PRINCETON, NJ, November 8, 2019— Last May, students demonstrated outside of Nassau Hall for 200 uninterrupted hours as part of the Princeton IX Now movement. These students were protesting the University’s failure to reduce rampant sexual and interpersonal violence on campus, and proposed eleven reforms to address the epidemic at hand. In response, the University 1) agreed to commission an external review of Princeton’s handling of Title IX cases, and 2) charged the Joint Student Faculty Advisory Committee on Sexual Misconduct to meet over the summer and formulate their own assessment and recommendations. The Joint Committee met over twenty times during the summer; ultimately, four of these meetings included the voices of student representatives from Princeton Students for Title IX Reform (PIXR), which led the Princeton IX Now protest. In the fall, the external review board was initially only willing to speak with one representative of PIXR — eventually, they spoke with three. The external review and the Joint Committee released their respective reports and recommendations the day before fall break.

PIXR found the reports, both of which presented recommendations without clear timelines for implementation, to be incomplete and biased.

External Review Committee:

The external review report is extremely disappointing and does not address most of the concerns brought forth by PIXR. We believe that there was a conflict of interest given that two of the three people tasked with the external review hold positions of power within Title IX offices at Duke University and Virginia Commonwealth University. The third person of the trio is the Deputy General Counsel at Emory University – a role concerned exclusively with the protection of university reputation and interests. When asking for independent reviewers, we were hoping to include voices that weren’t already implicated in the Title IX process, nor in University administration. We would have appreciated, for example, bringing in someone with a lens of transformative justice, or someone who was well-versed in speaking to student mental health concerns, etc. Given that many concerns brought up had a focus on reforming campus culture around interpersonal violence, we feel the University did an inadequate job at collecting a wide array of voices to speak towards this issue. We believe the University curated voices to reaffirm its own stances, and consequently believe the review cannot be looked at as completely independent of the university’s interests.

There is a clear lack of transparency with the way this review was conducted by the External Committee. There is no clarification as to whether the students they spoke with had direct
experiences with the Title IX process, and there was a lack of overall transparency with regards to the process for selecting students to contribute. Many students were not invited to contribute to the ongoing investigation, despite the investigation being triggered by student protest. Because the investigation was conducted over the summer, only certain voices became a part of the review. Along with that, the report emphasizes the perspectives of administrators and bows down to institutional processes without questioning them. For example, the report consistently refers to “the administrators interviewed by the review team” who gave information about resources currently in place. Not once do they make an effort to counter those opinions by including the perspectives of students directly being impacted by these systems.

The reviewers spent far more time articulating the resources already available to students by the university than addressing how these resources have fallen short. Instead of investigating how Title IX policies are implemented on this campus, and how said policies should go beyond the minimum requirements, the external reviewers instead focused on emphasizing how well Princeton is already doing. Again, this is despite the External Committee’s inception being triggered by student protest. Critically, the recommendations made by the reviewers failed to understand the key points highlighted by our group regarding the intersections of race, class and gender in dealing with sexual and interpersonal violence on campus. There is no significant emphasis on diversifying the institutional bodies that serve as resources for affected marginalized students. The report demonstrates no understanding of particular challenges faced by students at the intersection of class, race, ability, gender expression, sexuality, and interpersonal violence. This is largely because the reviewers tasked with the job do not represent a diverse student body. They represent the same problem we are asking them to fix: fewer white people in positions of power.

Lastly, the report charges the students proposing solutions with coming up with ways those ideas could realistically be implemented. It is not the responsibility of students to do the work for the university – should we not all be striving to make this University a better place? For example, in the report, it is written that “those who expressed at least some familiarity with the principles of restorative justice were unable to articulate how it worked or when it would apply in the Title IX context.” The problem isn’t that students can’t articulate solutions encompassing restorative justice, but rather that students articulate implementation strategies that don’t fit into existing – and opaque – administrative frameworks. Consequently, students are told that they’re being unrealistic, or are depicted as being uninformed when raising their voices for the change they want to see. Students who ask for restorative justice should not be outlining for the university how it can be implemented within the scope of current administrative policies. Unless the University plans on handing the reins over to students completely, it is the job of Princeton to seek proper, expert advice on melding new administrative philosophies with existent ones.
Joint Committee:

We believe that the Joint Committee report has great potential. There are parts of the report that we are excited to see come to fruition. For example, the establishment of a Restorative Practices Working Group is a promising step towards addressing students’ need for a non-punitive and rehabilitating process following experiences of sexual misconduct, where offenders can be held accountable and survivors can recover from the trauma of victimization. While this is a move in the right direction, this is just one more committee that the University has created with no clear outcome, timeline, or concrete steps towards implementation. In the same way, the report made numerous recommendations for various structures to continue doing what they are doing, even if student protesters demand otherwise.

