

OPINION

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GUEST VIEWPOINT

UO can move beyond institutional betrayal

By JENNIFER FREYD
For The Register-Guard

On the evening of April 28, hundreds of people packed the Global Scholars Hall on the University of Oregon campus for a premier screening of “The Hunting Ground.”

A compelling exposé of rape and sexual violence on American college and university campuses, this documentary captures through real-life stories what my students and I have been researching for many years: the horrors of betrayal traumas — trauma resulting from events such as sexual assault but by a trusted other.

One particularly harmful betrayal trauma is institutional betrayal. Institutional betrayal is caused by institutions that we trust and depend upon — like colleges and universities — when those institutions take actions that harm us and when those institutions fail to protect us in ways we expect.

In one study, UO graduate student Carly Smith and I discovered that when a university betrays survivors of sexual violence — for instance, by making

it hard to report the abuse — this institutional betrayal causes significant additional harm to victims of sexual assault.

Sexual assault is bad for people; institutional betrayal makes it even worse. Our universities are supposed to protect their students, not harm them.

In a campuswide survey study conducted last summer at the UO, graduate students Marina Rosenthal and Carly Smith and I found not only high rates of sexual violence on this campus, but also that institutional betrayal was experienced by many students. Our survey revealed that those students who had been betrayed by the institution were also more likely to withdraw from educational opportunities.

After more than two decades researching sexual violence, I know that sexual violence is a substantial problem in every part of society and that stopping it entirely is a challenge. Universities, though, have the knowledge and resources to reduce sexual violence. Instead, it appears that universities are a place where these problems are amplified.

Stopping institutional be-

trayal is not rocket science; in fact, we could do this very quickly if we made it a priority. If we did stop the institutional betrayal we would then substantially reduce the rates of sexual violence on campus and the related gender inequity. If we did really stop the institutional betrayal, we would reduce a vast amount of human suffering. We would save lives.

“The Hunting Ground” captured some events at the UO. In one segment, former President Michael Gottfredson said that speculations that student safety has been compromised or that the administration did not act in the best interests of students were “very, very inappropriate.”

I was sitting in a large auditorium when Gottfredson said these words. It was at a Senate meeting last May. On that same day it had become known that I had filed a Clery Act complaint regarding the university’s handling of a sexual assault case. I felt horrified by his words then, and do so all over again now. Questioning the actions of the administration was said to be: “very very inappropriate.”

Our university president was

wrong.

Silencing dissent is what is inappropriate. Silencing dissent is institutional betrayal.

Where are we today? We have made some progress but not nearly enough. It seems obvious that if this university actually prioritized protecting the civil rights and safety of students things would be very different by now.

What have sexual assault survivors and their allies learned at the UO this year?

◆ From the counterclaim in the lawsuit — which was later withdrawn under the pressure of students, professors and others — survivors and allies have learned what happens if one brings a complaint forward and tries to exercise one’s Title IX civil rights. It is called “shaming and blaming.”

◆ From the improper disclosure of the therapy records of a survivor, we have all learned what might happen should we talk to a therapist.

◆ From the statement that the counseling center’s policy was not changed, and then that the policy is not a policy, we have learned truth is not important. Yet as an institution

of higher education, truth is everything.

◆ From the retaliation that appears to have occurred toward employees who stand up for students, employees have learned to keep their mouths shut and students may have learned they are not important.

◆ From the neglect of crucial recommendations by the Senate Task Force — and from the recent announcement that the university will be hiring a Title IX coordinator who will be paid less than a new expert in public relations, also just advertised, we have learned — well, I will let you finish my sentence.

I realize that what I said may sound bleak. However, there is hope if our allies, inside and outside our institutions, work together to make changes. Apathy can be replaced with empathy and caring. Victims can become survivors. Truth-telling can replace public relations. And our hard-working administrators can move away from institutional betrayal.

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