

# Assessing the Effectiveness of Your Youth Protection Program

Higher Education Protection  
**NETWORK**



A HEPNet Community Resource

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# OUR MISSION

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We seek to advance the interactions of higher education institutions with children and youth. We serve as a coordinated voice promoting good practices for protecting vulnerable populations and providing programming and resources appropriate to their needs.

## AUTHORS

Melanie Bennett, JD, United Educators

Lindsay Meyer Bond, Higher Education Protection Network

James Bourgeois, JD, Praesidium

Marcy Huey, University of Alabama

Rebecca Whitman, University of Alaska Fairbanks



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# INTRODUCTION

Following the Jerry Sandusky crisis at Penn State University in 2011, many colleges and universities began asking themselves, “Do WE work with minors here? If so, how many?” Universities were shocked to find out that yes, they WERE interacting with minors — and oftentimes in larger numbers than their own traditional student body. In a recent survey of members of the Higher Education Protection Network (HEPNet), 65% of respondents have a student body of more than 20,000, yet 72% of respondents’ institutions serve over 10,000 minors annually. About 52% of respondents serve over 30,000 minors (HEPNet, 2022). At The Ohio State University, there are approximately 75,000 enrolled undergraduate and graduate students, yet the university interacts with over 700,000 minors annually (pre-COVID).

This information startled university leadership and boards nationwide, and the youth protection field took off. In early 2014, only a handful of individuals were tasked with an exclusive job focus on youth protection across the entire country. HEPNet formed in 2017 and now serves around 200 individuals from around 120 different institutions across the country. About 53% of respondents to a 2022 survey of institutions of higher education have positions allocated exclusively to youth protection (HEPNet, 2022), up from 18% in 2016 (HEPNet, 2016). Those who are familiar with higher education know what a significant jump this is in a traditionally slow-moving industry. Youth protection is considered by many to be the quickest-growing field within higher education.

Standards for youth protection in higher education are beginning to emerge due to the boom in hiring youth protection professionals to create policies and standards to follow for youth-serving programs and activities including athletics, internships, shadow days, community service projects, swim lessons, camps, and everything in between.

HEPNet data shows that most institutions that have a protection of minors policy require:

- Activities and programs to register centrally so programming is tracked along with compliance
- To provide child abuse training so signs can be recognized and the reporting process is understood
- To require background checks of those interacting with minors
- To establish minimum standards of behavior that must be followed, including but not limited to prohibiting one-on-one interactions

# INTRODUCTION

Colleges and universities that have prioritized youth protection have largely done a good job in defining these baseline standards thanks to organizations like HEPNet and the open sharing of resources. However, the time has come to assess exactly how effectively these policies are achieving what they are designed to do.

The acceleration of this field raises questions regarding how to assess policies, procedures, and practices. HEPNet believes it is important to educate others on how to effectively assess policies and their implementation, be it internally or externally. Many of us have overseen this work daily for years, and just as we shared resources for what should go into developing a high-quality youth protection program, we now want to outline how to assess that program.

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*Youth protection is considered by many to be the quickest-growing field within higher education.*



# IMPORTANCE OF ASSESSMENT

## WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS

HEPNet conducts biennial surveys of different protection of minors operational practices within higher education institutions. In the 2021 Operational Survey, all the participating institutions indicated they have implemented or are in the process of implementing a protection of minors policy. This shows that institutions are investing time, resources, and funds to create protection of minors policies and programs.

Although protecting minors programs are common, Operational Survey responses also indicate that schools are not regularly assessing these programs. Nearly 20% of the responding institutions said they do not have a system for monitoring the effectiveness of and adherence to the protection of minors policy. Periodic reviews help ensure a program's effectiveness. Assessments are needed to determine what is not working and adjust practices accordingly.

Creating policies and practices to protect minors requires time, money, stakeholder buy-in, and resources. Periodic assessments require additional institutional resources, but they protect minors and save institutions money. Perpetrators can create claims that cost institutions hundreds of millions of dollars to resolve. It is less expensive to modify a functional system than to recreate a less-than-functional system after an incident occurs.

