



Supporting Accountability: How Respondent and Responsible Student Services Intersect with Survivor Safety

This guide was written by Joan Tabachnick in partnership with Victim Rights Law Center. This project was supported by Grant No. 15JOVW-24-GK-03025-MUMU awarded by the Office on Violence Against Women, U.S. Department of Justice. The opinions, findings, conclusions, and recommendations expressed in this publication/program/ exhibition are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the U.S. Department of Justice.

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BACKGROUND

Campuses are increasingly recognizing the need for dedicated services for students accused of or responsible for sexual misconduct. Historically, students involved in an adjudication process relied on general campus resources, but recent years have seen the emergence of specialized services designed to provide equitable support. While terms vary, most often these are referred to as “Respondent Student Services” or “Responsible Student Service.”¹ This shift reflects both changing legal requirements and a growing interest in more research-informed and student-focused practices, like alternative resolutions and restorative justice.

In 2020, the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) released Expanding the Frame², a comprehensive survey of over 300 participants, which offered insights into the wide range of responsible student services currently offered. The survey showed that **no single model was being used across campuses in the United States.** Services were housed in a variety of different offices on campus, and responsible student services staff possessed diverse backgrounds and training.

¹ Based on interviews and focus group discussions, “Responsible Student Services” and “Respondent Student Services” are used as umbrella terms. The colleges interviewed offer services to different students ranging from students who have been accused, students found responsible, students transferring into a campus after being found responsible at another campus, and students seeking help voluntarily for sexual misconduct. In this guide, these terms are used interchangeably and should be interpreted broadly. Any school developing these services should identify the language that works best for their campus community.

² Jennifer Henkle, Jill Dunlap, and Joan Tabachnick. “Expanding the Frame: Institutional Responses to Students Accused of Sexual Misconduct,” 2020.

However, a more recent qualitative study³ identified two broad categories of responsible student services:

- Process services to help students understand the policies and procedures of the campus and of the Title IX process.
- Support services designed to include case management, psychoeducational and/or counseling services (on campus or referrals), to help students understand the impact of their actions and address any mental health needs.

As campuses wrestle with which services they can and must provide to all students, one thought persists -- whether and how to provide services to students accused of and/or responsible for sexual misconduct on campus, including those who voluntarily reach out for help.

CONTEXT

Staff from a diverse group of campuses (hereinafter called “participants”) participated in interviews and a roundtable to discuss the responsible student services offered on their campuses. This summary highlights the themes and takeaways that emerged from the interviews and roundtable.

Although responsible student services programs vary widely in structure, staffing, and confidentiality, they share some common purposes: promoting accountability, preventing future harm, and supporting the educational mission of higher education.

The motivations for creating these services varied, including compliance and risk management, addressing survivors’ needs, prevention, and education for responsible students. Participants described responsible student services as key to overall community well-being. They argued that these services support broader campus prevention efforts, support at-risk students before they cause harm, offer effective ways to hold responsible students accountable, and uphold institutional values of learning and growth.

³ Karunaratne, N., Noor, L., Karbley, M., Linder, C., Pavelka, A., & Broussard, J. (2025). Working with respondents in sexual misconduct cases: Perspectives from practitioners. McCluskey Center for Violence Prevention.

According to the participants, survivors often say that what they want most is to ensure that the responsible student does not harm anyone else. When drawn out further, survivors often realize that suspending or expelling the responsible student does not achieve this goal.

It only means that they may still harm someone while off campus, at a different campus, or in their community. Participants said that offering an effective intervention for a responsible student more closely addresses survivors' requests for accountability and preventing future harm.

“
If [survivors] want someone to learn, to understand, and to do better, then we need [pathways for] growth and accountability [for responsible students] to be able to facilitate what survivors want.
”

CHALLENGES

Each participant offered a different account about how responsible student services were created, where they are located, what services are offered, their level of funding, and their access to on-campus and off-campus resources. However, even with these differences, **common themes emerged about the challenges facing each campus, including limited resources, lack of easy access to outside standards, shifting regulations, confidentiality concerns, and practitioner isolation.** The responses highlight that while campuses take varied approaches to the services offered to responsible students, practitioners consistently emphasize the same hurdles to overcome in order to offer effective services.

