



Lessons for Penn State: Cover-Ups Cost Money, Student Lives

By [SUSAN DONALDSON JAMES](#)
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[Laura Dickinson](#) was raped and murdered in her dorm room at Eastern Michigan State College on Dec. 15, 2006, but her parents waited an agonizing 10 weeks before they knew the truth because of a cover-up.

It took several days to find the 22-year-old student after her parents, unable to contact her, frantically called the college. Dickinson's decomposed body was found by a janitor after students reported a stench coming from her dorm room.

She was found lying on the carpet in [room 518 of Hill Hall](#), naked from the waist down, a pillow over her head, with traces of semen on her leg. The attacker had taken her keys and locked the door.

But the [college hid those grim details](#) and the fact that police were investigating Dickinson's death as a homicide, instead issuing a release to students saying she had unexpectedly died and and telling her parents "no foul play" was suspected.

School safety experts say a combination of arrogance and ignorance fuels college cover-ups like the apparent one at EMU and an alleged one at Penn State University in a growing child sex abuse scandal.

"We were left to wonder and try to figure out how a perfectly healthy young lady up and died," said her father Bob Dickinson, a 55-year-old Home Depot employee who lives in Grand Rapids, Mich. "It was frustrating and unnerving. And as time went on, nothing made sense. It was hard to put it to rest."

Laura's family was told of the crime two months later in February 2007, when police arrested 20-year-old [Orange Taylor III](#), a student with numerous college violations.

"They lied to us," said Dickinson.

EMU was fined \$350,000 by the Department of Education, the same federal agency that is investigating Penn State, alleging officials did nothing when they learned former defensive coordinator [Jerry Sandusky](#) had allegedly raped a 10-year-old boy in a locker room shower, among the 40 counts involving eight boys.

[Penn State has denied](#) knowing about the alleged rape in 2002.

The department is also looking at Marquette University in Milwaukee, where five athletes were accused of sexual misconduct by three female students last year, according to a report this week in [Time magazine](#). The university, which does not have its own campus police, did not report the allegations to law enforcement.

The university has said it is [cooperating with the investigation](#).

"Marquette has acknowledged mistakes made in dealing with allegations of sexual assault involving student athletes on our campus. The focus of our efforts moving forward is on protecting our students, providing support to sexual assault victims, and working with our entire campus community and beyond to improve our education and procedures around this critical issue," school officials said in a statement.

Under the [1990 Clery Act](#), colleges and universities are required to disclose information about campus crimes and warn students of threats to their safety. It was named for Jeanne Clery, who was raped and strangled to death at Pennsylvania's Lehigh College in 1986 at the age of 19.

"There are laws and police to protect us, but unless the people in charge act on them, they don't work," said Dickinson. "There was arrogance on some part and for others, they were following what they were told to do, even though they knew better."

After two trials -- the first a hung jury -- Laura's attacker was convicted and is now serving a life sentence without parole. Dickinson learned then that Taylor seldom went to class and those he did attend, he was failing.

He also had a "repeat habit" of breaking into dorm rooms and stealing electronics, according to Dickinson. "It was not his first offense. He should not have been allowed on campus."

Colleges Try to Protect Their Image

An investigation initiated by EMU's Board of Regents concluded that school officials had endangered students to protect the university's image -- the same allegations that are being made today at Penn State.

College safety experts say that incidents at both EMU and Penn State are emblematic of the insular way in which colleges handle sex crimes.

[Brett Sokolow](#), a managing partner at National Center for Higher Education Risk Management, who has worked with hundreds of colleges to enhance student safety, was critical of EMU and Penn State, though he said they are "an anomaly not the rule."

"At Penn State loyalties were at play, like big-time football at the expense of other members of the community," said Sokolow.

"Sometimes it's based on fear that the information coming out will harm their reputation or hurt their endowment or recruitment," he said. "College admissions are keen to make sure their campuses don't get a reputation for being unsafe."

Campuses are required under Title IX to investigate all complaints and to provide "prompt and equitable remedies," according to Sokolow. "Colleges work hard to get a good internal resolution. But rape is not the same thing as pulling a fire alarm in a residence hall and some colleges do it better than others."

The other reason colleges handle sex crimes internally is that criminal prosecution is "not a viable option" for victims, most of whom are women.

"The conviction rate is less than 1 percent," he said. "Our society blames the victim and they populate the juries. A young woman goes into a guy's room drunk and all a jury sees is her bad behavior."

"It's easier in a case like Sandusky," he said. "When it's a homosexual attack, we condemn it." And, of course, the Sandusky allegations involve underage boys.

One in six American women will become a victim of sexual assault in her lifetime, according to the [Rape, Assault and Incest National Network](#), and the college population is four times more likely to be victims than any other age group. An estimated 73 percent of all victims of these crimes know their attacker.

"That number is particularly relevant for college campuses in addressing issues of sexual violence," said RAINN spokesman Katherine Hull. "Recognizing the majority know each other and it's not always a stranger in the dark in a parking garage on campus, it is likely to be someone the victim knows, who lives in the same dorm or is the same social group or class or a friend of a friend."

Hull said it was "absolutely critical" that these crimes be treated with "adequate severity."

"These crimes cannot be handled internally by college police and judicial systems," she said. "They cannot be treated like an overdue library book."

When crimes like date rape and sexual assault between students do go to college judiciary courts, they often go unpunished, according to a study by the [Center for Public Integrity](#) and funded by the Department of Justice.

College officials are confused over definitions of sexual offenses and the laws reporting provisions, according to the study.

"Available data suggests that, on many campuses, far more sexual offenses are occurring than are reflected in official Clery numbers," it said.

Schools Know More About Sex Crimes Than Police

But David Finkelhor, director of the [Crimes Against Children Research Center](#) at the University of New Hampshire, said more sex crimes are coming to the attention of authorities, particularly since strengthening of the Clery Act by the Obama administration.

"The message of virtually all education programs dealing with child maltreatment, bullying, dating violence and a host of other problems has been to 'tell someone and get help,'" said Finkelhor in a 2009 study published in the [Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine](#) this year.

But in cases of peer victimizations, date violence and date rape, school authorities often knew more than the police, according to the study.

"It's true there are many cases on campuses that don't get reported to the police, but I think this is an inherent feature about sex crimes and other kinds of intimate violence," said Finkelhor. "There is an inclination when it involves juveniles on juveniles not to think of these as crimes ... People think of college students as not fully adults [and] that can color administration's thinking about what is to be done -- that they are better handled here where the university is in loco parentis [in place of the parent]."

He agrees that there needs to be better collaboration and training between police and residents' assistants and counselors who deal with college students.

That might have saved Laura Dickinson, according to her father, who said officials should have done more to prevent their daughter's murder.

In a flashback when the Penn State scandal became public, he said he remembered a conversation with Connie Clery about her own daughter's murder.

"She and her husband were determined to right that wrong," he said. "A college campus should be a safe place for a student and when it's not, we have to fix that -- to clamp down on security."

"We have to make officials more accountable for their actions and the students themselves need to wake up," he said. "The consequences are costly."

EMU paid dearly for the cover-up and the Dickinsons eventually also won a \$2.5 million civil lawsuit against the college.

"It's really hard to explain why there are cover-ups," said Dickinson. "The purpose and drive of an organization that does that is hard to comprehend."

"It's human nature," he said. "For lack of a better term, we do stupid things. Fortunately most time they get caught. It's hard to hide something like that. It goes on for a little, but the whole thing comes out in the end."

