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Education is key to helping prevent sexual assault

BY JANET L. SMITH ('81)

It is a societal problem that robs individuals of their sense of safety. Its survivors are women and men, although at widely disparate levels. It is the focus of renewed attention at the national level. "It" is sexual assault.

The current national dialogue about sexual assault reaches to top levels, where The White House Council on Women and Girls and the Office of the Vice President issued a report in January estimating the scope of the problem as nearly one in five women and one in 71 men having been raped in their lifetimes. One in five female college students have been sexually assaulted while in college, the report says.

Student advocacy and the U.S. Department of Education's "Dear Colleague" letter of April 2011 have heightened national discussion of sexual assault. In early May, the education department's Office for Civil Rights released a list of 55 higher education institutions under investigation for possible violations of federal law over the handling of sexual violence and harassment complaints. Since the initial list was released, JMU and 20 other colleges and universities have been added.

It is important to note that under its own policies and procedures, OCR investigates all allegations that fit with the framework of the

statutes it enforces. Accordingly, the list of 76 institutions recently released by OCR indicates only that institutions have received such complaints. It is not a judgment on the legal merits of the complaints. As the assistant secretary for civil rights has emphasized, "a college or university's appearance on this list and being the subject of a Title IX investigation in no way indicates that the college or university is violating or has violated the law."

Meanwhile, programs of all kinds are in place to educate students on preventing sexual assault from happening. "At JMU students are introduced as freshmen to the sexual misconduct policy and the concept of giving and receiving sober consent during the True Life session in Summer Springboard and there is a whole session where they go through bystander intervention training during 1787 Orientation. Parts of that training are about sexual violence," says Liz Howley, assistant director, University Health Center's Student Wellness and Outreach and a certified health education specialist. "Haven, which is a mandatory online training that students begin before they even come to campus, covers healthy relationships, sexual assault and bystander intervention."

Health education specialists view bystander intervention training as a promising practice. Called "Dukes Step Up" at JMU, the training was used at the university before the Campus SaVE Act mandated its implementation at the nation's colleges and universities.

The approach educates people in "learning the skills to act when you see something," Howley explains. "If I'm at a party and I realize that someone I came with might be too drunk to give consent, then I can intervene using the skills from Dukes Step Up."

Key parts of the training are understanding why people choose not to intervene in situations, sexual assault ones as well as other threatening situations, and training to overcome those barriers to action.

"Bystander intervention really fits in well with our campus because we are a community that prides itself on looking out for one another. Our campus environment is important," Howley says. "While certainly not the solution to sexual violence overall, bystander intervention training is one piece of the puzzle."

Awareness raising programs for freshmen and bystander training are but two of the many ways JMU faces the challenge of sexual assault. President Alger also recently announced a suite of updates to sexual assault policies and procedures. Find more details at www.jmu.edu. ■



Students help shape White House efforts to prevent sexual assault

Recommendations from a White House task force to prevent campus sexual assaults include key contributions from JMU students Kim Johnson ('12, '15M) and Raychel Whyte ('14). This past spring, the duo was invited to the White House to advise President Obama's White House Task Force to Protect Students From Sexual Assault. The two attended the formal release of the task force's report on April 29. While advising the White House task force, Johnson served as a graduate assistant for sexual violence education,

advocacy and support in the JMU University Health Center. She also advised the JMU student organization Campus Assault Response. She and Whyte were co-coordinators of JMU's Red Flag Campaign chapter and Take Back the Night. The two joined 13 students from around the country in the vice president's office for a meeting with the White House adviser on violence against women, the secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services, and members of various advocacy groups.