Car Accident On Campus Raises Concerns About Pedestrian Safety

Following a March 4 accident on Garrison Avenue, concerns for pedestrian safety grow.
Cassandra Chabot, Staff Writer

At approximately 9 p.m. on March 4, a Toyota struck a female University of New Hampshire (UNH) student who was walking in the crosswalk on Garrison Ave. in Durham. The student was treated and released from Portsmouth Regional Hospital that night, but questions about pedestrian safety at UNH linger.

Located just outside of Stoke Hall and the Paul College of Business and Economics, news of an accident spread quickly across the UNH campus by way of social media platforms. Snapchat and YikYak, an app that allows its users to remain anonymous, both harbored discussion of the accident. According to users, one student captured a video of the aftermath and posted it to the UNH 2027 Snapchat story. However, it was promptly taken down and later replaced with an apology from the student.

“The pedestrian was transported to the Portsmouth Regional Hospital by McGregor Ambulance personnel. She was later released after being treated for minor injuries,” said Durham Chief of Police David Holmstock.

Speed was not considered a factor in the accident; the operator of the Toyota was issued a citation for failure to yield to a pedestrian in a crosswalk.

“The crosswalk will not protect anyone,” said Holmstock. “There is somewhat of a misconception that if a person is in the crosswalk and gets hit, it is always the fault of the operator. That is not quite accurate.”

Pedestrians also have a responsibility to only enter the crosswalk when it is safe enough to do so. They must provide a vehicle with enough opportunity to be able to stop before taking that first step.

“Our investigations have revealed on several occasions that additional factors such as a lack of adequate lighting or the placement of the crosswalk may play a role in the operator's ability to see the pedestrian,” said Holmstock.

Some students can attest to these outside elements.

“I have seen people get hit,” said Mary Rotthoff, a fourth-year student at UNH. “I have been clipped by a car in broad daylight. There's not great signage, so when you're blocked by the sun or when everyone wears black at night, it can be difficult to see.”

Holmstock recommends that students wear bright clothing, always walk with friends and keep in mind that an operator's view is limited at night.

“We have many students in town that patronize the bars on Main Street, usually during the hours of darkness,” he said.

Steve Pesci, special projects director for campus planning, acknowledged the location of the accident highlights the shared infrastructure of the town of Durham and the university.

“Garrison Ave. is a town-owned street,” Pesci said. “And the university manages the lighting, signage and markings outside of the curbs.”

In the late summer of 2023, UNH and Durham hired the engineering firm, Tighe & Bond, to help review the key crosswalks on campus and downtown.

Tighe & Bond will present a prioritized list of crosswalk enhancements to town and UNH staff which will eventually be programmed in university and town capital improvement work plans and budgets. Improvements could range from traffic control changes to enhanced pavement markings, but no decisions have been made yet.

While crosswalk advancements are welcomed by many, pedestrians and students alike should remain vigilant, eliminating distractions and staying aware of oncoming traffic while crossing; it may save a life, said Holmstock.