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“No Means Yes?”: Changing Rape Culture on College Campuses

Earlier this year, an article published by the *New York Times*, entitled “Reporting Rape, and Wishing She Hadn’t,” detailed the ordeal of one female undergraduate student, Anna, at Hobart and William Smith Colleges in central New York. Anna was brutally raped by several members of the football team during the inaugural weeks of her freshmen year (Bogdanich). Immediately following the event, she visited the sexual assault nurse on campus, who reported that Anna had experienced “blunt force trauma within the last 24 hours indicating intercourse with either multiple partners, multiple times or that the intercourse was very forceful” (Bogdanich). Despite the fact that the sexual assault nurse issued this report, the University spent just 12 days investigating the report, ultimately holding an in-house hearing that cleared the football players of any form of wrongdoing (Bogdanich). Similar to many other universities, Hobart and William Smith Colleges report having a zero tolerance policy for sexual assault. Yet, unfortunately a case like this is not uncommon, and many students who actually have the courage to come forward and file a report, “Come to regret [their] decision, wishing they had never reported the assault in the first place” (Bogdanich).

Prior to the late 1980s it was assumed that university campuses were a safe environment for women. In 1987, the first comprehensive research studies regarding the prevalence of sexual assault on college campuses were conducted and found that sexual violence was actually more common on campuses than originally thought. The 1987 study found that 54% of college women

will be sexually victimized during their college careers (Koss 169). The same study found that only 25% of men admit to any form of wrongdoing in terms of sexually aggressive behavior (Koss 170). The results of the studies conducted in the late 1980s, as well as those conducted today, overwhelmingly show that “college women are at a higher risk for sexual assault than their non-college-bound peers” (Karjane ii). Considering that women make up “57% of the undergraduate population nationwide,” it is important that the majority sex feel safe in the campus environment (Marklein 19). Colleges and universities alike have been addressing this issue in different facets, including modifying prevention, awareness, and support programs for students, however too often the focus is on modifying female behavior. In order to decrease and hopefully end sexual assault on their campuses, universities need to implement sexual assault prevention programs designed for all-male audiences that address commonly accepted rape myths, the legal definitions of sexual assault and/or rape, and exercises designed to encourage empathy and responsibility.

University administrations are simply not doing enough to combat sexual assault and rape. The lack of action by university administrations has created a sexually violent culture on college campuses nationwide. In a recent survey of 350 universities regarding their policies and procedures for sexual violence, “nearly 40% of the schools had not conducted a sexual assault investigation over the last year fives” (Strauss). In addition, another “1/3 of the schools surveyed provided no sexual training to students about the issue” (Strauss). Almost weekly, another report is released about a particular university discouraging students from reporting sexual assaults, mishandling sexual assault cases, and providing inadequate disciplinary actions for offenders (Iaboni). For example, recently “A group of 23 students filed a federal complaint against Columbia University alleging the school failed to protect victims of sexual assault” (Ibanoi).

Overall, it is evident that current measures implemented by university administrations to decrease sexual violence on their campuses are ineffective, thus they must consider new more effective programs.

To be able to appropriately discuss sexual assault and rape it is necessary to acknowledge commonly accepted “rape myths” that contribute to the idea that “women are responsible for their victimization and relieve the rapist from any sense of responsibility” (What Are Rape Myths). Some commonly accepted rape myths include, but are not limited to: It’s not rape if “they’re dating, there was no force/violence involved, she didn’t fight it, she went home with him, she wasn’t aware of what was happening, and she said no, but really meant yes” (Lowen). Individuals use “rape myths” to justify the actions of rapists and ultimately blame the victim for his/her own behavior surrounding the attack (Flores 448). It is also noted that the belief of commonly accepted rape myths leads to an increased likelihood to commit sexual assault in the future (Osland 183). Clearly, the acceptance of rape myths is a major problem for our society that needs to be corrected in order to appropriately handle sexual violence. Fortunately, sexual assault prevention programs designed for men have shown a 55% drop in their participant’s acceptance of rape myths following the conclusion of the program (Foubert 158). The discussion about rape myths is vital to the success of all-male programs because men are more likely than women to believe rape myths and students earlier in their college careers are more likely to believe rape myths than students later in their academic careers (Lonsway 93). The necessity of all-male audiences can be noted as well because “men are more comfortable and more honest in single-sex groups” (Berkowitz 167). Overall, all-male sexual assault prevention programs have shown success in decreasing the acceptance of rape myths among their participants because men

are able to be more open and honest discussing these commonly accepted rape myths among their peers.