Participants also spoke about the challenges facing both survivors and responsible students, including social isolation, bullying, public shaming, and organizational fallout affecting peers. **Participants agreed that addressing these issues was key to deeper accountability for responsible students and support for survivors.**

3 TIPS WHEN BUILDING A RESPONSIBLE STUDENT SERVICES PROGRAM

1 Build leadership buy-in. Adequate funding and a philosophy that treats responsible students with dignity and humanity stood out as essential for meaningful accountability and behavior change. Investment by Title IX coordinators, Vice Presidents of Student Affairs, Deans of Students, and University Presidents is essential to removing barriers. Participants further noted the importance of situating responsible student services within broader prevention, education, and re-entry efforts, emphasizing the need for clear structures across a spectrum from at-risk students to those returning to campus after sanctions. They further suggested that offering more resolution options, including alternative pathways, can benefit both survivors and responsible students by focusing on individual needs, learning, accountability, and healing.

“
Thankfully, our Dean of Students was very much on board. Our Director of Student Conduct was very much on board and even our General Counsel's office – even though they sometimes have a very different lens from us, they said yeah, this could be really helpful. Getting those key offices on board was so helpful to the development of our services.”

2 Build strong cross campus relationships, including survivor services. Participants agreed that strong cross-campus relationships, particularly with survivor services, made their responsible student services programs stronger. On campuses with a positive relationship between responsible student services and survivor services, participants described a wider range of support services for responsible students while directly addressing the needs of the survivor community as well. Campuses without this collaborative relationship offered much more limited services for responsible students, primarily

process guidance. Participants described the importance of listening to concerns others may have about responsible student services. For example, when listening to staff who provide survivor services, participants said that they were hearing the deepest concerns about “never again” – making sure

that the responsible student would not hurt anyone else in the future. Participants shared that most of their conversations with others on campus center the function of responsible student services as necessary to change responsible students' behaviors, enhance trust in campus processes, address survivors' needs, and reinforce the campus's role as an educator – not merely an adjudicator.

3 Develop foundational knowledge and community. Finally, participants expressed a strong need to develop a source for foundational knowledge, and some suggested the importance of creating a professional community that can formalize training or standards. A number noted that their current work can feel isolating and that some of the simplest tasks, such as developing a job description, could benefit from a centralized hub for communications and questions. Many said connecting with other campuses is incredibly helpful and recommended taking advantage of the valuable professional development opportunities that have emerged over the last few years. These include:

“It is a privilege to do this work. When I am able to work with a student in a meaningful way they walk in their world in a different way. It shows that our work does have value.”

- Klancy Street Science-based Treatment, Accountability, and Risk Reduction for Sexual Assault (STARRSA) Materials, Webinars and Resources
- Massachusetts Society for a World Free of Sexual Harm (MASOC) campus webinar series focusing on responsible students
- NASPA reports, including Expanding the Frame and Five Things
- Safer Society treatment referrals
- The Association for the Treatment and Prevention of Sexual Abuse (ATSA) list of qualified clinicians
- United States Department Of Justice Sex Offender Management Assessment and Planning Initiative (SOMAPI) Report
- University of Utah McCluskey Center report on Working with Respondent Services

Ultimately, participants agreed that responsible student services should not be viewed as optional add-ons, but essential components of a just and effective student conduct framework—one that upholds safety, accountability, and the well-being of every student in the campus community.

CASE STUDIES

The following case studies, taken from the interviews and roundtable, help illustrate the array of approaches to responsible student services that campuses across the country have taken.

CASE STUDY NO. 1

CAMPUS: A midsize university in a large state public university system; known for its research and attention to undergraduate education.

PARTICIPANT: Respondent Support Services Coordinator

Where are the services housed? Respondent Support Services (RSS) are housed in the Office of Student Conduct and Conflict Education (OSCCE). The office offers support to any student engaged in the student conduct process, including Title IX investigations, alternative resolutions, academic integrity cases, and lower-level housing violations.

