In Jennifer Freyd For The Register-Guard

O n the evening of April 8, hundreds of people packed the Global Scholars Hall on the University of Oregon campus for a premiere screening of “The Hunting Ground.”

A compelling expose 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 trauma—trauma resulting from events such as sexual assault but by a betrayal. Institutional betrayal trauma is institutional betrayal. Institutional betrayal is caused by institutions that betray. One particularly harmful betrayal 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 one campuswide survey conducted last summer at the UO, graduate students Marisa Rosefeld and Carly Smith and I found not only high rates of sexual violence on the 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 more likely to withdraw from educational pursuits.

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 placing where these problems are amplified.

Stopping institutional betrayal 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 see substantively reduce the rates of sexual violence on campus and the related gender inequity. If we did stop the institutional betrayal, we would see 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 UO president Michael Gottfredson said that that speculation that student safety had been compromised or that the administration did not act in the best interests of students was “very, very inappropriate.”

What have sexual assault survivors and their allies learned at the UO this year? From the statement that civil rights and safety of students are 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 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 from the policy is not a policy, we have learned truth is not important. From the neglect of crucial recommendations by the Women’s Task Force—and from the recent announcement that the university will bring 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 blunt. However, there is hope if our allies, inside and outside our institutions, work together to make changes. Apology 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.

GUEST VIEWPOINT

UO can move beyond institutional betrayal

Jennifer Freyd is a professor of psychology at the University of Oregon.