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First Line of Defense: Protecting Youth on Campus

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Abstract

Many institutions recognize the need for a centralized process to address the safety of youth on campus. Legislation, publicized incidents, state and national laws, and research have pushed this topic to the forefront. In an effort to educate, mitigate risk, and create consistency, the implementation of university-wide youth protection policies has become a common practice. While each campus is different, foundational components to these policies can create a cultural shift and educate individuals on their role in reporting abuse and neglect. Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) launched its youth protection policy, *Safety and Protection of Minors*, in July 2016. The policy took over two years to create and is now in the second year of implementation. Based on the evolution of this policy, from inception to application, the university has learned that this initiative is a shared responsibility and that leaders play a key role.

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Disciplines

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Campus size, the landscape of youth programs, law, and university leadership can dictate the design and components of a youth protection policy. VCU's Division of Community Engagement (DCE) developed a Youth Programs Manual in 2012 that provided best practice guidelines for youth programs. A year later, the university's chief integrity and compliance officer recognized the need for a youth protection policy to accompany this manual to align institutional regulations with youth protection standards. The university established a working group chaired by the DCE and the Office of Integrity and Compliance to assess the impact the policy would have and ensure successful implementation. The group consisted of community partners, consultants, and university leaders from such areas as human resources, athletics, university counsel, risk management, and campus police. The group's first priority was to disseminate a campus-wide survey to determine the scope and type of programs/individuals engaging with youth on campus. The results demonstrated the large role youth programs already played on campus, reinforcing the need for oversight.

Another important priority of the working group was to identify the VCU unit that would be responsible for the policy. Determining which unit should be charged with oversight of a youth protection policy demands thoughtful consideration and depends on factors like capacity, expertise, and the functionality of departments/units. At VCU, the Mary and Frances Youth Center was given this responsibility in an effort to further pair positive youth development (PYD) best practices with policy. The Center is housed in the DCE and provides programming and training for youth. Leaders initially considered offices like human resources, which had expertise running background screenings. The Center's mission and expertise, however, better aligned with the policy. Whether oversight for campus policy is assigned to human resources, risk management, or a nontraditional unit like a youth center or student affairs, creating a smooth process will allow for successful implementation. Driven by university leadership, the resulting policy highlighted best practices in PYD was approved by the Boards of Visitors and was ready to be put into motion.

Communication and education is complicated and pivotal to creating a sense of shared responsibility. Institutional leaders play a key role in establishing expectations and advocating for accountability. Working in tandem with the oversight office, they set the tone for how the new policy is valued and intervene in instances of noncompliance. Attention should also be paid to helping faculty and staff understand that youth protection policies are intended to serve as a risk management tool and not a barrier. Leaders can reinforce this understanding by identifying opportunities for collaboration, including such efforts as identifying and meeting shared technology needs, establishing new campus partnerships, and advancing community engagement efforts.

The early years of implementing a policy can provide insight on key strategies and lessons for addressing youth protection on campus. Some of the insights garnered from the experience at VCU include:

1) Units with the highest volume of youth programs (reservation offices, athletics, student affairs, etc.) may need additional support to fully comprehend the impact of the policy on their department;
2) Third-party organizations participating in programs on campus can provide a unique viewpoint;
3) Training, tracking, and screening needs may require investments in new technology; and
4) Noncompliance concerns require a well-developed strategic process (i.e. audit, site visit, compliance report, improvement plan and best practices recommendations).

Campuses are not alone in attempting to meet these challenges. There is a growing community of colleagues across higher education that can provide support, insight, and guidance. One resource is the [Higher Education Protection Network (HEPNet)](), a national association of administrators and faculty who seek to advance the protection of children and youth in their interactions with higher education institutions.

As policies evolve, campuses can identify benefits, opportunities, and enhancements. Youth program registration data gathered to support youth protection efforts can, for example, be repurposed to account for the scope of youth engagement activities and provide a comprehensive database of youth programs for the community. Utilizing experts on campus to provide workshops on PYD best practices can enhance the spirit of the policy and encourage prevention efforts.

No policy fits every situation. Whether an individual wrote the policy, participated in a steering committee, or was hired to implement it, continuous feedback and critical review can inform changes and ensure the policy evolves with the youth programs and the campus climate it serves.

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