her the authority to effectively lead the office. She likened the culture of masculinity to a "heavy blanket" that kept her from achieving anything.

"You could very distinctly feel that you were the only woman in the room," Gooden said. "And although they let you talk and they let you get it out, I wouldn't say that I felt heard."

When the job started affecting Gooden's health, she resigned.

In March 2017, Terraine Bailey took the job. She managed to institute ambitious programming: the campus added sexual-assault prevention training, a "Stand Up" campaign to encourage bystander intervention, and a sexual-abuse response team. And she set ambitious goals, including a new hire and greater transparency for the office.

But Bailey has also been accused of victim-blaming. In Key's video, he said Bailey was condescending toward him when he met with her about his complaint against Crews, and that she canceled meetings with him. Venkayla T. Haynes, an advocate for sexual-assault survivors and a Spelman College graduate, said she has personally advised students who told her they felt disregarded by Bailey, who left the college in September 2018.

A Spelman student, whose Title IX sexual-assault case against a Morehouse student is still pending after it was opened two years ago, said she felt Bailey had insinuated she was lying and encouraged her to drop her case. The student, who requested anonymity out of fear of reprisal, said Bailey told her that she didn't want to ruin the Morehouse student's career. Echoing Key's allegation, the Spelman student also said Bailey did not show up at scheduled meetings.

When reached by *The Chronicle*, Bailey said she was unable to speak about her employment at Morehouse College.

After Bailey, the responsibilities of the office were apparently delegated to Sophia Brelvi. Reached at Dartmouth College, where she is now working as a deputy Title IX coordinator, Brelvi declined to comment to *The Chronicle*.

The current interim position is held by Cassandra Tarver-Ross who is also associate vice president for human resources. Exemplary of the frequent changes in the office, it is Brelvi's now defunct email address — not Ross's — that is still attached to the Title IX position title on Morehouse's website.

While employee turnover is common in Title IX offices at colleges across the country, it's not common to see coordinators turn over as frequently as they have at Morehouse, said Katherine W. McGerald, executive director of SurvJustice, an advocacy group for sexual-assault survivors.

"There is high stress and high burnout in the work," McGerald said. If Title IX offices aren't properly funded, or if the employees in the office aren't properly trained, she said, problems are bound to arise.

And at Morehouse, they have. In recent years, frustrated students have on multiple occasions taken matters into their own hands, outing alleged rapists publicly, both on campus and on social media.

"I feel like survivors are in between a rock and a hard place," Haynes, the Spelman graduate and victims' advocate, said. "You're trying to do the right thing, or go through the administrative route and report to Title IX, and have these conversations with administration. But if they're ignoring you or discouraging you from reporting. If they're not taking the situation seriously ... what else can we do but go public?"

"It's very unfortunate," Haynes said, "that we have to go to social media and be retraumatized."

### **'The Making of Men' Has a Cost**

But the roots of Morehouse's sexual-misconduct problems may run deeper than the Title IX office.

Jordan Long was a freshman at Morehouse when he walked into a residence hall and came upon the on-duty resident adviser listening to music out loud. A song came on, and Long noticed its lyrics contained an anti-gay slur. He asked the RA to turn it off, but the RA refused. Then the RA began calling him the slur.

During Long's time at Morehouse he had experiences that went beyond casual homophobia, he said.

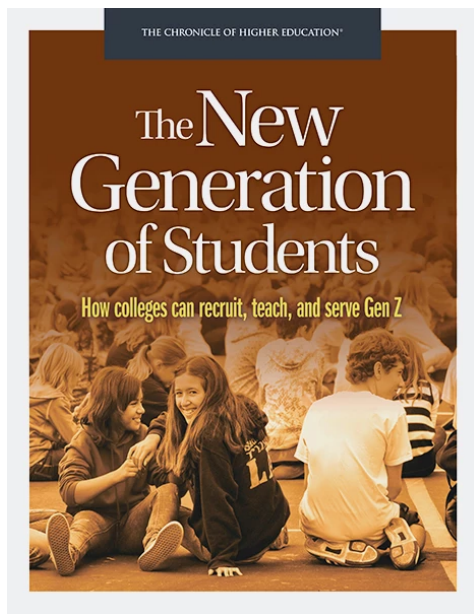
He also remembered a finals-season de-stressing event in which he was petting dogs with a group of students, and a student discreetly pinched his butt. Long, shaken and uncomfortable, told a friend about the incident, who confirmed his account to *The Chronicle*.

Long said he didn't report the incident at the de-stress event because he didn't want to be seen as weak, especially among his Morehouse peers. "You're supposed to be a man, you're supposed to be stoic," Long said. "You're supposed to solve your problems quietly."

