

May 22, 2023

To: Senator Muth, Senator Schwank, and the members of the Policy Committee

RE: Domestic Violence Awareness & Prevention Democratic Policy Hearing

## **Introduction**

My name is Dr. Kiara Allison, and I currently serve as the Title IX Coordinator at Widener University, which has two Pennsylvania campuses, one campus located in Harrisburg and the other in Chester. I am providing testimony regarding: the types of education and programs that college students receive regarding sexual violence, including domestic and dating violence; the effects of sexual violence on students, including financial impacts; and suggestions on how to address the problem of sexual violence on colleges campuses, namely the suggestion to require comprehensive sex education in K-12 schooling.

## **Role of the Title IX Coordinator**

As the Title IX Coordinator, I am primarily responsible for responding to all reports of sexual misconduct, including sexual assault, dating/domestic violence, stalking, sexual exploitation and sexual harassment in a timely manner. When a report is received, I send outreach to the complainant ( i.e., victim or harmed party) inviting them to a meeting with me to discuss their option to report to law enforcement in cases where crimes have occurred, discuss their procedural options for formal or informal resolutions through the University grievance process, to connect them with campus and/or community resources and most importantly, to provide any necessary supportive or protective measures required.

Examples of supportive and protective measures include:

- Referral to counseling, medical, and/or other healthcare services
- Referral to community-based providers
- Visa and immigration assistance
- Student financial aid counseling
- Altering campus housing assignment(s)
- Altering work arrangements for student employees
- Safety Planning
- Providing Campus Safety Escorts
- Transportation or parking accommodations
- Implementing No-Contact Agreements or No-Contact Orders
- Academic support, extensions of deadlines, or other course/program related adjustments
- Class schedule modifications, withdrawals, or leaves of absence
- Any other action deemed appropriate by the Title IX Coordinator

## **Community Partners**

Widener University has long standing partnerships with our local rape crisis center, the Delaware County Victim Assistance Center, and our domestic violence center, the Domestic Abuse Project of Delaware County. These community resources offer a range of support services including 24-hour hotlines, counseling services, legal services, advocacy and court accompaniment services, and safe houses. Widener students can access services at these community partners by connecting confidentially on their

own or through a referral by the Title IX Coordinator. These community partners also provide education and programming support to the Title IX Coordinator and student organizations.

### **Training, Education and Primary Prevention**

In addition to responding to reports, I am also responsible for coordinating all training, education, and primary prevention efforts related to sexual misconduct/violence for all students and employees.

Training and education efforts include;

- **Reporting Training** (students/employees)

This presentation covers the prohibited conduct, required reporting, reporting options for students, how to report, and what happens after a report is made.

- **First Responders Training** (employees, including student employees)

With the generous support of the Governor's 2022-2023 Its on Us PA grant program, Widener will partner with the Delaware County Victim Assistance Center (DCVA) to co-create and provide trauma-informed first responder training for our first responders on campus, which includes Campus Safety, Residence Life Staff and on-call Deans. This training will be offered in July and will equip our first responders with the skills necessary to receive and respond to reports of sexual violence with sensitivity.

- **Community Specific Education (LGBTQIA)**(students)

With the generous support of the Governor's 2022-2023 Its on Us PA grant program, Widener has contracted with the [Mazzoni Center](#), whose mission is "to provide comprehensive health and wellness services in an LGBTQ-focused environment...". Although queer and trans people experience sexual violence at higher rates than straight people, our LGBTQIA students are an under-reporting population on our campus. Therefore, we want to create targeted interventions for our LGBTQIA students to make sure they understand that our services and processes are inclusive. In these aims, we are in the process of collaborating with the Mazzoni center to create a 1.5-minute-long promotional video that highlights the facts, resources, and services available, especially those that may be of particular interest to the LGBTQIA community. We are also co-creating a 2-hr workshop led by Mazzoni center educators for our LGBTQIA student- leaders. This workshop will cover bystander intervention, reporting options, the reporting process, on-campus and community resources, and available supportive and protective measures. The aim of this workshop is to equip students within the LGBTQIA community with valuable information so that they can provide direct support to their peers, who otherwise may be uncomfortable or apprehensive about reporting sexual misconduct to the Title IX Coordinator.

#### **Primary prevention efforts include:**

- **Sex Signals** (first-year students)

The [Catharsis Productions "Sex Signals"](#) program combines theater, improvisational comedy, and audience interaction to educate students about issues surrounding dating, sex, and sexual violence on college campuses through relatable, intersectional scenarios. This program is a required presentation for all new first-year students at New Student Orientation.

