

Hesston College initiates outside review of policies after national organization's report of sexual violence

By **BLAKE SPURNEY**

HARVEY COUNTY NOW STAFF

HESSTON—Hesston College is conducting an outside review of its Title IX policies. The action follows a statement by Into Account, a not-for-profit organization that tracks sexual violence on college campuses, that it received numerous reports of sexual assaults at Hesston College.

In late September, Into Account, posted the statement under the headline “Sexual Violence at Hesston College.”

Erin Bergen, student advocacy coordinator for Into Account, wrote the information based on seven reports she said her organization received from women who were victims of sexual violence at Hesston College.

The statement noted that “multiple women” ended up dropping out of college after they were assaulted.

Bergen said her organization received reports from students and other members of the community for a number of years and that a few patterns emerged.

“One was the systematic way that the Student Life Office, and specifically Deb Roth, was involved in covering up cases of sexual violence,” she said. “When Into Account realized that Hesston College was not going to resolve

this without outside pressure, we put out a call for reports.”

Deb Roth is the vice president of student life at the two-year college, which reported an enrollment of 363 in 2020.

Into Account stated in an update following its call for reports that it received an additional eight reports about violence and abuse at Hesston College.

Stephanie Krehbiel, executive director of Into Account, said students reported that Roth questioned victims in such a way that they were made to feel they did something wrong. Some victims reported that they were forced into mediation with the male student who committed the assault.

“That happened repeatedly,” Krehbiel said. “It’s nasty.”

At the time, Hesston College acknowledged the release by Into Account on its Facebook account and stated it would review policies and provided contact information to resources such as the Hesston Police Department, its Title IX coordinator and Safehope for those who experienced sexual violence.

After reading the response, the report and being contacted by a student at the college about the situation, Harvey County Now began looking into the issue in October.

Harvey County Now also reached out to Roth.

Roth referred questions about the allegations to Jennifer Ellis, who is a communications coordinator for Hesston College.

Ellis said the college’s Title IX coordinator oversaw policies and processes through which the college addressed “its critically important responsibilities to Title IX matters for our campus community.” She said the Title IX coordinator played an essential role in the college’s commitment to the safety and well-being of students, faculty and staff.

“This includes, where relevant, participating in reviews of sexual assault allegations,” Ellis said. “We are currently initiating an outside review to ensure the college’s Title IX policies, procedures, and practices are fully up to date with changing federal requirements, including those that pertain to campus sexual assault.”

Ellis said when the college became “aware of concerns from our students or employees that we are not following best practices in our policies and procedures, we take them seriously. Hearing that some of our students believed we mishandled Title IX reports caused the college to seek an outside review.”

Colleges that receive any federal funding are required to follow Title IX, which is legislation aimed at protecting people from discrimination.

The U.S. Department of Education specifically notes that discrimination based on sex can include sexual harassment or sexual violence. Colleges also are required to file an annual Clery report, which tracks various crimes reported on campus, including sexual assault. Hesston College reported that no rape had occurred on campus since 2018, when two rapes were reported. The college lists zero rapes from 2019-21, which is the most recent year of available crime statistics. After contacting the Hesston Police Department, Harvey County Now confirmed that an 18-year-old woman reported to Hesston Police that she had been the victim of a sex crime between September and November 2020. Another 20 year-old woman reported being raped on March 20, 2022. The addresses for both incidents listed 301 S. Main, the address for Hesston College.

Harvey County Now also made efforts to speak with those who filed reports about sexual violence on the college campus and asked Into Account to put them in touch with any of those who submitted reports. Bergen stated that no one was interested in being interviewed at the time of the request.

The organization states on its website that “every person who reports to us has the

right to confidentiality and control over their story.”

Krehbiel said each victim had her own way forward. She said she thought it was likely that some victims eventually would choose to speak publicly, and some have already commented on social media.

Krehbiel said she thought the college’s outside review of Title IX was related to the problems her organization uncovered.

“I think these problems have been building for a while,” she said. “And I will say, they have a new Title IX coordinator, and she’s not responsible for any of these things that happened previously. A review of their policies is not good enough. It isn’t going to satisfy survivors, particularly survivors who had a lot of interaction with the institution and then had their lives turned inside out. They have to live with this, and one way Hesston can contribute to the healing for being victimized by their institution is to find out what happened.”

Krehbiel said women reported being told that what happened to them did not rise to the level of rape but rather that what they experienced was a “relationship problem.” She said victims also were told things

about Title IX that were true, such as a claim that the legislation had a statute of limitations. She said she thought the college was trying to keep its crime statistics low.

“It is a lawsuit waiting to happen,” Krehbiel said. “They’re lucky they haven’t been sued yet.”

Krehbiel said Title IX could work when it was applied in a way that supported survivors. But she also noted that it was common for colleges to be out of compliance with the reporting requirements. She said Into Account was a national organization that specialized in trying to get accountability. She said when victims were reporting sexual assaults to Into Account instead of local organizations, that meant that a college’s system for helping survivors was not working.

Bergen said it would take a dedicated and multifaceted approach to change this culture into one of care and safety.

“Hopefully, Hesston is up for a challenge and is bringing in lots of good professional help that is not just lawyers,” she said. “The students of Hesston College deserve an administrative team that is willing to value the safety of the students above their own perceived liability or institutional defense.”