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# IMPORTANCE OF ASSESSMENT

## INSTITUTIONAL BUY-IN

Once school administrators are aware of the importance of conducting program evaluation, the next step is to articulate an evaluation's specific goals. An evaluation's focus and purpose should be clear and succinctly stated. In alignment with the evaluation's goal, there should be one or more statements of how to measure goal achievement. The evaluation also should explain how data will be collected and how that data will be used. A simplified example of this format may be:

*The mission of the protection of minors program is to keep children and youth safe while they are involved with the university and its affiliated programs. Success in the protection of minors program means: 1) knowing how many youth are served by the university, 2) having no reports of harm to youth in affiliation with the university, and 3) having all adults working with youth successfully complete screening processes. An evaluation of the protection of minors program is needed to determine whether there are any components of the program that are failing, missing, or inadequately fulfilling the goals of the program (Royse et al., 2016). Data on the number of youth served and compliance rates with the adult screening process for the evaluation period can be pulled from the compliance and registration system. Incident reports can be collected from the university's incident reporting system. Findings from the collected data will be used to refine protection of minors processes.*

The ease with which an institution buys into a proposed program evaluation may depend upon a cost-benefit analysis. In other words, administrators will want to know if the cost outweighs the benefit. Costs and benefits can be either direct or indirect (Royse et al., 2016). Direct costs of a youth protection program evaluation include items such as program manager salary, insurance coverage, and software systems. Direct benefits are items such as the ability to retain insurance, as opposed to paying for litigation outcomes directly. An example of an indirect cost of an evaluation is potential concern from community members about why the evaluation is needed, whereas indirect benefits may include improved child well-being, inter-generational outcome improvements, and higher university enrollment.

# IMPORTANCE OF ASSESSMENT

It can be difficult to measure the benefits of a youth protection program and its effectiveness, and costs may seem higher than the perceived benefit. However, administrators should consider the following: Insurance rates increased between 20% and 40% between 2018 and 2020 for institutions of higher education (Whitford, 2020). Conversely, when considering the settlement costs of abuse and molestation lawsuits in higher education, the increases in insurance do not come close to the savings. The widely publicized Jerry Sandusky case at Penn State cost the university approximately \$237 million (Whitford, 2020), and a more recent case at the University of Southern California cost more \$1 billion (Cifarelli Law Firm, 2021). Significantly, these costs do not account for the long-term economic costs to the victims and their communities, nor do they account for lost tuition to the university or for loss of reputation as the result of such a lawsuit. The combined wages and benefits of a youth protection program manager generally cost less than \$200,000 per year, and the specific costs of technology are mostly absorbed by sharing the technology with the whole university system. Training programming may cost between \$15,000 and \$80,000 per year. Combined, these program costs come in far under the potential millions or billions of dollars if sexual abuse and molestation of minors is allowed to occur during university-affiliated activities. Any gaps that can be identified and closed by conducting a program evaluation can reduce the risk of such a lawsuit occurring.

When seeking buy-in for youth protection program evaluation, consider stakeholders' motives for providing youth programming. Asking questions of stakeholders, especially administrators, about what makes youth programming valuable to them will encourage their involvement and help determine how to frame requests. For example, if certain stakeholder groups believe a primary goal of youth programming is to recruit future students, frame conversations with those stakeholders within that context. An institution could state, "We want to make our university the institution of choice for future students. To accomplish that goal, we need youth attending our programs to feel welcomed and safe and that they had a positive experience here. By identifying gaps in our youth protection program, we can improve the experience of our future students."

“*Periodic assessments require additional institutional resources, but they protect minors and save institutes money.*”



# SELF-ASSESSMENT

## PROCESS OF SELF-ASSESSMENT

Self-assessment is one way to assess the effectiveness of a youth protection program. Oftentimes when an institution implements formalized self-assessments, programs view them merely as another audit. This can result in a lack of buy-in or inaccurate information. It is key when establishing a self-assessment process to work with an institution's programs to understand their missions, services, and overall risks. Therefore, it is imperative that the self-assessment process must be less like a checklist and more of a tool to help facilitate growth and resources to the programs working within the institution.

