Develop response plan for students returning to campus after sexual misconduct

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By Claudine McCarthy, Editor

ST. PETERSBURG BEACH, FLA. — The call for higher ed administrators to ramp up their responses to reports of sexual misconduct has become a hot topic on college campuses throughout the country. Student affairs professionals have long been addressing this issue, with a special emphasis on fair student conduct processes and victim support.

But most colleges have probably overlooked one particular outcome of having an increased emphasis on this issue. It involves the students found responsible for the sexual misconduct.

“There’s an exponential increase happening or about to happen in suspensions tied to sexual misconduct, and we’re all very dialed into this process. But I haven’t heard anyone talk about what’s going to happen on the back end of when the students want to come back onto campus,” said David Karp, associate dean of student affairs and professor of sociology at Skidmore College in New York.

That’s why Karp and Robin J. Wilson, a clinical and forensic psychologist with McMaster University in Ontario, spoke about Circles of Support and Accountability (CoSAs) at the annual conference of the Association for Student Conduct Administration.

Research shows that CoSAs provide an effective way to safely reintegrate sexual offenders into the community after their release from prison, Wilson said. He thinks CoSAs could translate into a similar approach of working with students who want to return to college campuses after they’ve committed sexual misconduct that falls into a lower level of risk and severity.

Wilson has spent more than 30 years working with sexual offenders and victims and conducting public policy work and research. He now runs a private consulting practice that assists in the development of CoSA projects, with support from the federal Office of Justice Programs.

Understand the model

CoSAs tailor interventions to each individual and target specific behaviors through “radical inclusion, meaning including people in our social circles who we might otherwise have ostracized or driven out because of their conduct. CoSAs act as a buffer between the socially disenfranchised and, in this case, a fearful community,” Wilson said. CoSAs invest the necessary time to ensure the person who has done wrong returns to the community safely, he said.

CoSAs involve two concentric circles of people surrounding the “core member,” or person responsible for the misconduct:

1. **The inner circle** of volunteers from the community provides advice, guidance and accountability through weekly meetings and daily contact so the core member doesn’t fall back into other behaviors that led to his misconduct in the first place.
2. **The outer circle** provides professional support through counselors, police officers, social workers, victim services and health services staff, and faith community representatives.

A circle coordinator ensures everything goes according to plan and that the inner circle reaches out to the outer circle as needed and that the outer circle actually responds, Wilson said. He said CoSAs operate on several core principles:

- No one is disposable.
- No one can overcome this alone — that’s why we need the circles.
- No more victims (for that offender).

Research disproves the common assumptions that all sexual offenders are guaranteed to repeat and can’t be rehabilitated, Wilson said. In fact, reoffense rates are much lower than commonly believed, he said. Data shows about 15 percent of known sexual offenders will commit a new sexual offense within five to seven years, decreasing to less than 10 percent for those who have remained offense-free in the community for at least 10 years, he said.

Consider CoSA success stories

Various CoSA projects have had high success rates in the United States and Canada, the United Kingdom (Circles-UK), and Europe (Circles4EU), Wilson said.

When researchers asked core members in CoSAs what may have happened if they didn’t have their circles, they said they may have:

- Had difficulty adjusting.
- Had difficulty in relationships with others.
- Become isolated and lonely.
- Turned to drugs and alcohol.
Wilson recalled when a reverend and church elders created a CoSA for “Charlie,” a sexual offender released from prison. Community members picketed — understandably, considering that Charlie had an actual risk rating of a 100 percent chance of reoffending within seven years, Wilson said.

But Wilson said they had to consider the alternative. “We could stand idly by and watch him reoffend or do something active about it,” he said. Communities share responsibility for both the victims and the offenders, who, despite their wrongdoings, are still community members, he said.

Charlie never committed any sexual or other criminal offense and had maintained a close connection to his circle until he died 12 years later, Wilson said. “If it can work with a guy like that, then why can’t it work on your campuses as well?” Wilson said.

CoSAs on campus deserve consideration, but campus officials would first need to gauge each violation’s severity, the campus anxiety level, and other factors, Karp said. CoSAs could benefit victims as well as the entire campus community and beyond — not just the student responsible for the misconduct, he said. That’s because CoSAs provide reassurance that the administration is paying close attention to the offender, he said.

“It’s a very good time for us to create models where we’re building good relationships, by having CoSAs on campus. I don’t buy the model that suspension or expulsion is a good outcome. Where are we expelling them to? Is the place they’re going to as well-resourced, as well-informed, and as capable of working with that student so that student functions well in society?” Karp asked.

Address challenges

If you’re considering implementing CoSAs at your institution, Karp and Wilson offered the following recommendations to help you better manage and respond to several likely challenges:

- **Challenge:** Limited time, staffing and other resources.
  - **Response:** “How many people on our campuses have so much energy around the issue of sexual misconduct but have no place to channel it, except for getting OCR to get your campus on the list?” Karp asked. They could pour that energy into participating as members of CoSAs, Karp said.

  “We’re very intentional about who we accept into the circle. We want them to be balanced in most areas of their lives. We want them to be invested in the idea that things can be better. We don’t want someone with an axe to grind. We don’t want someone who thinks the world needs to be nicer to sexual offenders. Women have to have a voice in this, and we’d be foolish not to include them,” Wilson said.

  CoSAs could meet in a room in your student center and an existing staff member could coordinate CoSAs as part of their responsibilities, Wilson said.

- **Challenge:** Resistance from those who just want these students removed from campus.
  - **Response:** Not all victims feel this way. Karp said. Although some victims have said they were able to come forward only because they knew the person would be expelled, other victims said if they knew expulsion was the only option on the table they wouldn’t have come forward, he said. Stress the full title of CoSAs, with emphasis on the word Accountability, and explain that the student won’t just be wandering campus without support, monitoring and check-ins.

  When victims find out that CoSAs will hold the person responsible for completing sanctions or counseling, and ensure they don’t cross paths at class or the gym, victims are likely to feel reassured, Wilson said. It also saves time for student affairs professionals who would’ve had to cross-check their schedules, he said.

  In Wilson’s experience, the police and victims’ advocates groups become the voice of the community and might have the least faith in CoSAs — initially. So he takes the time to meet with them and explain how CoSAs won’t watch someone fail and victimize more people, but instead serve as a proactive alternative to sitting idly by while a person involved in sexual misconduct returns to either your campus community or another community. Formerly resistant communities that have CoSAs have now sent letters of recommendation, he said. “Everywhere we go, there’s skepticism first, and acceptance after the fact,” he said.

- **Challenge:** Students who won’t accept responsibility for sexual misconduct.
  - **Response:** CoSAs can still work even if students don’t admit their wrongdoing: you just have to change the way you approach these students, he said. Denial or minimization doesn’t predict the risk of repeat offenses, Wilson said. But individuals who can commit to living their lives very differently than they did before increase their chances of becoming responsible community members, he said. Wilson suggested telling the student in denial: “Let’s just say you didn’t do this and it’s just a great miscarriage of justice. Let’s look at where you are in your life right now. People think or will assume you did this. They think horrible things about you because of this. So what do you want to do to change your life situation and how you’re perceived right now?” The steps they would take in response would end up being the very same steps you’d want them to take if they did admit responsibility, such as participating in a CoSA, he said.

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