In spite of the demonstrated success of all-male programs, the majority of sexual assault prevention programs on college campuses are targeted toward women, and are focused on “risk reduction and self-defense classes, environmental changes to promote increased campus safety, and victim-advocacy programs” (Hong). These programs, designed for women, can be problematic because they focus on self-defense methods. These self-defense methods are “typically addressed to stranger rather than acquaintance assaults” (Yeater 743). Contrary to the popular image of the predatory stranger, 92% of all sexual assaults on college campuses occur at the hands of an assaulter who is at least an acquaintance if not a friend of the victim (Zinzow 711). Thus it is evident that most women’s programs focus too much on the “women’s behavior” (Foubert 5). It is ineffective for universities to merely focus on sexual-assault prevention from the victim’s perspective because in actuality these attacks are not random, but instead are premeditated. Currently, “99% of people who commit rape are men” and prevention efforts need to be focused on the rapists not the victims (Greenfeld). It is important to note that very few men actually believe they committed any form of sexually aggressive behavior toward their victims (Koss 170). Therefore, it is evident that the issue lies in education of men about the definitions and laws regarding sexual assault and/or rape. Many individuals consider sexual violence to strictly mean rape, but in fact in a broader and more accurate sense “sexual assault is any unwanted sexual contact: inappropriate touching, forced kissing, forced penetration, or forced intercourse” (Sexual Assault Law & Legal Definitions). Prevention programs designed for men focus on explicitly defining terms like sexual assault and rape and consistently remind the participants of the characteristics of both. Another major aspect of this education involves

consent as it relates to alcohol. Many rapes and sexual assaults reported by women take place when the couple participates in sexual activity, yet the woman is too intoxicated to consent to the sexual act. With nearly 71% of sexual assaults on college campuses taking place when the victim, perpetrator or both parties had been drinking it is important for both groups to be educated about consent in regards to alcohol (Ward 756). Thus, in order to protect both men and women on college campuses it is important that men be educated about the legal definitions and their local laws regarding sexual assault and rape and in regards to the consumption of alcohol.

In addition, programs designed for all-male audiences are effective not only because they address the legal definitions of sexual assault and rape, but also because they increase men's empathy toward survivors of rape and sexual assault and address the inaccuracies of gender norms present in society (Foubert xii). Prevention programs increase men's empathy toward survivors of rape by making participants realize sexual assault or rape can happen to them as well. One program taught at Binghamton University attempts to "sensitize men to the way a female rape victim might feel" by asking participants to visualize themselves as police officers who are sexually assaulted by two drunken men (Fogg). Others like *The Men's Program* shows the audience a video to compare a male police officer's rape experiences "to experiences commonly had by female survivors before, during, and after being raped" (Foubert 3). These types of exercises help men relate to the victim, which will ultimately decrease their likelihood to rape or commit sexual assault (Foubert 89). Prevention programs for men also attempt to break traditional gender role stereotypes that "men are sexual aggressors or competitors" and women are the "gatekeepers" for sexual relations (Hong). This stereotype connects men's sexual activity frequency to his masculinity and pressures men to be sexually active as frequently as possible or they will be considered less of a man (Berkowitz 174). When this idea is taught in a mixed-

gender group men are unlikely to challenge themselves in their beliefs and men associate the word “gatekeeper” with victim blaming.