What is offered? The services offered are twofold. First, respondents receive process guidance. This service helps the student understand what they can expect throughout the investigation and resolution process. Second, students have access to educational and emotional support, which helps them manage personal and social challenges as they move through the process.

Working closely with other campus resources (like the survivor advocacy office, academic support, and the behavioral intervention team) is important to provide comprehensive support to students.

Are the services confidential? No. This decision offers some challenges to educational conversations when working face-to-face with the student. However, in some cases non-confidential services can enhance collaboration and resource access because it is easier for staff to

communicate about services needed for the student and how best to help them through the process.

What resources do you have/access to internally? Dean of Students office, the Behavioral Intervention Team, and the confidential survivor advocacy office (CARE). A strong, collaborative relationship with CARE is essential, enabling a variety of joint prevention efforts. One example is a four-hour consent workshop for a fraternity, a part of a sanction that can lead to effective prevention education outcomes.

What resources have you accessed externally? Relevant NASPA training, such as offerings from Klancy Street and Chris Linder, and Science-based Treatment, Accountability, and Risk Reduction for Sexual Assault (STARRSA) training.

How do students find your services? Most students are referred to RSS through direct, "warm handoffs" from staff, particularly Title IX investigators and student conduct adjudicators. These proactive and direct referrals from staff at the very beginning of the process are the most effective way to connect students with the support services they need. In recent years, there has been a growing number of students who self-refer because of what they have heard from a friend or from a workshop or training on campus.

“
...the first [advice] that comes to mind is to not do this type of work in a bubble. I think it's community work... I think working with respondents or students accused of sexual misconduct is a community-wide effort for prevention too. And I think if you get the buy-in from people you're working with, it does wonders for the students you work with too.
”

What is your background and training? Background includes experience as a peer mentor and within a Title IX office. This combination provided experience in both student support and the procedural aspects of Title IX. Other background and training includes presenting at numerous conferences and trainings and co-authoring one of the first overviews of support services for respondents.

CASE STUDY NO. 2

CAMPUS: A large Midwest public university known for its excellence in research, teaching, opportunities for learning, and sports.

PARTICIPANT: Associate Director of the Office of Student Conflict Resolution

Where are the services housed? Within the university there are multiple support and process systems for students responsible for sexual misconduct. The Equity and Civil Rights/ Title IX (ECRT) office has the Intake and Supportive Measures team which is the front door into the process. They support all students, both complainants and respondents. This is where students are usually introduced to the process.

The Dean of Students Office houses the Respondent Support Program, which helps students understand where they are in a process and what it means for them personally. The Assistant Dean of Students acts as the coordinator for the Respondent Support Program. After a student is introduced to the process through ECRT, the student has the option to meet with the Assistant Dean to understand what this means for them as an individual in their particular context. The Dean of Students Office acts like a connecting hub between many of the different resources and addresses whether accommodations need to be made for housing, navigating financial aid, or academic accommodations such as changing, withdrawing, or dropping classes.

What services are offered? The program works hard to connect students to the campus resources they need. To respond to the changing needs, the program has continuously created new resources for these students. For example, a trauma-informed guide for working with respondents is available to all staff, the STARRSA AP program is offered and/or mandated to students who need these educational interventions with new modules added as the program evolves. The university also developed a new re-entry program to help respondents return to campus safely with the support and accountability they need to live safely in the community. It is also part of an effort to keep reaffirming that respondents also need support in addition to accountability.

The university also offers an adaptable resolution process. If the complainant chooses this path, they meet with the team at the Office of Student Conflict Resolution (OSCR). They are asked what they need and then a similar meeting is set up with the respondent.

If both students agree to participate, there is a process to move towards a resolution agreement. After that agreement is reached, the university continues to monitor commitments made in the resolution agreement.

