

Sexual Assault on College Campuses: The True Reality

Introduction:

When a student, let's call her Jane, decided to report a crime of sexual assault, she believed she was doing was the right thing, that she would get justice and closure for a crime that took away her freedom of choice. Instead, she quickly realized that the system designed to report and prevent sexual assault, was a really a system built on principles of victim blaming, patriarchy, and misogyny. Rather than empathy and compassion, Jane was met with questions like "why was she drinking", "what was she wearing", "was she sure she had been sexually assaulted", leading her to blame herself and eventually redact her report. The harsh reality is that every 74 seconds someone is sexually assaulted in the United States, with many of those crimes occurring among college aged students (RAINN, n.d.). Survivors report being ignored, blamed, or even being told "they were asking for it".

And the most troubling part?

This did not happen in a police department or a court of law, it happened in the Title IX office on her college campus, an office that promotes itself to be founded and driven to provide student support and advocacy.

Stories like Jane's are why for one of my class projects I decided to create a website that analyzed the crimes of sexual assault on college campuses and identified what changes needed to be implemented in order to lessen the prevalence of this crime. This website was only a preliminary step, one not without its limitations.

Through my research it became evident that current policies on sexual assault prevention have largely failed to adequately provide justice for survivors. Therefore, systematic changes through changes in legal policies, training, outreach, and campus collaborations must be made in order to deliver justice for survivors of sexual assault. This paper aims to build upon my initial website in analyzing the problem further and creating a sustainable multi-step intersectional solution.

Background:

I created my website on sexual assault awareness my junior semester (Spring 2025) for my WGS 453 class, gender, and crime. My website was broken down into five different tabs: statistics, breaking down the problem, case studies, what we can do, and other resources, which is depicted in figure 1. This was a preliminary step that was designed to put into perspective the magnitude of the problem of sexual assault on college campuses. It was not without its limitations and will be expanded on when creating policy design in the following sections of this paper.

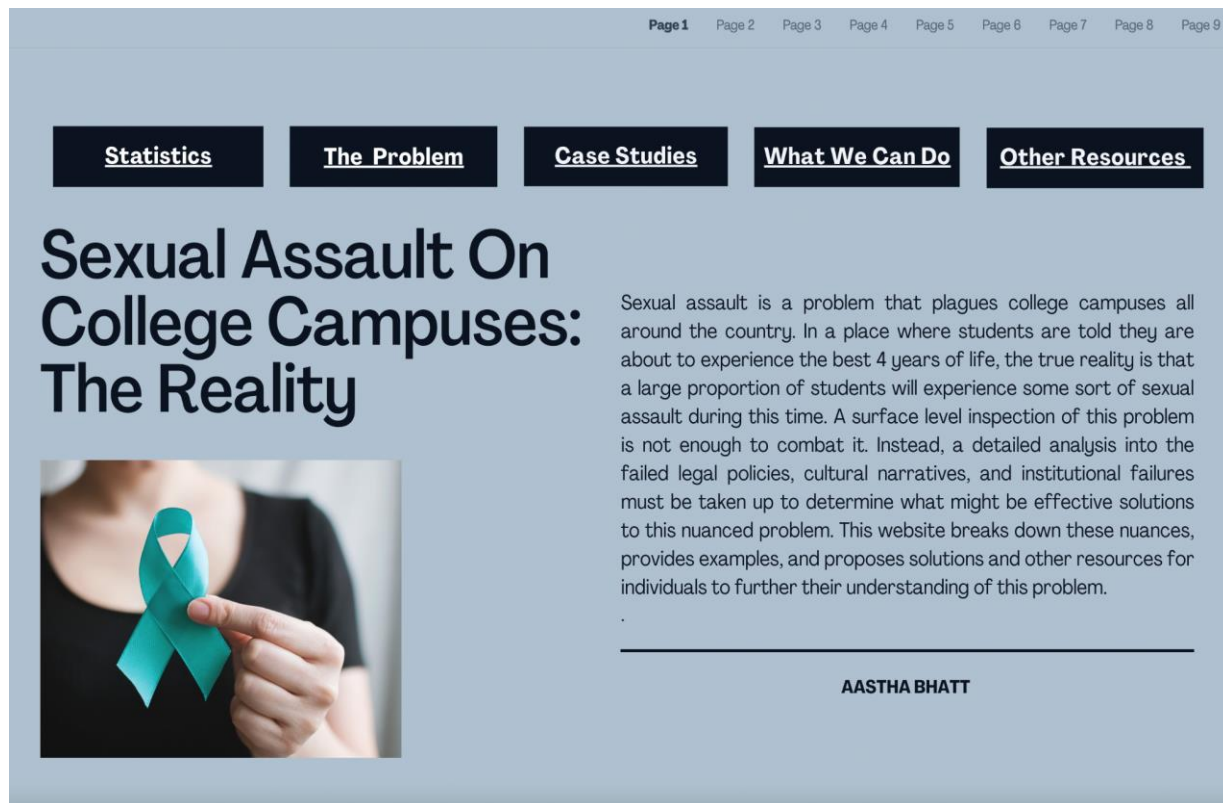


Figure 1. Image of front page of website.

