

NO KNOWLEDGE, NO POWER

Hidden rules on sexual harassment leave students in the dark

Sexual harassment is a serious problem. But UO professor Cheyney Ryan says that without knowledge of available resources and student rights, the problem is more damaging than it has to be.

Ryan began an experiment in his philosophy of law class where students conducted extra credit surveys about sexual harassment of students by professors. What is sexual harassment? Who should you talk to? How long do you have to report a problem?

The answers, he says, showed that students hadn't been notified of their rights or their resources. Some students said they'd go to the police, some said they'd contact what's now the UO Police Department, but by far the most common responses were "I don't know."

Over the past couple of years, Ryan says, he's talked or communicated with 10 to 15 UO administrators or officials about changing procedures campus-wide to ensure that all students receive that knowledge, but nothing has come of it.

The answers to the UO policies questions are in the Office of Affirmative Action and Equal Opportunity's 29-page "An Overview of Services and Complaint and Grievance Procedures." Students have a year to report sexual harassment by an instructor, and use the state's administrative rules to define sexual harassment (PDF available at wkly.ws/1cy).

Compare that to LCC's web page on sexual harassment, which includes examples, consequences and links to formal and informal grievance procedures on the same webpage (wkly.ws/1cz).

"The most frustrating thing is that the administra-

tion doesn't seem to care about the issue. When they're asked about it, they don't respond. When suggestions are made, they ignore them," Ryan says. "There seems to be basic indifference to this problem among the administration."

Student Lissi Sogn was inspired by her experience in philosophy of law and decided to make a documentary about the problem.

"The film is called *Left Unsaid*," Sogn says. "I called it that because I feel like it summarizes the film on several levels." She says that first the policies regarding sexual harassment are unclear or unsaid, and after incidents occur, students don't know what to do or how to be heard, leaving their experiences left unsaid, too. The film can be seen at wkly.ws/1cw.

"It's something that you carry. It's a burden that you carry," she says.

The impacts on students who are sexually harassed by a professor or other authority figure can be particularly awful because of the mentor-mentee relationship, says Carol Stabile, a professor in women and gender studies and director of the Center for Women in Society. "My experience has been that it's isolating, it's devastating, and it can also be really terrifying, especially when you don't

know what resources you have at your disposal — especially because it's been my experience that so many harassers are, to put it frankly, really good at what they do," she says.

When people don't know what resources are at their disposal, she says, they often withdraw from classes or leave programs. "There are some people who really do make a point at figuring out what those resources are, but I think it's safe to say that many institutions are still not very good at making those resources transparent," Stabile says. "Frankly, they're also afraid of litigation." Among the problems, she says, is a lack of a clear definition of what sexual harassment is — for both victims and perpetrators.

"In the cases that I've been involved in that have had positive outcomes, it's been because the people involved are proactive; they make it clear to the victim that it's not their fault," Stabile says.

Ryan says that while the information isn't being

pushed throughout the student body, there is at least one department making a uniform effort to disclose resources: The School of Music and Dance.

The music school's dean, Brad Foley, says that during faculty discussions in 2008, the department decided to begin adding a five-office resource list on every class syllabus that anyone experiencing bias, discrimination or sexual harassment could contact.

"It's important that students know whom to go to or where to go when there are problems that need to be discussed and resolved," Foley says. "We're trying to be proactive about making everyone aware that there are means in this community for dealing with an uncomfortable situation."

Sogn says sexual harassment education should become campus-wide. "I think there needs to be a university-wide effort to make sure that students know what the policies are clearly, what the statutes of limitations are, what does it mean to be assaulted, what is sexual harassment," Sogn says. "I think the UO should bring it up at orientation; I think they should bring it up at big gatherings."

Ryan says he thinks newly hired President Michael Gottfredson has the potential to make a difference. "I think that the leadership on this should come from the president's office. This is the kind of issue that if the president's office does not make clear how important it is, then it's simply, in my experience, nothing much happens," Ryan says. "I would say conversely, when the president's office does take a strong stand, things happen very quickly."

"Students need to know their rights, and in particular vulnerable students need to know their rights because they need the ability to speak up about it and complain about it when their rights are not being respected. As it is now, if students are not told what their rights are, then there's no mechanism for protecting them," Ryan says. "I think that's a principle that applies everywhere, but it certainly applies here, too."

Ryan says that despite the many differences between the child sex abuse scandal at Penn State and sexual harassment at UO, he sees something similar in the post-incident reactions that could be prevented by education. "Almost always when you have a really serious, serious incident like this, what you hear from the powers that be is that they thought they were abiding by the rule; they thought they were abiding by the law," he says. — Shannon Finnell

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— CHEYNEY RYAN, UO PROFESSOR

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