

Students and Administration Discuss Student Conduct

American University President Neil Kerwin and Board of Trustees Chair Jeff Sine held the Spring Open Forum on Tuesday, April 22, in the Kay Spiritual Life Center. In an hour-long question-and-answer session, Kerwin and Sine described the overall health of the university and addressed critical challenges facing the AU community.

The discussion covered the Middle States re-accreditation, the new East Campus, and the Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh. Student comments and questions centered on fossil fuel divestment and student conduct and safety.

Several students expressed concern over the recent anonymous emails alleging disturbing and harmful student conduct by a student group not recognized by the university.

A student asked, “Why does the university not mandate sexual assault education and bystander intervention training at Eagle Summit orientation? And do you plan on doing this?”

Kerwin stated that sexual assault is one of the most significant problems that universities are facing. He then called on Vice President of Campus Life Gail Hanson to explain AU’s policies and procedures toward sexual assault. She also said reforms will be considered.

“[We are all] deeply, deeply disappointed that we’ve got members of this community who would engage in the kind of activity they’ve allegedly engaged in,” Hanson said. “It degrades everyone. And we’ve prided ourselves on civility. What a huge, huge devastating letdown for all of us.”

“I just want to promise this community that the people in Campus Life, our colleagues on the faculty, everyone in the administration, are laser-focused on this...[I want] to thank the people who have been civil and who have offered to join the cause, who have written and come to see me,” she said. “And I’m looking forward to engaging them in very productive ways.”

One student followed up with another inquiry about future preventative measures: “Do you believe that the current systems we have in place to prevent sexual violence on this campus are enough? And if not, are you amenable to next year beginning to implement mandatory prevention education?”

Hanson emphasized that more programs do not always lead to better programs. “Most of the things we have in place are most of the things the best places around have in place. Now we just have to figure out how to do them better than anybody else,” she said.

In response to a question about punishment procedures, Hanson referred to the Conduct Code and online videos on Student Conduct. She outlined the process by which alleged perpetrators are

held accountable by the university. “We have a preponderance of the evidence standard. That means something is more likely to have happened than not,” Hanson said. “Students have rights under our Code of Conduct, so you’re innocent until you are proven responsible.”

She emphasized that when the process results in a finding of responsibility, a number of disciplinary measures are considered. Outcomes are confidential, unless the issue involves an assault or a sexual assault (then the complainant has a right to know the outcome). She acknowledged that cases might be adjudicated by AU and the justice system concurrently.

A student who represents the American University Panhellenic Council took issue with someone in attendance labeling the alleged group a “fraternity” at AU. “They are not a fraternity. And they are not affiliated with the Fraternity and Sorority Life (FSL) office at this campus. They were removed from that office in 2001, I believe, and since then the Fraternity and Sorority Life office has been actively trying to get them removed from campus.”

She stated that FSL has specific training on sexual assault and sexual assault prevention for all new members of Greek Life. And Panhel just approved twice yearly bystander training, which empowers students to act if they observe student misconduct.

Sine added a strong comment on these allegations: “It’s repulsive and disgusting. It doesn’t reflect on AU. It’s not our values.”

Prepared by University Communications, April 24, 2014

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