

EDITORIALS

Focus on perpetrators

Campus sexual assault isn't just victims' problem

Maybe now, as University of Oregon psychology professor Jennifer Freyd suggests, the UO can move beyond arguments over the validity of data showing a high prevalence of sexual assault on campus. A massive survey by the Association of American Universities mirrors Freyd's findings that nearly one in four women are assaulted as UO students — and that similar rates are found on campuses nationwide. The debate over whether it's happening is over. It's past time to do something about it.

The AAU contracted to survey more than 150,000 students on 27 campuses, including the UO. The prevalence of sexual assault is strikingly uniform — at the UO, 24 percent of undergraduate woman said they had experienced “nonconsensual sexual contact by force,” and 10.6 percent were victims of nonconsensual sexual penetration. Nationwide, the respective figures in those categories are 23 percent and 10.8 percent.

The numbers should silence doubters who say sexual assault isn't as common as is claimed. Even if the percentages were reduced by half or three-quarters, the problem would still be alarmingly serious. The UO can't find solace in the fact that the problem is also serious elsewhere — indeed, the fact that other campuses are also unsafe for women suggests that no one has found a way to stop or prevent sexual assaults, which means the solutions won't be simple.

The UO is an outlier in one respect: Only about a third of female undergraduates at the UO said they would expect the university to conduct a fair examination of a report of sexual assault. Nationwide, nearly half would expect a fair investigation. Such dismal expectations are dismaying — half is an unacceptably low confidence rate, and one-third is worse. The UO, and higher education generally, must find ways to improve

women's trust in their processes for dealing with reports of sexual assault.

“Turning the tide on this is critical,” said Robin Holmes, the UO's vice president for student life. “Students must be aware of the services available to them, have confidence that they'll be supported, and be assured that incidents will be investigated swiftly and fairly.”

Holmes is right, as far as she goes — awareness, credibility and trust are all vital. But she doesn't go far enough. Victims of sexual assault should have strong reason to believe they'll get the services they need, but even more, students at the UO should have reason to believe that they won't become victims of sexual assault in the first place. After-the-fact services, necessary though they are, deal with the consequences. Real progress won't come until universities find ways to deal with the cause: the perpetrators of sexual violence and abuse.

The perpetrators, mostly men and probably much smaller in number than their victims, can currently enjoy a sense of impunity, and often operate in an atmosphere of tolerance or even approval of their actions. That's what must change. Perpetrators need to fear that they'll be brought to account, with meaningful sanctions to follow. And the social context in which they operate must become hostile to sexual violence.

As universities have slowly awakened to the prevalence of sexual assault, concerns have also grown about a lack of due process for the accused. These concerns are valid, but cannot be allowed to soften a university's response to sexual violence. Investigations and disciplinary actions must be fair, while also offering opportunities for victims to obtain justice. Trustworthy after-the-fact processes are vital — but sexual violence on campus will remain as large a problem as the AAU survey found it to be until perpetrators are deterred, and their conduct is ostracized.