Before we can propose a successful and sustainable solution to sexual assault, we must first hold a clear understanding of what sexual assault is and the magnitude of the problem through accurate measurement. Sexual assault is defined as any type of sexual contact that happens without clear and voluntary consent. This can include rape, forced sexual acts, unwanted sexual touching, and other forms of sexual violence (RAINN, n.d.). This definition, however, can slightly vary from state to state, resulting in inconsistencies in reporting and documentation. Many officers are also unaware of all the different forms of sexual assault, which can result in survivors of sexual assault being ignored and dismissed. Figure 2 is an image from my website that depicts statistics illustrating the prevalence of sexual assault on college campuses.

What is even more alarming is that even these large and significant numbers fail to address the magnitude of the problem. These statistics, represented in Figure 2, only represent the number of crimes that are actually reported through legal channels on college campuses. However, when campus climate surveys are conducted, or unofficial reporting channels are quantified reports of sexual assault are significantly higher than those reported through legal channels, including to both university reporting staff and the police. Around 4 out of 5 students end up not reporting the sexual assault they have experienced to law enforcement and this number is even higher for students in marginalized communities (RAINN, n.d). This lack of reporting can be coupled with many different factors that we will further explore in this paper. To truly understand the scope of this problem, all these different lenses that impact reporting must be examined together to understand the true scale of sexual assault on college campuses.



Figure 2. Sexual assault prevalence on college campuses throughout the U.S.

Further, legal policies such as the Title IX and the Clery Act, are only applicable in certain geographical boundaries of college campuses. This means that many crimes of sexual assault that surpass these geographical boundaries by even an inch, will not be represented in statistics discussing sexual assault on college campuses. This results in sexual assault numbers being lessened and the widespread impact of sexual assault also being diminished. Without

accounting for vague legal policies, widespread underreporting, and geographical restrictions individuals are not provided the full scope on how big a problem sexual assault is. When a combination of all these lenses is enforced when analyzing sexual assault, it is quickly realized that sexual assault cannot be ignored on college campuses and violates a crucial freedom of choice.

Literature Review: Breaking Down The Issue

Sexual assault and why it has become such a comprehensible problem can be broken down into three distinct categories: legal policies, cultural narratives, and institutional failures. My website began decoding each of these categories, which we will further examine in more detail below.

Legal Policies:

When discussing legal policies both Title IX and the Clery Act must be discussed. To first begin understanding where these policies fail, a clear understanding of these policies and their legal scope must first be addressed.

Title IX:

Title IX is a governmentally enforced civil rights law that prohibits sex-based discrimination within the scope of education. The role of Title IX is as follows: to provide support for students when forms of discrimination impact students' right to education. Sexual assault is included within this list, but Title IX is only in effect when there is an evident connection between a sexual assault and the impact it has had on a student's education (NSVRC, n.d).

Further, both public and private college institutions must abide by Title IX if they receive federal funding, which majority of college institutions do. All institutions will have a designated Title IX office, where students can file reports of sexual assault. This reporting does not directly influence criminal court proceedings, but instead aims to provide students support through an educational standpoint. Title IX has been known to offer homework extensions, dorm changes, mental health counseling, or schedule changes for students (RAINN, n.d.)

Where this policy largely fails is in its generality. Title IX assumes that survivors of sexual assault all face the same experiences and barriers, which is simply not true (Aloisi, 2023). This policy fails to take into account how first-generation students, LGBTQ+, international, disabled, marginalized, or undocumented students face different barriers and different conflicts that impact whether they report these crimes and what they need in forms of support. For example, many Title IX offices do not have interpreters for international students or students whose primary language is not English, which greatly impacts initial disclosure and the effectiveness of a survivor's statement. It does not acknowledge the ostracization that those from marginalized communities may face in their local communities or how those in LGBTQ+ communities may fear being targeted because of their sexuality and their identity if they choose

to report these crimes (Holland, 2021). These are all legitimate and tangible barriers that prevent people from reporting or even hinder initial disclosure of the assault. Generalization allows for survivors to be ignored, resulting in this policy becoming ineffective.