Similar to the external review, the Joint Committee’s report fails to adequately address the deep concerns that PIXR brought to their attention in the spring. The report does not once try to engage with the concerns we raised about Title IX’s inability to address incidents of sexual misconduct that contain compounded violations (including but not limited to racist, (cis)sexist, homophobic, ableist, and transphobic violence) under an intersectional framework. It is unacceptable that the Committee did not offer any recommendations on how students who have faced, and will face, such incidents can be afforded the same opportunities for holding their offenders accountable.

While the Joint Committee did recommend the creation of a new administrator to help students navigate the Title IX process, they housed this person within the Title IX Office and made them a non-confidential resource who cannot serve as an official Title IX Adviser during the investigatory process. This completely ignores PIXR’s point about the resource needing to be independent of the existing structure of Title IX – someone who is also able to advise students before they decide to enter into a Title IX investigation.

The Joint Committee’s report hardly notes the hardships low-income students may face when trying to access mental health services. Despite having direct student testimony that speaks to the unquestionable hurdles low-income students face in this regard – not merely because of the opacity of the resources, but because of the lack of said resources – the Joint Committee doesn’t recommend anything besides a working group to reorganize the existing resources that are on campus. This committee wouldn’t be meeting until the Fall of 2020.

The report delegitimizes students’ experiences of sexual misconduct while abroad as merely part of issues with “travel safety” and failed to offer substantive recommendations beyond ones already proposed in their report from last year. This highlights their inadequacy in acknowledging and responding to the issue of sexual misconduct that occurs while students are
participating in off-campus University programs. While we demanded the implementation of an office to deal with the interpersonal violence students face while abroad, the Joint Committee sidestepped this request, only granting that those already involved with studying abroad be trained in dealing with interpersonal violence. We believe this issue is significant enough to warrant its own coordinator. Clearly the Committee and University – which at one point noted that “in the rare instances that sexual misconduct abroad has been reported, it has most often involved “street harassment” by strangers” – is not listening to input and personal testimonies from impacted students.

The Joint Committee’s report reflects a lack of urgency in that many of their action items: the work to be done by their established working groups is not set to begin until the next academic year. Further, many of their recommendations direct offices to continue doing what they are doing, without understanding the realistic ways in which these existing structures and policies are not working for students - as made evident by PIXR through collected testimonies and demonstrations last spring. Similarly, despite accountability and student oversight being a key theme that PIXR reiterated to the University during the spring protests and during meetings with the Joint Committee, they present no systems of accountability through which we can be ensured they will carry out the tasks they suggest.

Last semester, as part of our demands, PIXR asked for funding to be funneled into SHARE, alongside other centers and support hubs on campus. Some of these other centers include CAF, the Women*s Center, the LGBTQ Center, as well as CPS. Thus far, SHARE is the only center – to our knowledge – that has received funding as a direct result of PIXR protests on campus.

While we appreciate the University directing funding to SHARE, we feel that other concerns with SHARE – and with the campus at-large – have been overlooked. For one, student protesters pointed out the lack of diversity within the SHARE office, and the lack of diversity in SHARE material, which doesn’t adequately point to the intersections between class, race, ability, gender expression, sexuality, and interpersonal violence. There have also been concerns expressed with regards to the treatment of SHARE Peers who aim to critique, and ultimately refine, SHARE’s current approach to interpersonal violence on campus, with one SHARE Peer who has been involved in PIXR being unjustly forced out of the Peer program. Such retaliation against survivors by a survivor-oriented space is unacceptable and, frankly, the SHARE office should be ashamed of the ideological hypocrisy that led up to such action.

With this being said, any funding that’s placed in the hands of SHARE should be done so with transparency, student input, and student oversight. Furthermore, with regards to funding, the following demands should also be addressed and implemented, in ways they were not in either report: SHARE Peers receiving compensation for their labor (emotional and otherwise),
survivor-oriented spaces created independent of SHARE and Title IX offices, the creation of an office for students who experience interpersonal violence abroad, and the funneling of resources towards low-income students seeking mental health services. We ask the University to give additional resources to spaces outside of SHARE, including the aforementioned CAF, Women*s, and LGBTQ Centers, as well as CPS.

PIXR is committed to the implementation of its demands and will not stop until they are met in their entirety. We want radical reform because systems in place have not been working for many students, especially those most vulnerable on campus. As we continue to fight with the urgency this issue requires, we look forward to addressing and – when necessary – critiquing this University until it fulfills its promise to create a safe campus for all.