I had the opportunity to represent NMSU at the National Discussion on sexual Assault and Sexual Harassment at America’s Colleges, Universities and Service Academies. All public colleges and universities were invited. Just under 10% of the institutions sent a representative.

The purpose of the two day event at the Naval Academy was to explore data, trends, and best practices pertaining to addressing the apparent growing incidents of sexual harassment and sexual assaults at our colleges, universities and service academies.

Through plenary sessions, panel presentations and workshops, the National Discussion we explored data and best practices around the themes of Prevention, Innovative Approaches, Climate Leadership, and Evaluation of practices.

I choose to focus my time and attendance on both prevention and evaluation of practices. Let me summarize a few key take-a-ways from my workshops.

- Having data pertaining to sexual assault and sexual harassment and the general climate on campus is vital for tracking improvements and trends. What are we doing at NMSU around tracking data?
- Peer education seems to be the most effective. Training peers to educate their peers is vital. Building a prevention infrastructure within the institution – emphasizing it is everyone’s job. Connect messages and programs – alcohol education, mental health, depression, etc. – the issues are all inter-related).
- One institution created the “Guardian Angels” who were responsible to watch over their peers and be responsible for being a by-stander willing to intervene when necessary.
- Institutions need to deliver a clear and consistent message that sexual violence is not acceptable. Consistent and regular communication throughout the year is important for ensuring an emphasis on respect and responsibility. Be intentional about crafting messages that students can hear.
- Helping individuals develop healthy life skills and understanding healthy relationships and health sexual relationships is important for prevention. Helping people develop skills so they understand what they need in a partner and know how to select the right partner, having skills to develop a health relationship and learning how to “break up” in healthy ways.
- A good discussion on “suspensions”. There was a panel debate about whether suspending people just passes the problem along to society or other institutions. The
discussion included exploring ways to help individuals develop the appropriate skills within an accountable environment rather than just suspending someone.

- A couple of institutions shared the role of “unrestricted reports” versus “restricted reports” for sexual assault. By developing a process where someone could report sexual assault or sexual harassment in a “restricted report”, the institution was able to learn more about the climate and environment. A restricted report means that a person can report the assault or harassment but it will not be investigated, but the person would have access to all the support resources. The restricted report could become an unrestricted report at the request of the reporter at which time the report could be fully investigated. The idea is to support individuals who do not want to public nature of investigation, but who wish to have the supports and victim’s advocacy resources.

Reflection

This academic year I convened an advisory group (Campus Safety and Sexual Assault Prevention Taskforce) to discuss how NMSU is addressing campus safety and sexual assault prevention and also to identify additional steps. The work of this taskforce has led to environmental evaluations to ensure our lighting, landscaping, and building infrastructures support safety. The work has also led to identifying other initiatives within the areas of Education and Community Building.

At the next Campus Safety and Sexual Assault Prevention Taskforce we will discuss some of the best practices from the National Discussion to determine if and/or how to incorporate the information into our work.