

Vermont State House
Committee on Education
115 State Street
Montpelier, VT 05633

RE: S.164 “An act relating to miscellaneous changes to education law”

Testimony submitted on behalf of Taite Shomo and Grace Vedock in support of S.164

We would like to extend our thanks to the Vermont House Committee on Education for receiving our testimony today. Additionally, we would like to thank Senator Ruth Hardy for reaching out to us for testimony on the topic of sexual assault on college campuses.

Our names are Taite Shomo and Grace Vedock, and we are current undergraduate students at Middlebury College who have been involved in activism relating to campus sexual assault for the past two years. During this time, we have acted as the primary student organizers of an initiative titled “It Happens Here,” which gives survivors of sexual violence on campus the opportunity to share their stories and raises awareness of the prevalence of the issue at Middlebury College. Recently, as the leaders of It Happens Here, we recreated a project called “The Map Project,” in which students were able to anonymously submit locations on the Middlebury College campus where they had been sexually assaulted or harassed.¹ We also organized an academic conference during January 2019 entitled *Beyond #MeToo: Global Responses to Sexual Violence in an Age of Reckoning*. This conference brought together scholars from a variety of disciplines to discuss sexual assault activism around the world, including at home.

On behalf of survivors of sexual assault and in solidarity with fellow student activists who have worked tirelessly to hold perpetrators accountable, we are testifying in strong support

¹ See Figure A.

of S.164, as passed by the Senate, “An act relating to miscellaneous changes to education law”. We believe that an issue as widespread as campus sexual assault must be addressed on a state level, as the current prospects for Title IX reform as articulated by the Federal Department of Education pose a serious and substantial threat to survivors of sexual abuse on college campuses. We support the Senate bill’s ambitious approach, as articulated in section 3, to create and allocate funds for a statewide task force, which will assemble stakeholders diverse in age, occupation, and backgrounds, to conduct a statewide review of current policies in place in postsecondary educational settings.

Campus sexual assault is an issue that must be addressed nationally, locally, and institutionally because of the pervasive harm that it causes to individuals and communities. According to RAINN, the Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network, college-age adults are at a severely increased risk for sexual violence; among undergraduate students, 23.1% of females and 5.4% of males experience rape or sexual assault through physical force, violence, or incapacitation.² However, many victims of campus sexual assault do not report to the school or to outside law enforcement officials; according to the National Sexual Violence Resource Center, more than 90% of sexual assault victims on college campuses do not report the assault.³

Indeed, we confirmed through our work with The Map Project that students at Middlebury College were not reporting their experiences of sexual assault. In our anonymous survey, students reported 112 instances of sexual assault and harassment; by contrast, the 2018 Middlebury College Annual Security and Fire Safety Report documented only 25 reported rapes

² “College Sexual Violence: Statistics,” RAINN, <https://www.rainn.org/statistics/campus-sexual-violence>.

³ “Campus Sexual Assault,” NSVRC, <https://www.nsvrc.org/statistics>.

and 10 reported “fondlings” for the year 2017, the most recent data accessible.⁴ It is our fear that the number of students in Vermont who feel able to report their assaults will only diminish should the Department of Education’s proposed changes to Title IX be implemented.

Therefore, in reference to Section 3, subsection C, point 5 of S.164, we strongly support proactive state policy changes that could be implemented should Title IX reforms be handed down from the Department of Education. Title IX reforms proposed by Secretary Betsy DeVos are as dangerous as they are devastating to survivors everywhere; it is difficult enough to grapple with the physical and emotional effects of being assaulted, even more difficult to counteract social stigma that systematically silences and shames survivors, and more difficult still to report their traumas. As Grace was quoted in a USA Today article on proposed Title IX reforms, plenty of victims of sexual assault don't report for a variety of reasons — stigma, fear of reliving trauma or fear of their rapist being found not guilty by the school. The proposed reforms only intensify that distrust.⁵