Once a sanction has been made, the student may be referred to the STARRSA program which is housed within OSCR. This is a huge supportive educational resource for students. More recently, the students going through this process also work with the Men's Engagement Team, which is within the Sexual Assault Prevention and Awareness Center (SAPAC). For any reintegration process, many of these partners come together to talk about future accountability.

Are the services confidential? No. The office is not a confidential resource, which can make it hard to have deep and comprehensive conversations about accountability with the respondent.

How do students find your services?

The majority of students find these services through the Equity, Civil Rights and Title IX Office. However, through the educational side, there are partnerships with a variety of places on campuses who can also make referrals. For example, the SAPAC may make referrals, or the leader of a student group can make a suggestion to explore these services. A growing number of students have also come forward on their own, with concerns about their own behavior.

“Campus support systems for responsible students are necessarily complex but require intentional navigation support...Building community and finding like-minded colleagues is essential for practitioners in this field. [Our focus on] the ultimate goal of ending violence unites different campus offices despite our different roles.”

What is your background and training? The Associate Director is a licensed MSW, and their training for working with respondents has been pulled from many different resources. These include, but are not limited to: the University of San Diego program, restorative practices to address campus sexual harm, Mariame Kaba's workbook *Sexual Citizens*, webinars through Safer Society, Circles of Support and Accountability work, small group gatherings at NASPA, and Massachusetts Society for a World Free of Sexual Harm by Youth (MASOC).

CASE STUDY NO. 3

CAMPUS: A mid-size private university located in a large metropolitan city and known for its academic excellence, vibrant student life, and commitment to public service.

PARTICIPANT: Chief Title IX Officer

Where are the services housed? The university's Title IX office plays an oversight role for the process as well as the services offered to students accused of or found responsible for sexual misconduct.

What services are offered? The university offers a two-pronged approach, which involves 1) in-house support from the Office of Case Management and Victim Support Services (CMVSS) and 2) a therapeutic cognitive-behavioral therapy intervention through a partnership with an external independent clinical organization. Referrals to the clinical program occur either as a condition of an informal resolution or as a formal sanction following an investigation and hearing. The university strongly supports these respondent services in large part because these services are aligned with the university's educational mission of learning and growth. The services are also seen as being responsive to the needs of victims, who often expressed a desire for the person who harmed them to change their behavior and not harm anyone else.

Are the services confidential? The Office of Case Management and Victim Support Services is not a confidential resource for responsible students, and students are informed of the limits of confidentiality. However, the counseling office and the outside clinical programs offer confidential resources to students.

“ I think [we have] some challenges around getting our whole community on the same page about what the values are and how those play out when it comes to something like a report of sexual assault. And it's just hard. I think there's some natural tensions with how [we can] support survivors and hold people accountable, but in a way that is fair and still acknowledges their humanity and the values of the community we want to live in. ”

How do students find your services? Students have access to the counseling services of an outside agency through referrals as a condition of an informal resolution or as a formal sanction following an investigation and hearing. Given the campus investment in restorative justice, there is a menu of alternative resolution options available to students. More recently, some students have reached out to the Office of Case Management because they are being encouraged to get help for themselves. There is an ongoing need to make the broader community aware of these services and how they can be accessed outside of the formal reporting process.

“
...so often hearing from [survivors], I don't want to ruin someone's life, I just want them to acknowledge that they harmed me... and I want to know that they're not going to do this to someone else again. So seeking something that would change this person's behavior.
”

What is your background and training? The Chief Title IX officer holds an MSW and has maintained an active clinical social work license. Their professional background is rooted in direct service work, including internships at victim service agencies and six years at the same university providing case management, crisis intervention, and victim advocacy for both victims and respondents in misconduct cases. This direct clinical and case management experience informed their current role, which is more focused on policy, programming, and oversight within the Title IX office.

When starting the program, the Chief Title IX officer found many external resources that were helpful such as the MASOC conference, “Expanding the Frame” from NASPA, the STARRSA materials and training, and looking at the services offered at other similar universities.

For specific questions about your jurisdiction, how to use this resource or any other request for consultation or support, please contact VRLC at ta@victimrights.org.