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Kathryn M. Cavins Talks on College Students Risky Behaviors

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College aged kids often engage in daring and risky behavior. This means campus officials have to be ever mindful. Today during Morning Edition at the Garlic Press, GLT's Willis Kern talked about campus security with two central Illinois college administrators...

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Willis Kern: For about twenty years, officials at higher education institutions have been obligated by federal law to publish campus crime statistics along with timely warnings of campus threats. Rich Olshack, Associate Dean of Students at Illinois State University and Kathy Cavins, Dean of Students at Illinois Wesleyan University say their campuses go above and beyond what's required by federal law.

Kathryn Cavins: We start with the issues of prevention and that means that our policies and our procedures on our campus are structured in a way that we—that facilitates security, that we train our students and that that happens annually with students and of course new students and then, of course, having appropriate response mechanisms also.

Rich Olshack: I would agree completely and we try to build the best safety net we can for students, staff, and professional staff.

Willis Kern: Let's talk about the issue of sexual assault. The Center for Public Integrity released a report earlier this month that sharply criticized the way many college campuses handle the disposition of assault cases using as a basis many personal stories from victims who in some cases felt re-victimized through the investigative process, how is this type of thing avoided on your campus and why do you think other campuses are having a problem with it?

Rick Olshack: On our campus we have a very sound process for handling sexual misconduct cases. That doesn't mean that people involved in the process always get the outcome they want but it does mean we have a fair process set up. To answer the second part of that in terms of why some campuses struggle, they simply may not have explored deeply enough what type of process is going to be needed at that institution, what's going

to be fair for all the students involved, not just to the aggrieved party, the person filing a complaint but also to the student who's facing the charge.

Willis Kern: What about Wesleyan, Kathy?

Kathryn Cavins: Sexual assaults are complicated issues and there are a lot of emotions that are tied to that. We have an advocate who helps prepare our students for hearing—both sides of that issue though have to be prepared and at a small school like Wesleyan we have one person who does that, so we try to advocate but our role is for both sides of that issue.

Willis Kern: The CPI report cites a Justice Department study that finds one in five women on college campuses are the victims of rape or attempted sexual assault, so with 57% of college students being female, over a four year period 11.5% of all college students would be sex crime victims. Now using city of Detroit data from a few years ago, this means women are 45 times more likely to be sexually assaulted on a college campus than in what is recognized as the leading crime city in the United States. Now as a campus administrator, does all of this add up to you?

Rick Olshack: I think the statistics don't mean as much to me as the cases, the individual cases, and I think rather than focus on what percentage of my population is going to be impacted by this, I—we need to have a process in place that works for any student who's coming into contact with us.

Kathryn Cavins: I think that comparing college campuses to the city of Detroit is a little flawed myself...

[laughter]

Kathryn Cavins: But it still concerns me that female students are considering—one in five, or even—I mean, that's too much and so that's a concerning statistic.

Willis Kern: I guess the basic question is, does one in five sound about right to you?

Kathryn Cavins: No.

Rick Olshack: Not particularly, I think a definition would be in order in terms of what's defined as sexual assault or misconduct. There are too many cases that I have seen in my own experience that really are miscommunication but that does not minimize the fact that there are plenty of assaults that also take place.

Willis Kern: Colleges have ways of tracking students who may be perceived as possibly causing problems such as—maybe not to the degree of what occurred at Virginia Tech or Northern Illinois University, but maybe students of that ilk, how does this work?

Rick Olshack: We have a multi-tiered system really. It begins with an informal—just keeping up on students that appear on our radar. It's something called the Student Behavioral Intervention Team that just fields reports from around campus to keep an eye on students. We have a Dean on Duty program where students can come in and let us know that they're having some issues and then we do have responding processes. We have an incident command directed by our police department, a critical incident response team that we service support to that incident command, we have state police on campus, which I think really is an asset to us and an excellent emergency notification system.

Willis Kern: Kathy, how have things changed at Wesleyan in, let's just say since almost two years since the tragic event at Northern?

Kathryn Cavins: I think that we've had the structure in place similar to Illinois State's for a long, long time but I think that we see that differently and we take that responsibility even differently now that you see that these things are happening even closer to home and so really keeping track of where our students are and where students are having difficulties, it helps us respond more quickly to students.

Willis Kern: Kathy Cavins, IWU Dean of Students, and Rick Olshack, Associate Dean of Students at Illinois State University, guests during today's morning edition at the Garlic Press. Olshack says it's impossible to predict with high accuracy which students will commit a horrific act of campus violence, though he says colleges can track students who match a high-risk profile. Olshack says the real problem occurs when those not formally connected to campus come and commit violent acts, as was the case last year at Northern Illinois University. I'm Willis Kern, WGLT News.