

UW System: To recommend more robust hiring, reference check policies

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With heightened national interest in preventing sexual misconduct, UW System's proposals attract attention

MADISON - The University of Wisconsin System plans to require all UW institutions to document in personnel files instances of sexual violence and sexual harassment perpetrated by employees and to share that information with other employers, including System institutions and other State of Wisconsin agencies, during the hiring process. The System will also require the disclosure of substantiated instances of sexual violence and harassment from prospective employees.

The new policy could become a national model, particularly with respect to reference checks, UW System President Ray Cross said. It will be reviewed by the UW System's Board of Regents on Friday.

"Ensuring the safety of our students and our employees at every institution is one of the most vital responsibilities of the Board of Regents," said Regent Vice President Drew Petersen. "As we develop and implement these policies, we must be clear that employee misconduct at one UW System institution will not be hidden if they seek to work somewhere else within UW System. We are proactively taking steps to prevent such occurrences."

In June, Regents unanimously approved a resolution calling for UW System to develop or modify human resources policies to ensure more robust hiring and reference check processes related to sexual harassment be implemented at all UW System institutions. The resolution required all UW System institutions to appropriately document sexual harassment allegations and investigations in personnel files, exchange personnel files among all System institutions and State of Wisconsin agencies during the hiring of a prospective employee, and inquire about allegations of sexual harassment during background checks.

Since then, a work group of higher education, legal, Title IX and other experts from campuses across the System have studied existing personnel policies across the country and worked on crafting a draft policy for the UW System implementing the resolution's requirements. The work group found few existing documented policies to serve as a model. Several universities and statewide higher education systems around the country have expressed interest in UW System's study.

The draft policy to be presented to the Board will ensure consistent disclosure of cases of sexual violence and sexual harassment to hiring institutions and ensure that institutions ask about sexual violence and sexual harassment during the hiring process.

Further, the draft policy standardizes the content of personnel files, defines when and with whom personnel files are shared, and ensures appropriate documentation of sexual violence and sexual harassment in personnel files. The policy does not require inclusion of investigatory records in a personnel file.

The policy will undergo wider review over the coming months with shared governance groups and others on campuses across the System in anticipation of implementation in January 2019.

The UW System put forth a comprehensive new Board of Regents' sexual assault and harassment policy in 2016, codifying the UW System's commitment to address the issue, mandating training for all employees and students.