Through this process, an institution can establish long-lasting foundations that will ultimately ensure best practices in youth protection are infused and intertwined into the bedrock of youth programming. At its core, an institution's self-assessment process must be designed to prevent abuse. This can be accomplished through a formalized procedure that evaluates the strength of existing abuse prevention practices and develops a plan to sustain a culture of abuse prevention. By creating this formalized assessment, an institution designs a road map for youth protection while preventing programs from drifting back into substandard practices.

For a self-assessment tool to be effective, it must be designed to accurately evaluate operational standards within a program. Further, such operations must tie directly to preventing abuse. Many higher education institutions struggle with developing an assessment process that can evaluate hundreds of programs with differing missions, activities, structures, staffing, needs, and access to youth. Assessors can get trapped in a web of competing metrics such as licensing, state and federal laws, training requirements, screening practices, and individual experiences. However, it does not have to be so complicated. Organizations following a standardized approach, such as *The Praesidium Safety Equation*<sup>®</sup>, have found a much more manageable process that ensures all the different programs meet the institution's requirements to work with youth. HEPNet also provides numerous resources to support these efforts.



The Praesidium Safety Equation<sup>®</sup>

# SELF-ASSESSMENT

Consider including the following operations in a self-assessment process:

**POLICIES** — Policies should define the bandwidth of acceptable behavior between staff and the youth or vulnerable adults in the program’s care. Examining a program’s formalized policies and adherence to an institution’s policies can help employees understand what constitutes a policy violation, empower them to interrupt violations, and report questionable activities. Placing an emphasis on policy adherence can help the institution’s employees identify and interrupt inappropriate behavior before it ever escalates into abuse.

**SCREENING & SELECTION** — Institutions must ensure they use a multi-faceted approach to properly screen individuals with access to youth. Therefore, assessors should consider reviewing the application process, interviews, reference checks, and background screening requirements.

**TRAINING** — Effective abuse prevention training gives employees and volunteers the information and skills necessary to ensure safety. The training provided to those who serve minors must be frequent, specific, and immediately useful on the job. Further, the training must teach individuals how offenders operate, how to recognize inappropriate interactions and policy violations, and how to respond effectively. An effective assessment can ensure the right training is being provided to the right people.

**MONITORING & SUPERVISION** — Effective monitoring and supervision practices are essential for managing abuse risk. Assessments should include a process through site visits and program observations to ensure procedures are in place to supervise employees, volunteers, and youth. Further, this process should include safety checks of pre-designated, high-risk activities and architectural/facility risks.

**INTERNAL FEEDBACK SYSTEMS** — Information regarding program operations such as incident reports, client complaints, attendance records, or external licensing violations can aid in identifying high-risk programs or individuals. Additionally, understanding how and why information is received can minimize barriers to reporting. Therefore, assessing a program’s or institution’s internal feedback systems allows the organization to target specific risks and use the information to make informed improvements. This is key to a preventative model.

# SELF-ASSESSMENT

**CONSUMER PARTICIPATION** — Institutions that prioritize informing youth, vulnerable adults, and parents/guardians on how to recognize suspicious or inappropriate interactions can gain valuable risk mitigation. Such individuals can inform an institution of red-flag behavior prior to it escalating to a level of abuse. Assessors should consider this operation and analyze how programs are educating and empowering consumers to recognize and report concerns.

**RESPONDING** — Institutions must have formalized internal and external procedures for reporting abuse. Additionally, reporting procedures should encompass reports of suspicious behavior, inappropriate interactions, and policy violations. Response considerations also should include how to provide support to survivors. An assessment must evaluate this process to ensure all programs understand how to report and escalate concerns appropriately.

**ADMINISTRATIVE PRACTICES** — Abuse prevention must be embraced and ingrained within the operational practices of the institution. Leadership at the highest level must be informed of the risks and necessary resources to ensure the safety of those in care. The “voice from the top” is necessary to prevent drift from standards of safety. Therefore, it is important for an assessment to also include leadership involvement, practices, and understanding of the institution’s abuse prevention efforts.

Higher-education institutions can protect the minors they serve by implementing effective preventative measures. Thus, the purpose of the self-assessment should help achieve that mission.

