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## Learning the business: education and the Weinstein complex

Sexual misconduct in Toronto theatre schools highlights the need to address institutional flaws that are characteristic of the entertainment industry

By [Maighdlin Mahoney](#)



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In the aftermath of the [Harvey Weinstein allegations](#), it has become clear that Hollywood is not the only institution in the spotlight when it comes to sexual misconduct. In Toronto, theatre programs at postsecondary institutions like [Randolph College for the Performing Arts](#) and [George Brown College](#) have also been rocked by sexual assault accusations.

While it is productive that these allegations are being heard and taken seriously, it is problematic that many conversations revolve around accused individuals as outliers. This rhetoric allows institutions to target perpetrators without addressing the deeper issues of policy and culture that create and enable them in the first place.

Here's what has happened at the two colleges so far. At George Brown, several students accused former Acting Teacher Todd Hammond of inappropriate sexual comments. Though the first accusations from a former student appeared in February 2017, Hammond was still associated with the school as a director as late as April 2017. His name has now [disappeared](#) from George Brown's Theatre Faculty Directory, but the college has yet to make a formal announcement regarding his absence.

At Randolph College, founder and former [President George Randolph announced his intended retirement](#) for spring of 2018. Then, in January 2018, the college issued a formal statement saying that Randolph had been accused of making "unwelcomed comments and physical gestures" by former students and staff. The administration did not explicitly state that his preemptive retirement last December was due to these accusations, but I would say that the timing deserves scrutiny due to the quick succession of events.

In the end, we have two colleges specializing in acting and performance, and two high-ranking individuals accused of sexual misconduct, both of whom have now vacated their positions. While this is a good start, there is still much institutional action required. If we are now acknowledging that the entertainment industry is a breeding ground for sexual harassment – whether it be in Hollywood or within educational facilities in Toronto – institutions have to dig deeper and ask why this is the case and what they can do to prevent harassment in the future.

Professional entertainment settings are characterized by intense competition over employment, a theme that underlies the Weinstein allegations. A startling amount of Weinstein's victims stated that fear of losing current or potential job opportunities was a reason they initially chose to stay silent about their experiences.

Similar factors appear to be at play at the Toronto theatre schools currently under scrutiny due to sexual misconduct allegations. Students at George Brown have cited the school's [system of regularly eliminating students](#) for not meeting the program's standards as creating an atmosphere of fear and anxiety.

In an interview with *The Varsity*, two graduates from Randolph College who wished to remain anonymous recalled how they were made to believe that expressing any "concern, objection or dislike" of teachers or faculty would potentially ruin their career. This took place through instructions on professionalism and a lack of willingness to address concerns in conversations with various staff members. Furthermore, graduates of Randolph College stated that [Student Services](#), the proscribed avenue for sexual misconduct complaints at the college, is widely perceived by students to be not confidential.

If these schools are creating atmospheres where objections are perceived as tantamount to throwing away one's career, and where they may not even be heard confidentially, it is hardly a surprise that sexual harassment allegations fester.

To move past individual perpetrators into institutional changes, the first step should be breaking the culture of silence and fear. Weinstein had a reputation in Hollywood of being predatory before the accusations, but silence prevailed over fear that anyone who hurt his career would face consequences to their own employment. Randolph College and George Brown could combat this tendency toward silence by clearly



stating the conditions under which Hammond and Randolph stepped down.

While both [colleges claim to be revising policy](#), nothing has yet become public. Bringing the conversation out into the open is imperative to digging into policy and culture in a productive way. If the institutions remain hushed about the proceedings, it seems akin to the previous environments that cultivated fear around hurting the reputations of industry names.

It must also be acknowledged that theatre programs are a unique academic setting. One graduate from Randolph College noted that "theatre training does sometimes require physical contact between student and instructor," a requirement that probably does not occur in many other fields. A specific setting requires specific policy: if physicality is the norm, there must be a clear way for students to express when they are comfortable and when they are not, without fear of their education or career being jeopardized.

Institutions like George Brown and Randolph College exist for the purpose of preparing students for the professional industry – if sexual harassment goes overlooked or unaddressed, it is tacitly accepted, and undoubtedly bleeds into the professional industry. But if schools take the initiative in ensuring students' ability to express discomfort without repercussion, they can begin to change the industry from the ground up.

*Maighdlin Mahoney is a second-year student at University College studying English and History.*

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