The Clery Act

The Clery Act differs from Title IX as it is a policy that specifically requires schools to publish statistics and safety information for incidents that occur on college campuses. Unlike Title IX, the Clery act requires schools to make public an annual security report that reports all crimes, including crimes of sexual assault on college campuses. Under the Clery Act, universities are required to also make public their safety procedures that they put into place to lessen the frequency of crimes on their campuses (Terman, 2022). Like Title IX, the Clery Act does not directly impact criminal court proceedings, but instead compiles a list of all crimes that have occurred on college campuses, regardless of if criminal charges are filed or not. Universities that receive federal funding must uphold the Clery Act, both through implementing crime prevention and through publication of crime rates.

The Clery Act, however, has a clear geographical barrier as to where it can be applied, and which crimes are actually included in the reports. For example, if students go to the University of Tennessee-Knoxville crimes of sexual assault would be placed in the annual crime report published by the University. However, if a crime occurred, say in the Fort, a mere five-minute walk away from campus where many students live and interact, this then goes beyond the scope of the Clery Act and would not be included in the Clery report that is sent to the student body and to governmental agencies. Because of these geographical limitations of this act, reports and statistics of sexual assault are significantly lower than the reality of the problem at hand. Further, many administrators report large ambiguity as what is defined as a crime under the Clery Act, resulting in inaccurate reports being published. Lastly, institutional prestige and reputation must not be ignored when discussing the act. Higher reports of crime can hurt a university's standing, indicating that some universities may choose to engage in under-reporting activities or dissuade students from reporting crimes of assault.

Cultural Narratives:

Cultural narratives significantly affect whether an individual decides to report a sexual assault and the cultural biases that reporting officers may hold about sexual assault survivors.

Responding Officer's Conduct:

After disclosing a sexual assault, there are formal steps taken by university officials and officers. When an individual reports a sexual assault the first line of questioning is typically, have they been drinking. Now this question, in it of itself, is not aimed at directly attacking the survivor. Instead, it is asked many times to establish legality, if consent was applicable, and to get medical attention for the survivor. However, what quickly arises after initial intake and medical examination is this causation that because said individual was drinking, they were

sexually assaulted. Statements like “if you had not been drinking, maybe this would not have happened” have been reported being said to survivors hundreds of times, reflecting systematic and social inequities (Henry, 2021).

Many reporting officers upon initial inquiry and investigation tend to ask survivors “why” questions. For example, “why were they drinking so much”, “why were they at the party”, “why were they dressed the way they were”, “why didn’t they fight back or scream”, “why were they out so late?”. These “why” questions evoke feelings of blame within victims. They are accusatory, as if the sexual assault crime was the victim’s fault, like they could have done something differently to prevent this crime (NIJ, 2024). This is simply not true and truly reflects a deep systematic injustice that many reporting officers continue to uphold.

There is this image of the “perfect victim” that many officers, and many individuals within society hold, and when this metaphorical image is utilized to create a baseline for sexual assault questions, survivors feel blamed, ridiculed, and ostracized (Smith, 2016). There is absolutely no such thing as a “perfect victim”. Instead, what truly is occurring within sexual assault crimes, are that perpetrators believe that social hierarchy gives them the power and privilege of taking someone’s freedom of choice, especially if the victim is someone who deviates from the gender binary and the gender rules that plague our society. Perpetrators believe they are entitled to taking away someone’s freedom of choice, to violate someone else’s body, that victims were asking for it or they wanted it.

The reality is that no matter what happened on the night of question, no matter how the survivor conducted themselves, what they were doing, their past history, if they were out late, if they were intoxicated, a crime of sexual assault is not a representation of what they should have done, but instead is a representation of the systematic and stereotypical beliefs that allow for such a crime to occur. This disconnect between what a crime of sexual assault truly represents and responding officers’ questions, is why many individuals refrain from reporting crimes or leave their report incomplete. Figure 3 is an image from my website that briefly discusses how sexual assault investigation has been utilized to further uphold systems like the gender binary, gender rules, and the patriarchy, as they seem to target victims and give excuses for perpetrators.

