

The fight to halt harassment

Students, officials say academy has come a long way, but survey will put progress to the test

By Kelly Kennedy
STAFF WRITER

WEST POINT, N.Y. — Six percent of West Point women said in response to an April 2005 survey that they had been sexually assaulted as a cadet, 62 percent said they had been sexually harassed, and 96 percent said they had experienced sexist behavior.

The Army released those statistics last fall and shocked a system known for ironclad discipline. But officials said they knew they had a problem long before it was made public — and were working to address it.

“In 2001, we were already looking at sexual harassment, and there were some indicators that it was a problem,” said Col. Jeanette McMahon, special assistant for human relations at West Point. “It’s not surprising. The Army is a male-dominated environment.”

Last year, the school instituted a

number of changes to make that male-dominated environment — female cadets today make up 15 percent of the 4,000-strong population — feel safe and comfortable for everyone:

■ The school hired two human relations experts, McMahon and Maj. Samantha Breton.

■ The academy added three women to the once all-male counseling staff.

■ Sexual harassment classes, which used to be PowerPoint presentations, became discussion-based.

■ Cadets now handle complaints by recommending resources to victims rather than performing mini-investigations.

Except for the extra human relations staff, the changes either came from cadet recommendations or allow the cadets to create change for themselves, Breton said.

“Yes, the numbers are bad; and



‘At first, I was angry. I tend to think higher of cadets.’

ROSS MAYBEE
WEST POINT SENIOR, ON THE
NUMBER OF CADETS INVOLVED IN
SEXUAL HARASSMENT CASES

yes, we don’t like them; and yes, we use them to shock the cadets,” said Breton, special assistant to the commandant. “But when they can own it, the problems will have personal meaning, and they’ll come up with their own answers.”



Glowacki



Harmon

Before last fall, the Air Force and Naval academies owned the headlines in sexual assault stories. Then the 2004-05 Defense Manpower Data Survey showed West Point had worse data.

At the Air Force Academy, 4 percent of women surveyed said they had been sexually assaulted, 49 percent said they had been sexually harassed, and 82 percent said they had dealt with sexist behavior. At the Naval Academy, 5 percent said they had been sexually assaulted, 59 percent said they faced sexual harassment, and 93 percent said they had been the object of sexist behavior.

The survey is part of a congressionally mandated plan to deal with sexual assault and harassment at U.S. military academies after scores of Air Force Academy

women reported in 2003 being the victims of sexual misconduct and a leadership that was either unresponsive or ostracizing.

Harassment at West Point was an issue “no one even knew we had before the survey,” Ross Maybee said on his first day as a senior at West Point. “At first, I was angry. I tend to think higher of cadets.”

Maybee said his instructors were so shocked by the news that two of them took full class periods to talk about sexual harassment. He said both instructors made the change without any request from higher command.

Senior Marjana Mair said the statistics surprised her even though she was aware there was a problem at the school.

“You kind of know there are people and they’re not making it up, but I didn’t realize it was that bad,” she said.

One of the most troubling findings of the questionnaire, Breton said, was that cadets believe they can handle sexual assault themselves.

“They don’t handle it,” she said. “It comes out later in relationships, in suicides and in eating disorders. If you follow them for one to two months, they can’t sleep and their grades go downhill. Something happened to them, and

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