Sexual assault figures released

The study surveyed 150,072 students at 27 colleges, including the University of Oregon

BY DIANE DIETZ
The Register-Guard

Results from a massive survey on campus rape and sexual misconduct undertaken at the University of Oregon and 26 other universities last spring confirmed that at least 1 in 5 women reported being assaulted during their university years.

That's consistent with a series of previous surveys conducted by researchers who specialize in the study of sexual assault, such as those conducted this year and last by UO professor Jennifer Freyd.

Robin Holmes, UO vice president for student life, said, “The data itself is not surprising; but it’s still sobering.

“Turning the tide on this is critical,” Holmes said. “Students must be aware of the services available to them, have confidence they’ll be supported, and be assured that incidents will be investigated swiftly and fairly.”

The 288-page survey organized by the elite Association of American Universities includes data from such private schools as Harvard and Yale, as well as public schools such as the University of Arizona and the UO.

Surveyors drew 150,072 online participants from the 27 student bodies nationally,

Turn to ASSAULT, Page A7
Assault: LGBT, disabled students are at the highest risk

Continued from Page A1

including 3,059 from the UO. In most categories, the UO did not differ dramatically from the statistics recorded at other campuses.

One disparate statistic, however, suggests that UO students may have less faith in their institution than their counterparts at other universities. Fewer UO students said they believed officials would take a report of sexual assault seriously or conduct a fair investigation after such a report, the statistics show.

At the UO, 35.3 percent of female undergraduates said they would expect the UO to conduct a fair investigation, compared with 45.7 nationally.

Male undergraduates at the UO are a little more optimistic, with 44.4 percent expecting a fair investigation, compared with 53.2 percent nationally.

“We’re working very diligently to make students know we do take these very seriously,” Holmes said.

One surprising result nationally showed that, contrary to some criticism, university women often understate or under-report the sexual assaults against them. Most female undergraduates said after an assault they didn’t call police, but not very likely have received cultural messages that “penetration with force” is rape.

Interpret “penetration with force” as rape. It’s sobering — it really, really is — to know, “It’s sobering — it really, really is — to know,” Holmes said.

At the UO, the general prevalence of sexual assault is in line with the national rate.

Twenty-four percent of undergraduate women reported they experienced nonconsensual sexual contact through force or in situations when they were incapacitated and unable to consent. About 10.6 percent suffered nonconsensual sexual penetration.

Nationally, the numbers are 23 percent for forceful contact and 10.8 percent for penetration.

The universities paid $80,000 each to participate in the survey, for a total cost of $2.5 million nationally. Freyd said the survey is frustrating for researchers in the field who want to advance the science.

“A lot of energy has gotten lost over arguing about, ‘Is it true? Is it right? And so on,’ she said.

On the other hand, she said, “If this is the one (survey) that convinces people and we can move toward fixing problems and understanding them, instead of arguing about whether we have a problem, then it would be money well spent.”

A lot to digest

The report provides a mountain of data that university officials will be absorbing for months.

The questions cover sexual harassment, stalking and intimate partner violence. The numbers break down to fine detail about victims and assailants and the location and context of the incidents.

A striking finding, said David Cantor, a lead survey investigators and a University of Maryland research professor, is that lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or queer students are at the highest risk.

Disabled students also experience higher rates of assault, the data show.

There are people out there who are going to take advantage of individuals, and as a community we just have to have a very strong voice,” Holmes said. “We’re not going to allow that to happen.”

The Association of American Universities began “thinking about” its survey in November 2014 on the heels of the introduction of a bill called the Campus Accountability and Safety Act by U.S. Sen. Claire McCaskill, D-MO.

The bill, if passed, would require universities receiving public funding to administer a nationally standardized sexual assault survey, which the AAU trade group opposes.

The association began to implement its survey in April, about one month after the UO’s high-profile sexual assault incident involving three basketball players and a female freshman.

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