Sex Signals covers:

- Definition of active consent
  - Explains the relationship between alcohol and sexual assault
  - Debunks myths surrounding rape and survivors of violence
  - Encourages bystander intervention
- **United Educators Online Modules** (all students and employees)

[United Educators \(UE\)](#) is Widener University's insurance carrier. They also "help educational institutions prepare for, respond to, and recover from adversity and risks, enabling them to advance their mission". In this aim, they have created online educational modules that their members can use to educate their students and employees. Widener University currently assigns two mandatory online sexual violence prevention modules to our first-year students. With the generous support of the Governor's 2022-2023 Its on Us PA grant program, Widener will be expanding the use of the platform by utilizing additional modules to make sure that all students and employees receive training regarding sexual violence prevention and response.

Select Module Descriptions:

*Healthy Relationships*- This course will help learners understand:

- Characteristics of healthy and unhealthy relationships
- Forms of dating abuse
- Warning signs of an abusive relationship
- What to do if you're involved in an unhealthy or abusive relationship
- Supporting friends who may be in an unhealthy relationship

*Impressions: Help Recognize, Prevent, and Report Sexual Assault*- This course will help learners understand:

- Definitions of sexual harassment, sexual violence, dating violence, domestic violence, and stalking
- The "culture of care" at higher education institutions
- Prevention, including bystander intervention techniques
- How to report and where to go for support
- The meaning of consent

*Intervene*- This course will help learners with intervening:

- In a potential sexual assault
- In a racial bias situation
- In a hazing ritual
- To support a friend's mental well-being
- In a sexual harassment situation
- In an emotional abuse situation
- In a substance abuse emergency

- **Green Dot Bystander Intervention** (students and employees)

Widener University employs the [Green Dot Violence Prevention](#) strategy. The original Green Dot program was conceived in the college setting to prevent dating violence, sexual violence, and stalking. It relies on the premise that if everyone does their small part and commits to individual responsibility, the combined effect is a safe campus culture that is intolerant of violence. The college-based curriculum draws heavily on the experiences of college students and the reality of this issue in their lives. This curriculum uses interactive activities to reinforce core concepts and encourages students to envision their future and the world in which they want to live, then aligns their bystander behavior with that vision.

Widener is in the process of revitalizing and re-training our existing Green Dot Education Team that has not yet returned to pre-pandemic activity levels. With the generous support of the Governor's 2022-2023 Its on Us PA grant program, this summer, we will send 10 faculty and staff members from across the University to the Green Dot Institute, where they will learn how to implement the Green Dot Strategy. In the fall, we hope to offer Green Dot Trainings in First-year seminars, student leader trainings, residence halls, student-athlete trainings, and in departments and units etc. for students, faculty, and staff.

The Green Dot Program:

- Engages witnesses to interrupt situations that are imminently or potentially high risk for violence
- Provides skill building and specific strategies to increase the likelihood that trained individuals will intervene
- Trains participants to engage in proactive behaviors that model and endorse norms that are incompatible with violence

### **Scope of Problem**

Before I begin to describe my description of the issue of sexual violence on campus based on 7 years of professional experience in the Title IX space, I would like for the committee to consider these statistics.

According to the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence

- 1 in 5 women are sexually assaulted during their college tenure
- 43% of dating college women reported experiencing violent or abusive behaviors from their partners
- Over 13% of college women report that they have been stalked. Of these, 42% were stalked by a boyfriend or ex-boyfriend
- Women aged 16-24 experience domestic violence at the highest rate of any age group, almost three times the national average
- 48.8% of men have experienced at least one psychologically aggressive behavior (being kept track of by demanding to know his whereabouts, insulted or humiliated, or felt threatened by a partner's actions) by an intimate partner in their lifetime
- 1 in 7 men have been severely physically abused (hit with a fist or hard object, kicked, slammed against something, choked, burned, etc.) by an intimate partner at some point in their lifetime.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey

- Lesbian, gay, and bisexual people experience sexual violence at similar or higher rates than straight people
- 44% of lesbians and 61% of bisexual women experience rape, physical violence, or stalking by an intimate partner, compared to 35% of straight women
- 26% of gay men and 37% of bisexual men experience rape, physical violence, or stalking by an intimate partner, compared to 29% of straight men