While programs designed for all-male audiences attempt to increase men’s empathy toward survivors of sexual violence, programs designed for men also focus strongly on bystander techniques to help men intervene during a potential high-risk situation. Men are encouraged to become active participants in the movement against sexual violence on their campuses. Participants are encouraged to participate in events like “Take Back the Night” which seeks to end all forms of sexual violence by fostering safe and supportive communities as well as through awareness events. Participants are encouraged to see themselves as part of the solution not the problem (Berkowitz 170). Often in mixed-gender audiences, “discussions between men and women can be polarized” and end with each gender blaming one another (Berkowitz 167). Men do not see themselves as preventers of sexual violence against women, but only “fear false accusations from women” (Berkowitz 175). Prevention programs designed for all-male audiences teach participants to be effective bystanders and increase their own empathy toward the victims of sexual assault and/or rape.

As mentioned earlier, university administrations have mishandled a variety of different aspects of sexual violence on their campuses including prevention and reporting efforts. Students at these universities, have acknowledged this fact, and are thus working in unique ways to combat sexual violence on their campuses. In reference to the Columbia University case mentioned previously, “senior Emma Sulkowicz pledged to carry her mattress around campus until her rapist is expelled” (Schonfeld). This is one example of what students have been doing to focus attention on the topic. Another organization gaining popularity on college campuses is a program entitled Students Active For Ending Rape (SAFER). According to their website, the

program is “student-led” and is a “campaign to reform college sexual assault policies.” Students and survivors have lost faith in the system because of constant failures by administrations regarding sexual violence. Students are using unique events and activist gestures to bring attention to this important topic as well as to hopefully bring positive change to the situation.

Sexual assault prevention programs on college campuses can be designed for many different groups of people, including but not limited to: all-women, mixed-gender, and all-male audiences. The topics and goals of the prevention programs vary across audiences, but with the overall goal remaining the same: to decrease sexual assaults on university campuses. Research has shown that the “most effective prevention programs are designed for single gendered audiences” (Vladutiu 81). It is important to remember that these singled gender programs are only effective if men realize their own potential for violence and challenge the violence in other men (Berkowitz 163). Therefore the most effective method of reducing the prevalence of sexual violence on college campuses is to design programs for all-male audiences and focus lessons on decreasing the acceptance of rape myths, explaining the legal definitions of sexual assault and rape, and increasing men’s empathy towards the victims of sexual violence. Why is it then, that these types of programs have not been more widely adopted by universities across the nation? There is sufficient evidence showing the success of programs with all-male audiences, yet at most large universities, students are continually exposed to programs designed for mixed gender audiences not designed to address gender norms, rape myths, and other contributing factors to campus rape culture. Multiple studies, funded and endorsed by various departments of the U.S. government, have found programs designed for mixed-gender audiences are not a feature of effective prevention programs. This leads me to believe universities are merely creating a façade in reference to their empathy toward the sexually violent crimes committed on their campuses.

Universities simply do not want to address this issue on their campuses, because to do this they have to acknowledge there is a problem. The problem as a whole makes universities uneasy, instead of acknowledging the crimes on their campuses; they instead have attempted to apply a Band-Aid to remedy the situation. This does not help the situation, but only gives the outward appearance to potential students, faculty, and alumni that the problem is being appropriately dealt with. In reality, universities are failing to protect their students, and instead are more concerned with their reputations, and their fear of becoming known as the “Rape School.”

Introducing an all-male sexual assault prevention program would of course face some resistance on campuses. Undergraduate male students could feel that they are being blamed for the problem. Also, it is likely that Fraternities will not immediately respond to such programs. It is important that administrations explain the importance of the issue and show men that their education will be part of the solution. To further investigate this issue, I think it would be important to find out who decides what sexual violence prevention programs universities are using to inform and protect their students? Why are these statistics being ignored? Will this have to become a national movement in order to be successful? All of these questions lead me to believe that there is a lack of accountability on the part of university administration. This is too important of an issue to simply be ignored. Universities must be held accountable for their lack of action, and must be held to strict guidelines in the future in order to appropriately correct the problem of sexual violence on their campuses. While there are many characteristics of this problem that need to be addressed by university administrations, they must first acknowledge there is a problem.

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