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Photo by John Novotny

A Safe HOME

In 2011, colleges and universities across the United States received a letter from the Department of Education. The letter—known as a “Dear Colleague” letter—reminded schools that, under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, they have an obligation not only to protect female students from discrimination, but also to provide them with an educational environment free from all forms of sexual harassment and violence.

The intention of the letter was good: It wanted schools to become more pro-active about ending sexual misconduct. At the same time, it was a tall order. After all, how do you eliminate sin?

Nevertheless, in the wake of the letter, schools rushed to implement new policies to prevent sexual misconduct. The majority of those policies focused on the idea of “consent”—teaching students how to ask for and give clear permission about every kind of sexual contact, from handholding to intercourse. Schools also established educational programs for students and employees, clarified conduct guidelines, and created policies that facilitated cultivating a safe environment.

While Franciscan University has long had programs and policies in place to prevent sexual misconduct, Brennan Pergi, Franciscan University’s vice president of Human Resources and deputy Title IX/EEO coordinator, says, “We recognized the value of both evaluating those programs and policies and looking for better ways to communicate them. We also recognized the importance of doing so in a manner consistent with our Catholic identity.”

With the change in presidential administrations, much of the federal direction and guidance on Title IX has changed. The importance of the issue, however, has not changed, and seven years after the first “Dear Colleague” letter, Franciscan still strives to provide a safe home for all students on campus, where everyone’s dignity is respected.

Franciscan University’s Response

According to John Pizzuti, Franciscan’s Title IX/EEO coordinator and director of Campus Safety and Compliance, over the past seven years, the University

has reviewed all existing policies and procedures regarding sexual misconduct, strengthening or clarifying them when needed. Franciscan also designed and implemented new training programs on the problem for everyone who studies or works at the University; developed a host of educational programs for those who reside on campus; and even established Memorandums of Understanding (MOU) with the Steubenville Police Department and Alive Inc. (a local victims’ advocacy group) to ensure the consistent reporting of problems and support for victims.

In total, since 2011, almost two dozen new programs, designed to ensure the safety of all students, have gone into effect at Franciscan. Key staff members have received comprehensive training in helping victims of sexual misconduct. And the entire process of reviewing complaints—from reporting to adjudicating and appealing decisions—has been strengthened and clarified.

All those changes, however, have been informed and shaped by the Catholic understanding of human dignity and human sexuality. For example, the online training

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sessions regarding sexual misconduct that Franciscan developed for both students and employees extensively incorporate Catholic teaching on the human person and the gift of sexuality.

Likewise, says Pergi, that same Catholic understanding influences how the University addresses the issue of consent.

“We didn’t want to create the perception that consent is all that matters or that as long as you have consent, whatever you’re doing is OK,” he explains. “We worked hard to anchor what we say about consent to the Church’s teachings about the gift of human sexuality and make clear that consent isn’t enough; it’s not the goal. The goal is living a life worthy of a follower of Jesus Christ.”

Franciscan also sought to go beyond the requirements of Title IX and give students a formation in wisdom and virtue.

“We don’t want to be the school that simply fulfills the Title IX requirements and crosses it off our checklist,” says Catherine Heck, Franciscan’s assistant vice president of Student Life and deputy Title IX/EEO coordinator. “We want to offer our students a formation that calls them to a much higher standard of respect for themselves and others—a standard that would make Title IX a moot point.”

One of the ways Franciscan now does this is through an annual Gift of Human Sexuality Symposium, which addresses topical questions about love, sex, and the human person. The most recent symposium, held last September, featured six speakers, including Dr. Anne Hendershott on gender dysphoria (or confusion), Dr. Matthew Breuninger on the Theology of the Body and personal healing, and Daniel Mattson on same-sex attraction and personal identity.

“The goal is to address issues that people struggle with in terms of living a

chaste life—from pornography to same-sex attraction—and help students learn how to deal with those struggles according to Catholic teaching,” says Heck.

Further Challenges

At Franciscan University, encouraging students in virtue has always been the goal, both before and after the 2011 “Dear Colleague” letter.

“We aim to have the Catholic vision of the human person inform everything we do here,” says Pergi. “We strive to recognize the dignity of our brothers and sisters as images of God, and we want our students to see each other as a brother or sister for whom Christ died.”

“If you see someone that way, you’re going to want the best for them,” he continues. “If you see someone that way, you’re not going to harm them or mistreat them in any way. If you see someone that way, you’re not going to do anything to or with them that jeopardizes their salvation.”

To a remarkable extent, Franciscan has succeeded in those efforts. It has an exceptionally healthy campus culture and comparatively fewer incidents of sexual misconduct than other schools its size.

But it’s still not heaven. Original sin and concupiscence exist on Franciscan’s campus, just like they do everywhere else, and the success of the University’s efforts to prevent sexual misconduct depends, in large part, on people putting the formation they receive into practice and reporting misconduct when someone else fails to do so.

“We strongly encourage everyone who experiences or witnesses discrimination, harassment, or sexual misconduct to come forward,” says Pizzuti. “We’ve built in numerous provisions to help people

not be afraid to report what they’ve seen or experienced.”

Nevertheless, says Heck, one of the biggest obstacles the University faces is convincing people of that.

“Since we have been more intentional on the issue, more people are coming forward when there is a problem, but it’s definitely not 100 percent,” she explains. “Sometimes that’s because they don’t know they can report anonymously. Other times, it’s because they think they’ll get in trouble. For some students, I think sometimes embarrassment holds them back. They can have a sense of guilt and unfairly blame themselves.”

On that count and others, Heck believes parents as well as Franciscan have an important role to play.

“We need parents to be our partners in this,” she says. “After all, parents are the first educators of their children. When they’re 2, we teach them not to cross the street without holding hands. As they get older and are exposed to other dangers, we need to do the same. We need to engage them in hard conversations about sexuality, their dignity, alcohol, and drugs. We also need to do that not just in a ‘This is what the Church says’ kind of way, but from the perspective that ‘You are created in the image and likeness of God, and this is what we want for you.’”

“Talk with your child about things that could happen,” she concludes. “Let them know they can always call you, always talk to you. And that if they do find themselves in difficult circumstances, there is a support system ready to help them; they don’t have to be ashamed to come forward.”

Franciscan University’s Policy on Discrimination, Harassment, and Sexual Misconduct is available at <https://bit.ly/2ldZ5GB>.