

Safeguarding Our Communities From Sexual Predators: What College Presidents and Trustees Should Ask



In recent years, multiple universities have faced sexual predator scandals involving scores of victims. Often the institutional leaders were uninformed about the allegations regarding incidents on their campuses. This failure of leadership oversight has many presidents and trustees wondering how to safeguard their communities from similar tragedies. Here are key questions these campus leaders should ask and suggestions for creating a culture of prevention and reporting.

Become informed about policies and procedures.

What are the parameters of our sexual abuse policies?

Presidents should be well versed in the institution's policies addressing sexual misconduct and abuse. Consider whether the policies cover all members of the community. For example, are faculty, medical professionals, volunteers, and contractors included? If so, assess how the policies are conveyed to them and whether signed acknowledgments are required to show they have read the policies.

Confirm that the policies require all reports to be investigated and adjudicated using consistent procedures. Strict compliance is important, because any exceptions can lead to predators avoiding accountability despite allegations against them. For example, investigations should not stop simply because the respondent denies the action or because someone powerful requests that the investigation cease.

Do the institution's sexual abuse standards and policies apply equally to employees at all levels?

The institution's standards and policies must be applied impartially and consistently, without exception. This includes departments such as athletics, whose student athletes and staff are sometimes excused from following institutional requirements. It is important that exceptions are not made in policy or practice, even for employees in highly visible positions, prominent departments, or those who bring profit or prestige to the institution, such as doctors, scientists, and scholars. Remind staff that preventing harm to students and the campus community is always the top priority, even if it comes at a cost to the institution's reputation.

What are our institution's options for reporting sexual abuse?

Easily accessible reporting options are an important indicator of an institution that encourages reporting. Check whether reporting channels are well publicized, easy to find on the institution's website, and include an anonymous reporting channel, if possible. It is also recommended that the email address of at least one board member be made available online as an additional avenue for reporting.

What are the processes through which reports of sexual abuse are handled?

Review how reports are handled at the institution, including which office or individual processes the reports and launches the investigation. If possible, give one staff member oversight of all reports so trends and repeat offenders are identified, or establish a process that looks for these patterns. Inquire about guidelines for notifying high-level administrators, legal counsel, and others when more than one report is made against an individual. Ask whether the institution has any policies regarding the reporting of allegations to external law enforcement, especially with victims who are minors.



What is our policy regarding background checks?

Increasingly, educational institutions are implementing processes that require background checks of all employees at hire to screen for individuals with red flags in their pasts. Review your institution's policy regarding which positions or groups are subject to background checks, and what those checks entail. Keep in mind that phone calls to references—with fine-tuned questions that ask about the individual's respect for boundaries in interactions with students and children—are often the best source of information to weed out possible predators.

Take note of whether faculty, coaches, volunteers, and third parties are subject to the same screening as regular employees. Consider whether some employees, depending on job function, should have their background checks updated routinely during employment.

Be intentional with words and actions.

Have we established clear expectations for receiving updates on sexual misconduct reports and investigations, both on a routine schedule and an emergent basis for certain inquiries?

Presidents and trustees need not be involved in every allegation, but they should establish clear guidelines for regular updates about critical inquiries such as allegations involving more than one victim, more than one allegation against the same respondent, patterns of inappropriate behavior from teams or departments on campus, or allegations involving individuals in positions of power. Depending on the board's structure, one of its committees could take responsibility for monitoring these sexual abuse reports.

Similarly, presidents and trustees should establish guidelines for when they will be notified about settlements involving

allegations with more than one victim or allegations involving individuals in positions of power. By working with the general counsel's office or the individuals responsible for negotiating settlements on behalf of the institution, the president and trustees can ensure that they are informed early in the settlement negotiation process.

Often, staff have a strong reluctance to tell the president bad news, and the first instinct is to handle the matter so that it does not reach the president or board. However, on issues of serial sexual assault, presidents and boards are often held accountable despite being unaware of the allegations. Accordingly, they must become actively engaged and require updates on allegations. This cultural change may require professional development to educate staff and help shift attitudes.

Have we articulated our expectation that policies are followed?

Upholding the administrative structure for reporting, investigating, and disciplining is an important part of the president's role. The president must set the tone for thorough compliance with policies. As such, the president should only make investigative or disciplinary decisions if the president's involvement is prescribed by the policy.

Am I speaking out to foster a safe and inclusive environment on campus?

To effectively shape the campus culture, the president's actions should include a no-tolerance philosophy for sexual abuse and strong support for reporting. By publicly voicing support for survivors and proactively addressing topics surrounding sexual abuse, the president can serve as a catalyst for cultural change. If the community learns to be alert and report all boundary violations, this may stop or deter predators from further abuse.

Understand the campus culture.

What trainings are offered for students, employees, and faculty?

Take a close look at the trainings used for various audiences on your campus. Review the topics and training styles, then assess whether they are appropriate for each group. Are the trainings mandatory? How often are they required? Consider that many of the standard trainings (e.g. workplace harassment training for employees or Title IX training for students) may not cover important topics such as boundary violations, child abuse red flags, and employee obligations to report incidents of suspected sexual abuse.

Which staff members are addressing issues of sexual abuse on campus?

Presidents must make sure they are fully versed in the administrative positions working to prevent sexual abuse and assist victims on campus. Student affairs professionals often lead these prevention efforts and can be a valuable liaison for the president. By developing relationships with staff who handle sexual abuse reports and manage prevention efforts, the president can also establish an expectation that he or she be informed of noteworthy events.

What resources do we have for victims?

Providing appropriate, easily accessible resources on campus is critical for survivors' wellbeing. Review whether your institution's resources adequately serve the physical and emotional needs of victims and whether referrals to off-campus resources are provided. The institution's commitment to survivor wellness helps foster an environment that encourages reporting and supports those who make reports.

When did we conduct our last climate survey measuring sexual violence attitudes and prevalence on campus, and what were the results?

Institutional leaders must steer the campus culture toward an ethos that is alert about red flags, facilitates reporting, and supports victims. To do this, the president and trustees must understand the current campus landscape. A campus climate survey is an anonymous survey of students that assesses the prevalence of prohibited conduct, including sexual assault and abuse, and provides insight into students' perceptions about the environment on campus.

Presidents and trustees play an important role in protecting the campus community from sexual predators and should be well versed in the institution's reporting options, training programs, victim resources, and the administrative roles responsible for implementing these measures. Leaders who have a deep understanding of the institution's culture and engage in vocal support for reporting will help create an environment in which predatory behavior is unwelcome and boundary violations of any kind are not tolerated.



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