The college encourages students to live up to the expectation that they become, and represent the ideals of, Morehouse men. According to Morehouse's website, one of the college's most important objectives is "the making of men."

For some, this identity can be stifling, or simply incorrect. Plenty of gender-nonconforming students have graduated from Morehouse, where they may have been bound by its previous dress-code policy, which prohibited students from wearing traditionally feminine clothing. The college did earn praise in April when it announced it would allow students who identify as men, regardless of the gender they were assigned at birth, to enroll. But transgender women are not allowed — if current male students transitioned to identify as women, they would be asked to leave the college because, the policy states, being a men's college is central to Morehouse's identity.

Such masculinity can carry baggage, as can forced or socialized gender conformity. Marcus Lee, a 2015 graduate, was a member of the Morehouse College Safe Space collective, an LGBTQ-inclusion organization. He said the group sought to challenge the Morehouse community's hostility to sexual and gender identity outside of heteronormative binaries and masculine normativity.



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“There is a strict gender role that’s expected of you,” Lee said. “I think in many ways, Morehouse administration and Morehouse alumni, they don’t recognize that the tradition of creating a quote-unquote Morehouse man entails so much exclusion.”

But Lee said Morehouse’s culture was not maliciously homophobic or blatantly discriminatory. The administration supports pride week at the college and, from Lee’s experience, has effectively denounced outward displays of homophobia in the past.

The American Psychological Association published a study in January detailing the negative effects that men face when they’re pressured to conform to traditional masculine roles. When men “deviate” from “gender role norms of masculinity” or “fail to

meet norms of masculinity,” a slew of negative consequences can follow like aggression, homophobia, and misogyny. These pressures can be exacerbated for black men.

Dante McCord, a 2014 Morehouse graduate, saw these effects personally. He remembered that during a residence-hall meeting, a student described an instance, aggressively, where he said another gave him a “funny look” while he was in the shower. While McCord wasn’t personally worried by the comment — he didn’t think the student was capable of any violence — he recognized the warning, and remembered thinking, “Oh OK. Can’t look at him.”

That experience reminded McCord of an incident that roiled the college a decade earlier. In 2002, a Morehouse student named Gregory Love was attacked and beaten with a baseball bat by another student. The assailant reportedly thought Love was attempting to make a sexual advance toward him in the shower.

Antwann Michael, who graduated from Morehouse in 2014, said about 10 students have approached him to share their experiences with sexual misconduct on campus, after Key and Hill posted their videos. He said students are hesitant to report cases to the administration because they’re afraid of retaliation, or they’re afraid they’ll be outed as gay.

Michael said Morehouse’s hypermasculine culture exacerbates this fear, and keep students from seeking help if they experienced sexual abuse.

“If you are sexually assaulted by a man, certainly if you are socialized to be a man. You don’t necessarily want to disclose that ‘I was taken advantage of sexually,’” Michael said. “So you are discouraging students to speak up.”

This culture, combined with what Michael calls a “defunct” Title IX office, not only discourages students from reporting abuse, it allows others to weaponize their insecurities against them.

He said it’s widely known among the Morehouse community how unstable the Title IX office is. “The thing with the Title IX coordinator at Morehouse,” Michael said, “is that one day we will have a Title IX coordinator, and the next day they will not exist.”



## Morehouse's Racial Nuances

To attribute the origins of Morehouse's sexual-misconduct problem to its masculine identity would be telling only part of the story.



Courtesy of Da'Shaun Harrison

Da'Shaun Harrison

Morehouse represents the much sought-after black empowerment and success in an American society that has continually profited off of black subjugation, said Da'Shaun Harrison, a 2018 graduate. So even if abuse has been recurring in the institution for years, the community stays silent, out of guilt that public critique could jeopardize any power that's been gained.

"It's a response to white supremacy," Harrison said. "And this idea that because black folks are not protected by anyone else that we always have to protect ourselves, even at our own expense."

After Key and Hill posted their videos, Morehouse sent an email to alumni recommending that they deny interview requests and deflect to positive talking points about the college if asked by incoming freshmen about the allegations.

Like all colleges, Morehouse has an incentive to protect its image, Harrison said, adding that the email "was a blatant silencing tactic" that took validity away from Key's and Hill's accusations.

Responses like this leave former students, like Harrison and Long, caught between loyalty for and disappointment in an institution that has given them friends and community but also traumatic memories.

“Until they make structural change, these things will still happen,” Long said. “I critique because I love Morehouse. I have love even for the students who aren’t there yet. And I don’t want them to have to try and survive in this environment.”

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