Charge to the Task Force

Sexual assault and other unwelcome sexual conduct are matters of increasing concern for colleges and universities, including Harvard. This behavior is antithetical to the core obligations we owe one another in a community of learning and discovery, which must be based in openness, mutual respect, and trust. The University-Wide Statement on Rights and Responsibilities, adopted more than 40 years ago, underscores that a vibrant academic community is characterized by “respect for the dignity of others” and “freedom from personal force and violence.” We must reinforce these norms as part of a shared commitment, individually, collectively, and institutionally, to work to eliminate sexual assault and other unwelcome sexual conduct at Harvard.

Harvard devotes considerable resources to addressing sexual misconduct affecting our students. Each of the University’s Faculties has adopted strict student disciplinary rules punishing sexual misconduct. Established in 2003, the Office of Sexual Assault Prevention and Response provides important assistance to students who have experienced sexual violence. Last year, the University hired a senior Title IX officer, who has systematically bolstered the Title IX support system that reaches into every corner of the University. She has also convened a cross-University group that has worked throughout the academic year on new policies and procedures designed to internalize the evolving legal requirements of Title IX and other laws.

The legal requirements relating to sexual violence on campus have in fact significantly expanded. In the past three years, Congress has enacted new legislation, the Department of Education has issued new guidance, and President Obama has convened a cabinet-level task force. These efforts reinforce Title IX’s proper mandate that no student be denied effective access to any educational program or activity on account of gender, including as a result of sexual assaults or other forms of sexual harassment.

Harvard must and will meet our legal obligations, but those obligations should not alone define Harvard’s commitment to providing an educational environment in which all students have the opportunity to thrive. We can indeed do better, especially in the realm of awareness and prevention. Much of the current national focus has been on how higher education responds to sexual violence after it has occurred. This is important and necessary work. Yet we should also be reducing the likelihood of incidents occurring in the first place, including through means that reinforce the sort of community we seek to be and the obligations we owe to one another.
The task force is asked to consider the following questions:

- Can we understand more about the realities and circumstances of sexual assault at Harvard? The task force should evaluate existing data gathered by the Schools and Harvard University Health Services and conduct other outreach, including anonymous surveys, as appropriate. The goal is to gain insight into campus culture and the frequency and nature of sexual misconduct affecting Harvard students. Are there common patterns for sexual misconduct? Are there specific locations or situations that present particular risks? What are the perceptions and realities of the impact of sexual misconduct on individuals and the community? Do the student populations at the graduate and professional Schools differ from those at the College in ways that indicate different approaches? How often do situations cross School boundaries and thereby potentially present distinctive challenges?

- What is the role of alcohol and other drugs?

- What educational resources and other forms of outreach, including at orientations and similar events, do we currently make available to address both healthy sexuality as well as sexual misconduct? Do members of our community have a clear understanding of what sexual misconduct entails? Are we doing all that we should to use students’ social networks to encourage bystander intervention and reporting? How are the University’s messages and values reinforced throughout a student’s time at Harvard? Which approaches are effective and which warrant rethinking?

- Do students know about options and resources if they or classmates experience unwelcome sexual behavior? How might existing communication gaps be closed? What factors make a student more likely to report? Do students know about the potential consequences (both institutional and legal) if they violate community values and their School’s disciplinary rules? Are faculty and other members of the Harvard community properly informed about how to help a student who reports having experienced sexual misconduct?

- What can we learn from other institutions and social science research about how to reduce the incidence of sexual misconduct on college and university campuses? How do we build a campus climate that fosters prevention and offers maximum support to those who experience sexual violence?
The task force will seek input broadly from students, faculty, administrators, law enforcement, and subject matter experts, both at Harvard and nationally. It is asked to make recommendations about how Harvard may improve its prevention efforts, whether University-wide or at the School level. Finally, it is asked to reflect on how the institution should best periodically evaluate the effectiveness of its approach to sexual misconduct, with a particular sensitivity to a holistic approach that focuses on prevention as well as on responsiveness.