### **Testimony**

In this testimony, I want to highlight the experience of students that I encounter daily in my work as a Title IX Coordinator. Perhaps, unlike my counterpart today who works solely with and on behalf of victims, I work with both parties to facilitate a fair and impartial process and to ensure that each student has the necessary support needed. My academic training is as a philosopher and historian of education, so I have certain dispositions that come to bear on my perspective on this subject. Namely, that I believe in every humans' capacity to grow, become, and to be redeemed when we fail to meet the standards of our social contract. Additionally, I believe that being in community with each other is the hardest task assigned to each one of us and that sexual violence *compromises* our communities. So, while it is correct and necessary to give attention to victims and what they need to reclaim wholeness, it is wrongheaded not to consider the society and conditions that allowed perpetrators to become perpetrators. We also must consider what those accused of perpetrating violence may need to be redeemed and healed so that they do not continue to cause harm within our community. These are very big questions- more than I have time to address here, but I will offer that a start to tackling this problem is with primary prevention education, particularly comprehensive sex education that begins in K-12 schooling.

Experiencing sexual violence, of any form, is a life altering experience. A college student who is the victim of sexual violence will face many challenges in the aftermath of their experience. In my professional experience, many students have difficulty either recognizing what happened to them due to lack of understanding about the nature of sexual violence, or they have a hard time coming to terms

with the incident because most sexual violence is perpetrated by individuals that the victim trusts. Many of the reports that I handle involve incidents where the victim and the perpetrator are involved in some form of an intimate relationship. In short, sexual violence takes an emotional and psychological toll on our students who are already navigating the everyday stressors associated with college attendance.

I would estimate that 80% of my job is coordinating supportive or protective measures for victims.

Referrals to counseling, referrals to student accessibility services, coordinating new housing assignments, and providing no-contact orders are some of the most common supportive or protective measures provided. However, academic accommodations are the most provided supportive measure.

Victims often report nightmares, oversleeping or insomnia, not being able to focus, panic attacks, and crippling anxiety and depression. All the aforementioned symptoms affect their ability to perform academically, thereby putting their college careers at risk. While the supportive measures that I provide to victims are without cost, they are only available to students who report the incident(s) either directly to myself or any employee at Widener<sup>1</sup>. Although there are efforts to make sure that students understand their reporting options and the resources available to them, some students still will not feel comfortable with reporting to the university. Barriers to reporting include shame and stigma associated with being a victim, the fear of not being believed, the fear of getting into trouble with the university because drugs or alcohol may have been involved in the incident<sup>2</sup>, and the fear of being forced into a criminal process or formal investigation by the University. Men and our Queer and Trans students have additional barriers to reporting associated with their identities and they make up only a handful of reports that I receive during the year. Ultimately, students who do not report end up vulnerable to failing or dropping out because they did not receive the proper support and accommodation needed to

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<sup>1</sup> All employees, with few exceptions, are required to report all known details about disclosures of sexual misconduct to the Title IX Coordinator, including names, dates, times, and locations.

<sup>2</sup> To encourage reporting and participation in the process, the University maintains a policy of offering parties and witnesses amnesty from minor policy violations - such as underage consumption of alcohol or the use of illicit drugs - related to the incident

ensure their persistence at our institution. Furthermore, if students fail their courses, that may jeopardize their ability to seek federal financial aid in the future, thus creating a rippling effect in the student's overall educational trajectory. Lastly, we must also consider that a student who does not persist is still left with the costs associated with attendance although they have not attained a degree.

Being accused of perpetrating sexual violence is also a life altering experience. Of course, there are incidents that are particularly egregious that happen on college campuses that showcase the dark underbelly of the human psyche. However, what is also true is that in many cases of sexual violence, particularly those involving intimate partners, our students' immaturity, lack of emotional dysregulation, maladaptive coping mechanisms, and codependent behaviors are put on full display. For example, in stalking cases, many times the perpetrator does not know that their behaviors amount to stalking, as they may only understand stalking to be following someone across different locations. Another example that I often see in intimate partner relationships are threats of self-harm, or dishonesty about being pregnant to prevent a romantic partner from leaving the relationship. In these examples, perpetrators are attempting to get their needs met, albeit in selfish, manipulative, and alarming ways. To be clear, the impact of these behaviors is that the victim ultimately feels unsafe, and the perpetrator should be held accountable for their actions. However, what I am trying to demonstrate is that these patterns are not only indicative of personal moral depravity or defects in character. They are the symptoms of our society that does not equip our students with the skills needed to emotionally and psychologically navigate the world, let alone navigate romantic, intimate relationships. So, when I am working with accused students, they often experience disbelief, denial, or regret regarding the incidents. They often report extreme feelings of loneliness because they may have been isolated from their friend group due to the accusation. They report feeling deep shame and not feeling safe to seek support because they fear they will be stigmatized because they have been accused. Like victims, accused students often also require academic accommodations and are also at risk of failing or dropping out. Lastly, their family

relationships can become strained, especially if parents or guardians step in to provide funds for legal assistance for criminal or university processes.

