Parents of Stanford Student Allege Disciplinary Process Caused Suicide

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If you or someone you know is having thoughts of suicide or is in emotional distress, contact the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline *at 988.*

On March 22, 2022, Katie Meyer, a 22-year-old senior and goalkeeper on Stanford University's women's soccer team, died by suicide. Last week, her family filed a lawsuit alleging that the school's harsh disciplinary procedures caused her death.

According to the suit, Meyer was facing discipline for an incident in August 2021, where she allegedly spilled coffee on a member of the school's football team who had been accused of sexually assaulting a member of the women's soccer team. In comments to *USA Today*, Meyer's father characterized her actions as defending a teammate, although the lawsuit also alleged that Meyer told school administrators that the spill was accidental.

The lawsuit alleges that the football player was not subject to discipline for his alleged assault of Meyer's teammate, and repeatedly expressed that he did not wish to pursue a complaint against Meyer. University administrators nonetheless decided to pursue charges against Meyer through the University's Office for Community Standards (OCS). According to the lawsuit, the letter that Meyer received from OCS informing her of the charges contained "heavy legal jargon and threatening language," and University administrators acknowledged to Meyer that the disciplinary process was "inherently stressful."

The lawsuit alleges that, after she submitted a formal statement, Meyer did not hear from OCS for more than three months, and believed the process was over. On the night of February 28, however, she received a letter charging her with "Violation of the Fundamental Standard." She had contact with University administrators and scheduled a meeting for three days later, but was found dead in her dorm room the following day.

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CLIENT NOTES

Student suicide is one of the most tragic events that can happen at a College or University, and the allegation that it was caused by University procedures is particularly troubling. As many institutions have experienced, federal regulations like Title IX require schools to handle certain disciplinary manners in a way that can feel legalistic and stress inducing for students and employees alike. These processes must be administered according to the law, but having support mechanisms in place for students – particularly at the time they are notified of an accusation – is an important way that Universities can help alleviate stress and make sure that they are aware of any serious risks to a student's physical or mental health. Keeping students informed of the status of disciplinary matters in as transparent a way as possible, on a periodic basis, while also reminding them of support options, can be an important follow-up.

If an administrator or employee becomes aware that a student is in danger of suicide, they may have a duty to act. In Massachusetts, institutions of higher education have a special relationship with their students, and a duty to take reasonable measures to respond to a suicide attempt or specific plan to commit suicide of which they have actual knowledge. *Nguyen v. MIT,* 479 Mass. 436 (2018). Universities should therefore train their employees on where to report concerns about students who may be in danger of suicide or self-harm, and have a plan to respond to such reports.

For more information, please contact the author or your Bowditch attorney at 508-791-3511.

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