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# SELF-ASSESSMENT

## RESOURCES TO UTILIZE

In internal program evaluation, resources may include such things as written information, collected data, or people. There are a variety of tools available, and using a combination of these resources likely will produce the most accurate and thorough results. When starting in program evaluation, it might be useful to become familiar with what program evaluation entails. Resources beyond this guide may include program evaluation textbooks. Royse et al. (2016) produced one particularly user-friendly textbook that lays out step-by-step guidance. Other textbooks that may be useful in developing a program evaluation process are by Grinnell et al. (2015), King and Stevahn (2013), and Spaulding (2013).

An institution's existing resources may be more easily accessible and may guide the information collected. For example, people may choose to review the program's mission statement, values, and policies. These resources may help define what success means and determine what information is currently available to help measure success. These tools also may guide methods used to collect further data. When gathering data, following ethical guidelines to protect sensitive data is essential. Depending on a person's professional background, there may be one or more sets of ethical standards to follow. Colleges and universities already are subject to FERPA (U.S. Department of Education, 2021) guidelines. However, those overseeing youth programs may be required to follow additional guidelines, such as those the American Bar Association (ABA, 2020), American Psychological Association (APA, 2017), or the National Association of Social Workers (NASW, 2021) set forth.

Information can be collected using readily available software or web-based programs. For example, a survey can be created and made available to stakeholders using programs such as Google Forms or SurveyMonkey, which create little additional expense to an organization. Similarly, Google Sheets or Excel can be utilized to track data. Some universities use compliance and registration systems, which can be tailored to collect information about youth programming as events are being planned. This information can later be used collectively to identify patterns in the data to identify where gaps in practice exist.

# SELF-ASSESSMENT

Finally, but certainly not least, program stakeholders are an essential resource that should be leveraged in program evaluation.

Stakeholders may vary by program but typically include, but are not limited to:

- Event coordinators
- Youth
- Parents
- School administrators
- Those overseeing youth policies

For higher education sites just beginning youth programming oversight, stakeholders can provide insight into what it means to keep youth safe within the boundaries of programming realities. They also can help gauge existing group priorities and identify challenges with implementing new policies and procedures. For higher education sites with existing minors policies, stakeholders provide a voice for identifying successes and challenges within current processes. Stakeholder feedback can be gained through a variety of formats, such as surveys, interviews, and focus groups.

*Program stakeholders are an essential resource that should be leveraged in program evaluation.*

# SELF-ASSESSMENT

## REAL-LIFE APPLICATION

The journey of implementing program evaluation recently began at the University of Alaska Fairbanks (UAF). UAF's Protection of Minors (POM) program blossomed from and is housed in the heavily compliance-driven Environmental, Health, Safety, and Risk Management department. However, the department director strongly supports taking steps to back up the work done with evidence supporting whether practices are working. While there have been POM policies in place since 2013, UAF was, like many programs, not assessing whether the policies effectively fulfilled their intended goals. Put simply, the UAF POM policy has two primary, overlapping goals: keeping minors safe and reduce risk to the university. To better track and achieve compliance in youth programming, the department drafted a proposal to purchase and design a compliance and registration system (CRS) for the broader University of Alaska (UA) system.

After receiving approval from the necessary UA administrators, the UA POM team began engaging with the CRS company to design a system that worked for the university. It would have been quick to implement a system with a simple checklist of compliance items for authorized adults (those certified to work with minors in UA-affiliated events). However, UAF asked for the CRS to be more comprehensive and advocated for a design in which information gathered during registration can answer program evaluation questions. In April 2022, UAF rolled out the CRS to youth programs hosting summer events. During registration, program coordinators are asked a series of questions designed to gather information such as the number of youth anticipated, youth ages, program type (day camp, overnight camp, dual enrollment, etc.), how many authorized adults will be part of the program, where the program will occur, and what kinds of activities are involved. Once authorized adults are loaded into the event, the POM manager can see which compliance items (background check, training, application, reference checks, etc.) have been met. Adults who do not pass screening processes or create incidents can be flagged as not being allowed to work with minors in the UA system.