To be abundantly clear, sexual violence comes at a tremendous cost to our communities. It costs perpetrators, and it especially costs victims. When families send their students to college, they hope that they do not become a victim of sexual violence. However, many never consider that their students may become a perpetrator of sexual violence. Either possibility is damning. As such, it is our responsibility to equip our students with the skills, knowledge, and dispositions necessary to not only maintain healthy relationships, but to also be effective members of our community and society.

Therefore, we need to **require** comprehensive K-12 sex education in all Pennsylvania schools that goes beyond stressing abstinence, the anatomy of the sex organs, and the medical and scientific description of sex and reproduction, and discussions of sexually transmitted diseases or infections. Our students need age-appropriate lessons about boundaries, consent, interpersonal communication and other topics that are championed by public health experts and sex educators.

Sex education in K-12 schooling is important to me as a higher education administrator because the difference between a 12<sup>th</sup> grader and a freshman is a few short summer months. Students arrive on our campuses and for the first time, many receive their own living spaces, experience more freedom, have access to drugs and alcohol, have young adult appearances, and budding sexual desires, all of which are coupled with low maturity, low risk inhibition, under-developed pre-frontal cortexes, a desire to experiment with their personal and social identities, and a life's worth of messaging and conditioning around sex and sexuality. These factors confound to create risks specific to the higher education context, all the while there is constantly changing federal legislation that creates unreasonable demands on colleges and universities to create educational environments free from sexual violence. As such, I am asking that more attention be given to preparing students for healthy relationships before they step foot on any campus.



To make sure that our students are receiving quality sex education by trained experts, we need to funnel more money into our local rape crisis and domestic violence centers so that they have more capacity to do school and community education. I know first-hand through my work with multiple centers in Chester, Delaware, and Philadelphia counties, that the individuals that work in these centers are passionate and committed to their work. However, the reality is that many of these centers are not properly staffed or funded to meet the many needs of our communities. Moreover, the individuals that staff these centers are often not compensated at a thriving wage, although they are providing critical services to our communities. I believe that we need to show our commitment to eradicating sexual violence by directing resources to these centers.

I want to also champion the Governor's PA Its on Us Grant and ask for increased funding and continued support of this program. I have been the principal investigator of four grants at three different Pennsylvania universities, and I can say that our training, education, and primary prevention efforts would suffer greatly without the funding provided by this grant.

Additionally, I would like to offer that we begin to think about the programs and services that we provide to rehabilitate perpetrators. As mentioned earlier, I believe in the fundamental human ability to grow, become, and be redeemed. If we take seriously the notion that sexual violence is an assault on community, we will also then begin to reconsider what accountability looks like, what victims need to heal, and what actions are needed to bring offenders back into community (hopefully as healthy and whole individuals). There are abuser or batterer intervention programs that currently exist, but they are often only for court mandated individuals and there are none in Delaware or Philadelphia County that I our university could partner with, much like I do with our local rape crisis and domestic violence centers. Again, I am of the opinion that we must take affirmative action towards making sure that offenders, especially our young college aged students, do not continue down the path of harm and destruction that is sexual violence.

Lastly, I would like to conclude my testimony by making a final statement. Sexual Violence is wrongly seen as a women's issue because women are disproportionately the victims in these matters. It is a common fallacy to paint women as potential victims and men as potential perpetrators. This erases victims who are men and the LGBTQIA population completely out of the discussion. Nevertheless, the framing of sexual violence as a women's issue persists in our social imagination and history shows that women's issues do not receive the proper credence, attention, and response necessary to meaningfully address our concerns. Perhaps, this is the reason that bills such as Senate Bill 1092, introduced by Senator Timothy Kearney, that would mandate consent education in K-12 are dead. Is it because the cost of not having consent education is *just* more women who will become victims. Is that something that our commonwealth can stomach? That is the message that dead bills regarding this topic send to our public. So, if the case being made by victims is not enough to spur action to make comprehensive sex education a priority in K-12, then perhaps we can reckon with the fact that for every victim, there is a perpetrator, and that perpetrator can be our anyone of our beloved family members. It is my hope that this testimony provides insight into the effects of sexual violence on college campuses and provides impetus for the leaders of our commonwealth to require comprehensive sex education in K-12 schools, properly fund our rape crisis and domestic violence centers, continue to fund and support the Its On Us grant program, and to invest and create more rehabilitation programs for those who perpetrate sexual violence.