



FROM THE PRESIDENT'S DESK

Sexual assault in college

Discussions of sexual behavior, particularly sexual assault, are often mediated in a misguided attempt to protect the victim's feelings and the institution's reputation. Such attempts are rarely successful. Institutional failure to be forthright can result in lasting harm as rumors spread and denial prevents acceptance of the truth or corrective action.

All of American higher education is aware of this problem and I am pleased to report with confidence that The College of New Jersey has recently developed a range of programs designed to bring the issue out of the shadows, while empowering victims to obtain help and the institution to monitor corrective action.

In 2001 we were confronted with a disturbing accusation of inaccurate sexual assault reports. While we discovered there was no evidence of false reporting, we did realize our reporting methods needed major improvement. More significantly, we confronted what all institutions of higher education must—sexual assault is the single most underreported crime on a

college campus. Our goal came to be to remodel educational efforts, health services, psychological counseling, police services, and residence life programs to ensure that sexual assault reporting is as easy and safe as possible and that all such reports will be acted upon with sensitivity and professionalism.

We have established useful partnerships with community organizations such as the New Jersey Coalition Against Sexual Assault, Womanspace, and Hi-Tops. We sought and received a grant to reduce violent crimes against women on campus from the U. S. Department of Justice, allowing us to establish an Office of Anti-Violence Initiatives. By the end of this calendar year we expect to begin training staff and faculty volunteers to expand the number of individuals to whom a victim can turn, not as a counselor, but as a trustworthy, well-informed friend.

We doubt our students are substantially different from the national norms when it comes to sexual behavior—that means between three and five percent of our college women are sexually victimized

each year. While the incidence is very high, the reporting of such crimes is very low. In 2002 two sexual assaults were reported on our campus; in 2004 the figure rose to eight. We were quite sure when we began this work over three years ago that if we were successful, the result would be more reported sexual assaults, not fewer. That is not a rise in the number of assaults, but a rise in the number of victims who feel supported enough to reach out for help and to hold their attackers responsible. Realistically, we expect those reports to continue to rise, even as we do our best to help victims come forward, to help educate our student body on responsible behavior, and keep at it with determination.

Sincerely,



R. Barbara Gitenstein