Our clients frequently ask, “What is the role of a sexual assault advocate in relation to our grievance process?” In response, we ask, “What are they trained to do?” If we are relying on them to serve as advisers during our institutional grievance processes, we should be training them accordingly.

Let’s begin with reviewing the role of a sexual assault advocate. Too often this role is viewed as an individual whose sole role is “advocating” for the victim and advising them in the course of the institution’s grievance proceedings much in the way that an attorney advocates for a client. While this may be part of a sexual advocate’s role, it is not the primary one and is often not one for which they are adequately trained. Institutions should recognize that sexual assault advocates and sexual assault grievance procedure advisers do not fulfill the same function and meet very different needs.

Sexual assault advocates are trained, oftentimes through extensive certification and licensure, to provide emotional support, to assist in healing, and to provide guidance in understanding trauma. Support is key to assisting a victim of sexual misconduct in understanding the degrees of anger, guilt, fear and mistrust that they experience. A sexual assault advocate is a steadying, guiding force in the midst of a tumultuous sea.

Sexual assault grievance procedure advisers, however, use their knowledge and training on an institution’s policies and procedures to help guide parties through the myriad of policies, procedures, meeting, hearings and appeals. This function requires a very different skill-set and an array of additional training. Often institutions assume that sexual assault advocates already know how to perform this function, but often that assumption is incorrect.

Victims often develop a unique, trusting bond with their advocates; accordingly, victims often want those advocates to serve as their sexual assault grievance process advisor. This is both understandable and expected. With that in mind, institutions should thoroughly and annually train their campus’ advocates in all institutional grievance policies, procedures and protocols.

Next week we address a related question: “If we provide sexual assault advocates and advisers for a complainant, must we do the same for the accused individual in order to honor the concept of equity?”