# SELF-ASSESSMENT

In June 2022, UAF began reviewing the information quarterly to identify gaps between policy and practice. The questions that need to be answered will drive what information is reviewed. For example: “Are there certain policy requirements that are met less frequently? If so, what further information is needed to find out why? How will that information be obtained, and what will be done with it?”

Unfortunately, not all data can be measured using the CRS. The information in the CRS helps to answer questions about the goal of reducing liability and may even proffer information on some near misses (such as those caught by the screening process). However, the goal of whether kids are safe is still siloed. Working in collaboration with other UA universities, the next step for UAF is to implement an incident reporting system to collect data on which types of incidents are happening with youth, where those incidents are happening, and with which staff. These questions will further help identify potentially problematic patterns. Of course, not all incidents will be reported, so more outreach to engage parents and youth through surveys or interviews will be needed. While there is still much work to be done at UAF in POM program evaluation, every step gets UAF closer to determining the effectiveness of its POM policies.

“*The UAF POM policy has two primary, overlapping goals: keeping minors safe and reduce risk to the university.*”

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*An external assessor must have experience in the field of abuse prevention.*



# EXTERNAL ASSESSMENT

For institutions without the resources or internal expertise to conduct self-assessments, another worthwhile option is to engage in an external assessment. External vendors can bring additional experience and knowledge to the assessment process. When choosing external partners, determine what the institution is comfortable reviewing itself, and where assistance is desired. Knowing why a vendor is being hired helps narrow down which experts possess the desired qualifications.

When seeking a partner for this work, start by recognizing individuals' expertise in the field. Those with experience and knowledge in protecting minors, are also qualified to find the right vendor and eliminate poor matches. Select vendors that support the institution's policies and procedures and align with the mission.

When considering hiring an unfamiliar vendor, conduct a thorough review. Examine resources the vendor has produced to see if there is congruence with its findings. Also, consider aspects such as grammar and tone. Are the vendor's resources and presentations of a quality expected from employees?

Request references to learn about the vendor's process and reputation. Institutions that already have worked with the vendor are best positioned to know whether the vendor's offerings can meet the project's defined needs. In addition to asking the vendor for references, contact personal networks of youth protection professionals for references.

An external assessor must have experience in the field of abuse prevention. This is a niche field. Make sure the vendor has the background and knowledge to truly identify opportunities for improvement within the institution. This should include an understanding of how offenders operate, how sexualized behaviors occur, how certain activities and facilities increase the risk, and how incidents are most likely to occur.

The vendor's assessment should aid the institution with not only evaluating present operations but also providing prevention strategies and consultation to enhance the program. Further, select a vendor that can truly assist in providing and developing resources that will ensure youth programs not only meet, but exceed the standard of care in abuse prevention.

# INSTITUTIONALIZE CHANGES

Once a program evaluation process is established, it is essential to ensure the commitment to continuous evaluation and improvements outlasts one individual's tenure. One way to accomplish this is by including requirements for ongoing evaluation in written policy. For example, a youth protection program policy may require that the program manager makes an annual or biannual report to the university chancellor, president, or other identified administrator.

Establishing this expectation will create a necessity to, at a minimum, regularly review data. Another way to institutionalize evaluation processes is to make sure data is easily accessible. While some data may require an ongoing working relationship with another university staff (such as an admissions director or registrar), the collection of other data can be built into processes, such as a compliance and registration system. When data is easy to obtain and is visible, a program manager is more likely to adhere to established internal evaluation practices.

## CONCLUSION

It is very encouraging that so many higher education institutions are cultivating protection of minors policies. However, shifting legal and insurance landscapes suggest it is no longer sufficient to simply have a policy.

How institutions respond to allegations and assess their policies' effectiveness not only can land them negatively in the court of public opinion but it can place them in an actual courtroom. Colleges and universities must have a well-written policy and procedures to protect the minors they are inviting to programming and to also ensure that policies and procedures are mitigating the intended risks and are working.

HEPNet's mission is to support those in higher education to create or establish these expectations, and we offer many resources to help institutions do so. We hope this paper has highlighted how to successfully conduct an internal assessment or how to best select an external professional if desired.

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