

UO could skip violence study

Critics say AAU's survey is flawed

The university has committed \$87,500 to take part in the criticized national survey on campus sexual assault

By Josephine Woolington

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To ease concerns from some University of Oregon professors, interim UO President Scott Coltrane has said the university still could back out of a nationalized sexual violence survey that has been criticized by dozens of scientists.

The UO, however, would most likely be out \$87,500 if Coltrane made that decision.

Coltrane announced in December that the university would develop its own campus "climate" survey in addition to using the national one overseen by the Association of American Universities, a nonprofit higher education trade group whose members include some of the nation's top public and private universities, including the UO.

The UO agreed to pay for the AAU's survey before an advisory committee appointed by Coltrane reviewed it and before the UO's independent institutional review board evaluated it.

UO spokeswoman Julie Brown said Thursday that the UO is waiting to make its first nonrefundable payment to the private Maryland-based research firm Westat, which will administer the survey.

The survey initially was estimated to cost \$85,000. But more than half of the AAU's 62 members are not participating in the nonprofit group's sexual violence survey, which has driven up the cost slightly for the 28 universities that have signed on to conduct the survey on their campuses this spring.

Climate surveys seek to measure how often sexual violence occurs on college campuses and how students perceive such violence. Results from climate surveys may help universities craft

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new policies to address sexual violence and provide more resources for victims.

Sexual assault has been a topic of debate at the UO for several years but was heightened after three basketball players were accused of raping an 18-year-old student last year.

Some members of Coltrane's advisory group — made up of three professors, two administrators and two graduate students — expressed concern this week about how much power they'll have to oversee the survey that the university appears to be moving forward with.

The AAU has said previously that questions on the survey cannot be changed.

“Nothing is clear yet,” said Carol Stabile, a journalism and women and gender studies professor, who is serving on the advisory group.

Stabile said the group has met twice and was given a copy of the survey. The group is supposed to give feedback to Westat today, but she’s not sure whether the survey is a draft or final version, or whether the group’s feedback would result in changes to the survey.

“Until we get clarification, it’s hard to proceed,” Stabile said.

The AAU announced several months ago that it would oversee a climate survey to avoid having to administer a federally mandated one.

UO psychology professor Jennifer Freyd and almost 60 other researchers from across the country say the AAU survey, which students will take in April, is flawed and could undermine federal efforts to understand the scope of sexual violence on college campuses.

The AAU has disputed such claims, saying the survey will be based on a White House recommended model and designed with a select group of 19 university professionals who have experience with survey research, sexual assault, gender studies and students affairs.

Experts say the survey lacks transparency because universities aren’t required to release the results to the public, a caveat that contrasts with recently proposed federal legislation that would require schools to conduct climate surveys and make the data publicly available online.

The AAU has indicated that it will compile aggregate data to release publicly next fall. The data would not identify schools, prohibiting researchers and the public from comparing rates of sexual violence at different universities. Coltrane has said previously that he would make the UO survey results public.

Freyd and four other researchers sent a letter to college presidents this week, urging them to hold off on the survey, which they argued could produce skewed data and result in a misconception of the scope of sexual violence on campuses.

Freyd — who has studied sexual violence for more than two decades, administered her own UO climate survey and will lead another survey for the UO this spring — said one of the AAU survey’s biggest flaws is that it repeatedly uses the terms “sexual assault” and “sexual harassment” without defining them.

“We know from our research that the majority of victimized students don’t identify their experience using those terms,” Freyd said.

Some young students, for example, may have experienced someone repeatedly saying sexual things to them, but they wouldn’t know that it was a form of sexual harassment.

“If you’re an 18-year-old student, you may not know that’s a problem,” Freyd said. “The student may think, ‘It’s all in good fun.’ ” The AAU survey also begins by asking students whether they’ve experienced a rape that involved physical force. Freyd wrote in her letter that such a question “only reinforces societal biases that rape is typically a violent crime,” which is inconsistent with most students’ experiences with sexual violence. AAU spokesman Barry Toiv said late Thursday that the survey draft that Freyd and other researchers critiqued is “very much out of date” and that it has been revised.

The survey “is a scientifically first-rate initiative to help universities better understand the attitudes and

experiences of their students with respect to sexual assault and sexual misconduct,” Toiv said.
