

# **2023 Public Description of Work for Action Collaborative on Preventing Sexual Harassment in Higher Education**

Vanderbilt University

## **Title IX Office/Project Safe Collaboration - Addressing Reports of Sexual Misconduct Within a Registered Student Organization**

### **Relevant Rubric Area(s):**

1. Prevention –Ally or Ambassador Programs, Leadership Education and Skill Development
2. Response –, Improved Communication and Increased Transparency
3. Approaches for Pursuing Organizational Change – Leveraging Distinct Stakeholder Groups and Creating Partnerships (both students and staff)

### **Description of Work:**

Responding to Allegations of Sexual Assault as a Student Org: A Case Study

#### History of Issue

Over the past academic year, several different student organizations and/or their advisers contacted the Title IX Office and the Project Safe Center at Vanderbilt seeking guidance on how to navigate managing a student organization that has a member who is or allegedly is participating in the Title IX process as a respondent or who has been reported to leaders of the student organization but has not been reported to the Title IX Office as a potential respondent. Of particular concern to some student organizations were situations where both participants (complainant and respondent) were members of the organization, and were also attempting to participate in organization events or leadership opportunities. These concerns arose in both graduate and undergraduate student organizations, and student participation in these organizations impacted classroom, laboratory, and extracurricular involvement beyond the activities of the organizations.

In responding to requests from student organizations and their advisers, the Title IX Office and Project Safe Center staff noted that there were numerous instances of student organizations attempting, themselves, to investigate or resolve reports of sexual misconduct within their membership, in order to determine if a member should be removed from the student organization. This led to numerous misunderstandings, both within the membership of the organization as well as generally within the campus community, or on social media or other public fora, as the Title IX Office, Student Affairs, and academic offices would get calls and other communications alleging that a person was in a “Title IX process” or “had a Title IX complaint” against them. It also led to attempts by these student organizations to use Vanderbilt

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policies to conduct their own proceedings using Vanderbilt policies without any official endorsement or process, or to dismiss students with no process at all.

At times, these organizations often did not understand the difference between the Project Safe Center, which is an advocacy and prevention-focused, limited confidential campus resource, and the Title IX Office, which is a prevention and investigation-focused office, which is the office charged with the duty to investigate, remediate, and prevent sexual misconduct on campus, both under federal law and Vanderbilt policy. Student organization members were often unable to parse where else a report of sexual misconduct may have been submitted, if at all. Phrases such as “Project Safe case” and “Title IX is investigating” [when there was no investigation] were often used during follow-up conversations between the student organization and the Title IX Office and Project Safe staff.

### Opportunities for Education and Partnership

The Title IX Office and Project Safe Center staff identified two initial concerns based on their experiences with student organizations over the past (2021-2022) academic year. First, student organizations needed greater context on how Vanderbilt addresses reports of sexual misconduct, and the appropriate role of the organizations (or lack thereof) in that process. Second, student organizations needed clarity on the functions of the Title IX Office and the Project Safe Center; both what differentiates the two, and how they work together.

### Solution Through Partnership

This partnership allows the Title IX Office and the Project Safe Center to speak to their respective roles on campus and, at the same time, provide the campus community with much needed information related to the topic of sexual misconduct prevention and response. Additionally, it allows attendees to understand that both offices are able to answer student organization questions and that the offices continue to work together to support the community.

The partnership creates a customized presentation, with accompanying role-playing exercises for participants, that will address situations where members of the same cohort or student organization are involved in a sexual misconduct incident or proceeding. The presentation demonstrates to the participants how they might support all parties in a sexual misconduct case, as appropriate, and engage in more responsible, trauma-informed ways, while the role-playing nature of the exercise provides a low-stakes way for participants to experience feeling what it is like to be the subject of a social media post concerning something that they would rather remain private, to help cultivate empathy and understanding if and when they might consider posting something themselves in the future.

The joint structure of the presentation will reinforce the partnership and collaborative nature of our two offices and their work, while further explaining to the participants how the two offices are

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distinct and when they should seek services from the Title IX Office and when it would be better to go to Project Safe or when working with both offices may be useful.

Specifically, the Title IX Office will discuss how sexual misconduct is addressed on campus and the ways that student organizations should and should not be involved in addressing sexual misconduct. This information both increases awareness of Vanderbilt policies related to these matters and aids in Vanderbilt's on-going efforts to educate its campus partners on the subjects of sexual misconduct prevention, response, and reporting.

The Project Safe Center, located within the division of Student Affairs, is well-suited to share best practice suggestions related to bystander intervention and trauma-informed tactics for student organization leaders and members. Specifically, Project Safe will share how student organizations can continue their activities while being supportive of their membership, regardless of status as complainant, respondent, or witness.

### *Presentation Structure*

The presentation is structured into four parts. First, the Title IX Office talks about how the Title IX process works, the reporting options available, and where student organizations can find support when they have questions. Second, Project Safe presents on best practices related to survivor-centered response, bystander intervention, and how to be understanding of a respondent who may or may not be going through a Title IX process. Third, Title IX and Project Safe jointly have attendees work through a series of case studies in groups before re-convening to discuss the case studies as a whole. This structure allows the participants to synthesize the information that they learn during the first half of the presentation and apply it to the case studies that they work through during the second half. Fourth and finally, the presentation leaves space for questions from attendees. Many student organizations view themselves as being unique, whether in focus area or structure, and this portion of the presentation will allow for individualized response to members of the campus community.

### *Desired Outcomes*

#### *Partnership Through Increased Communication with Student Organizations*

Through this presentation, Title IX and Project Safe will encourage student organizations and their advisers to bring questions to the appropriate office, rather than trying to internally problem solve. This presentation is also designed to deter potentially harmful or problematic investigatory tactics employed by student organization members who have not been trained to conduct sexual misconduct investigations and who often lack any authority through the organization itself to do so. Often an initial increase in contact with the Title IX Office and Project Safe Center is an indicator of increased awareness and understanding of the respective roles of these resources on campus.

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### *Organizational Change Through a New Standard Training Option*

Title IX and Project Safe developed this training with an eye towards the future. Both offices have already committed to scheduling Fall 2023 training sessions with new student organization leaders. These trainings are customizable and well-suited to join the list of student leader training options available for interested individuals and groups. Having a standardized training such as this creates an opportunity for Vanderbilt's response to shift from being reactive to proactive in training student leaders and organizations on their appropriate roles in responding to sexual misconduct. In this way, we anticipate a reduction in confusion about how to address sexual misconduct within student organizations, a reduction in online speculation, argument, and/or harassment related to alleged incidents of sexual misconduct by and among students and student organizations, as well as a reduction in misdirected reports and general comments to the campus community about someone being "under investigation" when no investigation exists.

**Website for further information (if applicable):** <https://www.vanderbilt.edu/title-ix/>;  
<https://www.vanderbilt.edu/projectsafe/>

**Point of Contact Name:** Mary E. Roy, J.D., Director, Title IX and Title IX Coordinator; Cara Tuttle, J.D., Director, Project Safe

**Email Address for Point of Contact:** [mary.roy@vanderbilt.edu](mailto:mary.roy@vanderbilt.edu);  
[cara.tuttle.bell@vanderbilt.edu](mailto:cara.tuttle.bell@vanderbilt.edu)