

# Ousted Grammys CEO Deborah Dugan sues Recording Academy, claims retaliation for exposing 'boys club'

 [ew.com/music/2020/01/21/deborah-dugan-grammys-ceo-sues-recording-academy](https://ew.com/music/2020/01/21/deborah-dugan-grammys-ceo-sues-recording-academy)

Embattled Recording Academy CEO Deborah Dugan alleges she was sexually harassed and placed on leave as “retaliation” for raising concerns about the “boys’ club” atmosphere within the organization that hands out the Grammy awards.

On Tuesday, Dugan filed a complaint with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission outlining these allegations and including a Dec. 22, 2019 email to HR that she claims was the root of her firing. The 46-page document outlines numerous claims, including those originally made in the Dec. 22 email.

In the email and the official complaint, Dugan alleges the Academy’s general counsel Joel Katz sexually harassed her, calling her “baby” repeatedly and trying to kiss her at the end of a business dinner. Mr. Katz did not respond to request for comment. (His auto-reply message indicated that he was out sick.)

The EEOC complaint also outlines Dugan’s attempts to address, in her words, “egregious conflicts of interest, improper self-dealing by Board members and voting irregularities with respect to nominations for Grammy Awards, all made possible by the ‘boys’ club’ mentality and approach to governance at the Academy.” It is this concern that Dugan alleges is part of the reason behind her firing, refuting the Academy’s claims that a female employee alleged Ms. Dugan had created a “toxic and intolerable” work environment.

Dugan’s official complaint also states that the female employee behind that accusation is Claudine Little, former executive assistant to Dugan’s predecessor Neil Portnow. Portnow exited his position as Grammys CEO last year, resigning from his position after he came under fire for his now infamous remarks at the 2018 Grammys calling on female artists to “step up.”

Dugan claims the Board encouraged her to hire Portnow as a consultant for \$750,000 a year, despite the fact that there was an outstanding sexual harassment claim against him. The complaint also includes allegations that Portnow raped a female recording artist, “which was, upon information and belief, the real reason his contract was not renewed.” Attempts to reach Portnow for comment were not successful. Ms. Little is still listed as his primary representative, and her email returns a message that she is out of office “on leave.” Furthermore, Dugan alleges that the Board engaged in a conflict of interest scheme in 2019 by allowing an artist under consideration for a Grammy Song of the Year nomination to sit on the committee that was voting for said category. Per Dugan, the artist ended up with a nod, despite ranking near the bottom.

An initial statement from Dugan's lawyers, Douglas H. Wigdor and Michael J. Willemin, upon filing of the complaint read, "The complaint that we filed today against the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences (the Grammys) highlights tactics reminiscent of those deployed by individuals defending Harvey Weinstein. As we allege, the attempt by the Recording Academy to impugn the character of Deborah Dugan is a transparent effort to shift the focus away from its own unlawful activity. This blatant form of retaliation in corporate America is all too common, even post #MeToo, and we will utilize all lawful means necessary to ensure that those responsible are held accountable for their actions."

The Recording Academy responded to this and the filing of the complaint with a statement of their own. It reads, "It is curious that Ms. Dugan never raised these grave allegations until a week after legal claims were made against her personally by a female employee who alleged Ms. Dugan had created a 'toxic and intolerable' work environment and engaged in 'abusive and bullying conduct'. When Ms. Dugan did raise her 'concerns' to HR, she specifically instructed HR 'not to take any action' in response."

Their statement continues, "Nonetheless, we immediately launched independent investigations to review both Ms. Dugan's potential misconduct and her subsequent allegations. Both of these investigations remain ongoing. Ms. Dugan was placed on administrative leave only after offering to step down and demanding \$22 million from the Academy, which is a not-for-profit organization."

Dugan's legal team quickly responded to the statement, refuting the Academy's claims. "As the charge filed today clearly alleges, the assertion that Ms. Dugan did not raise concerns prior to the accusations manufactured against her is completely false," it begins. "Ms. Dugan repeatedly raised concerns throughout her entire tenure at the Academy, and even gave large presentations focused on diversity and inclusion at Board meetings. In addition, it is not just Ms. Dugan who has raised concerns. As alleged in the charge, artists, other board members and employees have all raised virtually all of the concerns raised by Ms. Dugan. As alleged, the Academy has lost its way and abandoned the recording industry, instead focusing on self-dealing and turning blind eye to the 'boys' club' environment, obvious improprieties and conflicts of interest."

The statement also claims the Academy's repeated leaks and disclosures of information forced this issue into the public eye. "It was never Ms. Dugan's intention to turn this into a public fight precisely because of her love for music and the members of the recording industry. Unfortunately, staying silent was made impossible by the Board's repeated leaks and disclosures of false and misleading information to the press," it concludes. "Finally, as alleged in the charge, on the morning of the day she was put on leave, *the Academy* offered Ms. Dugan millions of dollars to drop all of this and leave the Academy. The Board Chair demanded an answer within the hour. When *Ms. Dugan* refused to accept and walk away,

she was put on leave. The Academy claimed that Ms. Dugan was put on leave based on accusations made against her *over a month prior* that the Board knows very well are meritless. That is not a credible story.”

The complaint itself alleges that the accusations made against Dugan by Little were “not of the sort that would ever result in a CEO being put on administrative leave.” It accuses Chair of the Board, Harvey Mason, of publishing a “false, retaliatory and defamatory” letter Dugan claims was designed to destroy her reputation before filing her complaint.

“The Executive Committee is trying to paint Ms. Dugan as a money-hungry liar. Nothing could be further from the truth. In reality, Ms. Dugan took the CEO job at the Academy because she firmly believes that music can save lives,” the complaint concludes. “Six months later, the Board is doing everything it can to destroy Ms. Dugan for the sole reason that she posed a threat to the ‘boys’ club.”

*This is an ongoing story.*