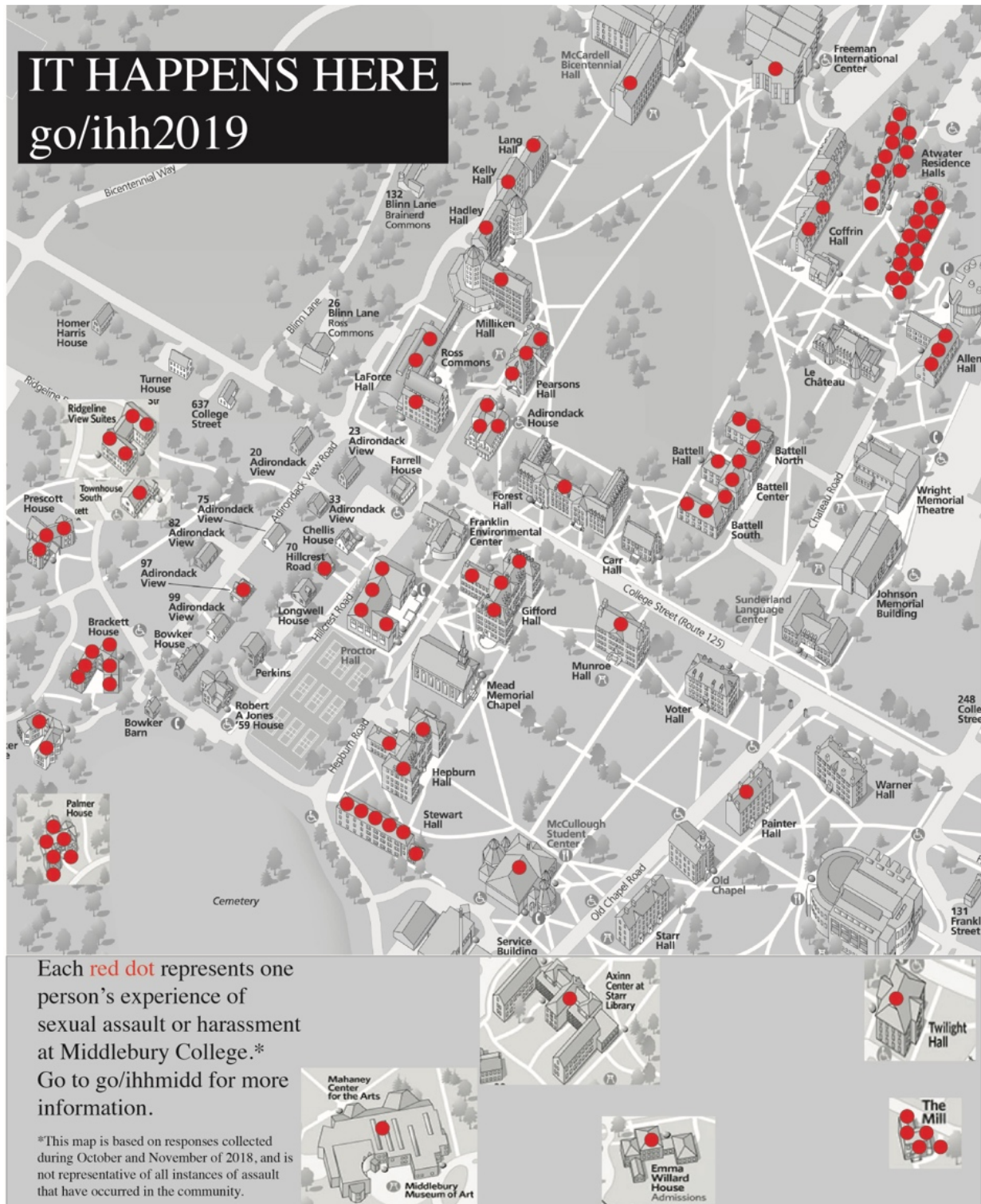
We appreciate the inclusion of college students’ voices on this issue; as students, we encounter the complicated and widespread effects of sexual violence on a daily basis. That the proposed task force would include students speaks to its commitment to acknowledging and building on the long history of student activism surrounding sexual assault. In a federal climate already hostile to marginalized groups, particularly women and survivors of sexual assault, we

⁴ “2018 Annual Security and Fire Safety Report,” http://www.middlebury.edu/system/files/media/Middlebury_Annual_Security_and_Fire_Safety_Report.pdf.

⁵ “I Don’t Know If I Would Feel Comfortable,” USA Today, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/2019/02/07/students-fear-study-abroad-programs-under-proposed-title-ix-guidelines/2789421002/>.

feel that now, more than ever, the state of Vermont should take bold steps toward addressing and rectifying campus sexual assault.

Figure A



The Map Project, presented by It Happens Here, Fall 2018.