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Playing it safe

The design of the University infrastructure leaves few options for women to stay safe after dark



Bryan Dixon Emerald



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According to the 1999-00 ASUO Budget Book, Saferide gets \$40,713 in student fees for its operations. That sounds like a lot of money for a group that excludes the participation of one half of the student body, delineated specifically by sex. Can this support by the students for such an exclusive group be justified?

I suppose there are a number of ways to approach the question. But as a student of architecture, I chose to simply look around the University campus to see if I could decode the meanings and implications inherent in the way the buildings and grounds are designed, constructed and arranged.

My observations led me to believe that the campus was designed without consideration for the safety of women, even though

recent changes such as Saferide have attempted to improve the situation.

One of the first and, I think, most strongly symbolic things I noticed is the contrast between the way the statues of the Pioneer Father and Mother are treated. The father is located midway between the front doors of Fenton and Friendly Halls and directly on axis with the front door of Johnson Hall, giving him what is arguably the position of greatest architectural impact of any sculpture on the University. He is highly visible from 13th Avenue, which is probably the busiest street on campus and is certainly the University's main street. He stands on a rock among well-tended landscaping, and the weapons he carries, along with his confident demeanor, illustrate that he is in control.

In contrast, the Pioneer Mother is relegated to sitting on a pedestal tucked in a backwater of the campus, on axis with Johnson Hall's back door and Gerlinger Hall's locker room door. She sits in the mud not far from an alley, a few

bushes carelessly planted nearby. Even the plaques on the side of her pedestal depict her standing passively by as men and circumstances control the events of her life. Her head is bowed in defeat. The plaque on the back of the pedestal, describing the sculptor's intent, implies that her presence needs explanation.

The relationship of these statues is mirrored in the entire infrastructure, layout and construction of the University. The same greenery that makes the Oregon campus so beautiful provides a myriad of places for an attacker to lurk. The most effective method of providing safety in an urban or university setting is to have lots of people on the street; yet, most of the classroom buildings lack any support for after-hours activities other than night classes, and are well separated from the resident halls.

Consequently the campus is very lonely after dark when night classes end. In many places there is a lack of street level lighting, which is another big safety factor. The emergency call boxes do nothing to reduce the perception

of danger. Women are not safe crossing the campus on foot after dark.

For an example, let's say a single woman who lives in Carson Hall wants to take a night class at Villard Hall or enjoy a play at the Robinson Theatre. When she leaves she has about three choices. She can dodge past the bushes around Deady on the way to 13th Avenue. Or she can go down to Franklin Boulevard and walk the long way around and down Agate Street, but even there she faces some quiet dark places. Or she can call Saferide.

I've walked the campus at any time of night with literally no fear, but I've sensed the fear in single women I've encountered in lonely stairways at midnight in Lawrence Hall. While a few guys might fear a personal attack, men do not have to deal with the universal female fear of male sexual assault. A guy may not feel comfortable walking home from a night class, but he generally will not change his life or refuse to take a required class to avoid the situation. Many women do.

All of this ultimately results in reducing choices for women. According to the Office of Public Safety, nine out of 10 forcible sexual assaults are not reported, the campus logged two in 1998, indicating that about 20 rapes were actually committed.

Many women will not take night classes even if they are part of their degree requirements for fear of assault after leaving class, and I'd have to say they're justified. In effect this means that, intentional or not, the entire University-built infrastructure discriminates against women. I don't know what the value of that infrastructure is, but it must be at least in the hundreds of millions of dollars. Obviously, that can't be changed all at once, but maybe we can start soon.

Yes, sexism is still a problem at the University. But \$40,000 for Saferide to mitigate the problem seems like a very small token indeed.

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