Managing Survivor Advocacy
Tip of the Week authored by LB Klein, MSW, Independent Consultant and ATIXA Advisory Board Member

The reporting party of an ongoing investigation has missed full days of classes. What are some best practices for ways to communicate with faculty members regarding a student absence that will not compromise confidential information but will provide the adequate notification?

Providing accommodations can be quite challenging while respecting a student’s privacy. Here are a few preferences I’ve compiled in managing survivor advocacy:

I always prefer that a Dean of a particular school reach out to the faculty member that the student should be excused to prevent the faculty member from knowing it is Title IX-related. If the Title IX Coordinator has a job that would encompass a greater breadth of responsibility related to student crisis, that would be fine. However, students can feel an alert of a Title IX matter is equivalent to informing their professor they were sexually assaulted. Having buy-in from each academic division can also ensure that accommodations are executed well and consistently and that the Dean is looped in if faculty start asking questions or pushing back.

It is helpful to word a message in such a way that the faculty member knows the issue is serious but also to not proactively ask the students questions about it or probe for more information. The phrase “serious personal matter” tends to communicate the point. Some faculty try to show empathy in ways that may be very uncomfortable to a survivor or may ask invasive questions. Even if the Title IX Coordinator did not prompt this intentionally, I’ve seen faculty accidentally prime a student for emotional disclosures that the student then felt were necessary in order to secure the accommodation. I’m grateful survivors no longer need to approach each faculty member individually, but if this is the result of our requests for accommodation, it can sometimes defeat the purpose. Instead, make sure the faculty member knows that conversations about ensuring the accommodations are welcome.

Survivors really appreciate having as much information as can be shared when communication takes place on their behalf. It can be a huge relief to know a school has one’s back, but feeling like everyone is talking about you without you present is an unfortunate side effect. Therefore, sending the brief text of the email that one is sending to a faculty member can be the extra step that provides the student with a greater feeling of power and control over the situation. Even asking the student who they might want the email worded can help them face less anxiety about interfacing with their professor.