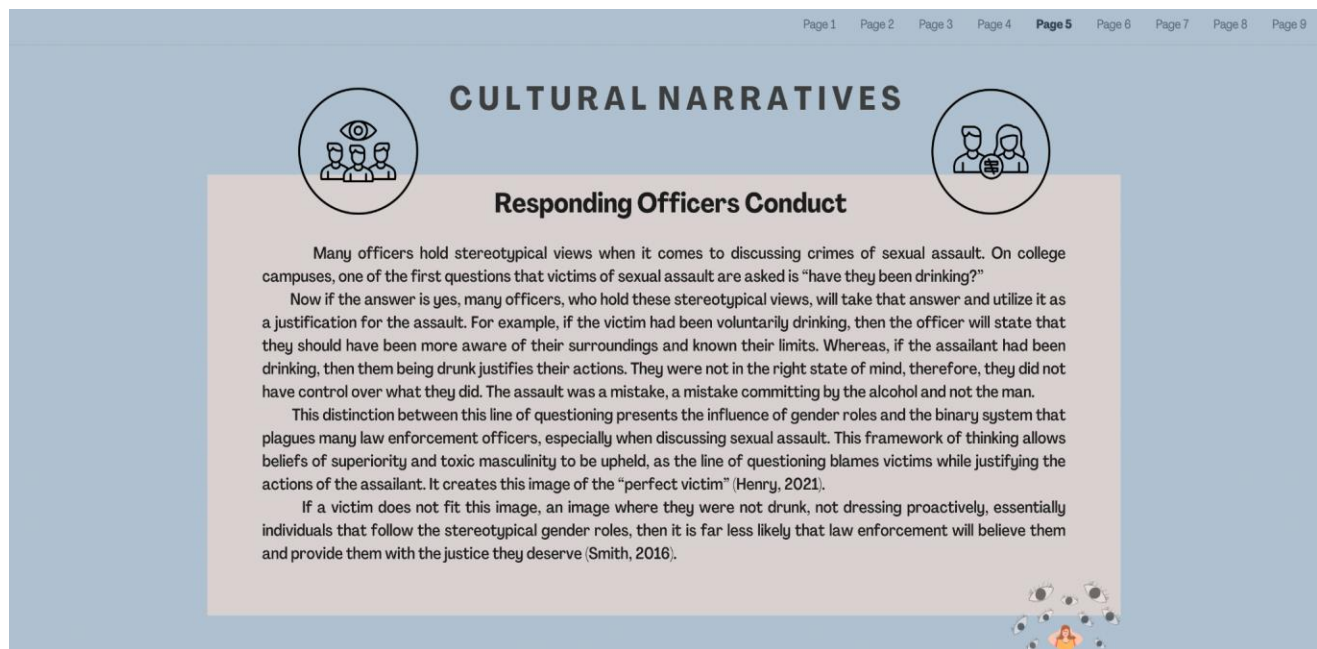


Figure 3. Image from my website depicting how sexual assault investigation has been built on gender rules and regulations, inhibiting justice, and advocacy for survivors.

Cultural Stigmas:

Cultural stigmas also play a huge role in whether a survivor chooses to report these crimes. Rather, than just listing the cultural stigmas that influence whether survivors report crimes of sexual assault, an in-depth discussion of these stigmas and how they influence individual's differently must be addressed. For example, someone who is a person of color may refrain from reporting because of the fear and shame they feel they will bring upon their community if this crime becomes public (Aloisi, 2023). These individual fears lack of confidentiality, lack of cultural understanding, and further victimization from the student body, reporting officers, as well as their family.

An intersectional lens must also be applied when discussing sexual assault. For example, if the perpetrator of a crime was of the same minority race as the survivor, a survivor may refrain from reporting the crime because they may believe if they report this crime, they are betraying their community and choosing to side with those who practice ideals of racism and discrimination. In a country where marginalized communities are already targeted, a survivor may feel discouraged or even blamed if they report a rape that was committed by someone apart of their community. Here both sex and race are intertwining variables that must be examined in order to effectively understand why, in this hypothetical scenario, a survivor refrains from reporting or even taking legal action.

Another example is, say a woman who is undocumented is sexually assaulted. The fear of losing federal funded scholarships and being deported are all realities she will consider before deciding to report her sexual assault. In this scenario, you see lack of confidentiality and fear of political retaliation occurring preventing adequate and effective practices of justice being

implemented for the crime committed against her. These are just a few examples of the many cultural backgrounds that must be taken into consideration. Students on disability, first-generation students, study abroad students, all have different cultural backgrounds and barriers that must be discussed and accommodated for when looking at sexual assault reporting (Miodus, 2023).

Institutional Failures:

Lastly, institutional failures play a huge role in the prevalence of sexual assault on college campuses. Figure 4 depicts why institutions would hide crimes of sexual assault. Environments that do not embrace all parts of an individual's identity: their race, sex, gender, result in other members of the student body believing it to be okay for crimes of sexual assault to occur (Nightingale, 2022). Further, when institutions hide the prevalence of sexual assault to “maintain their prestige”, the opposite occurs. Institutions create an environment where they are essentially stating that it is okay if crimes of sexual assault occur, as what they value more is public appearance rather than the safety of the student body. By ignoring this issue, institutions are simply worsening the problem at hand, and in turn worsening their integrity.

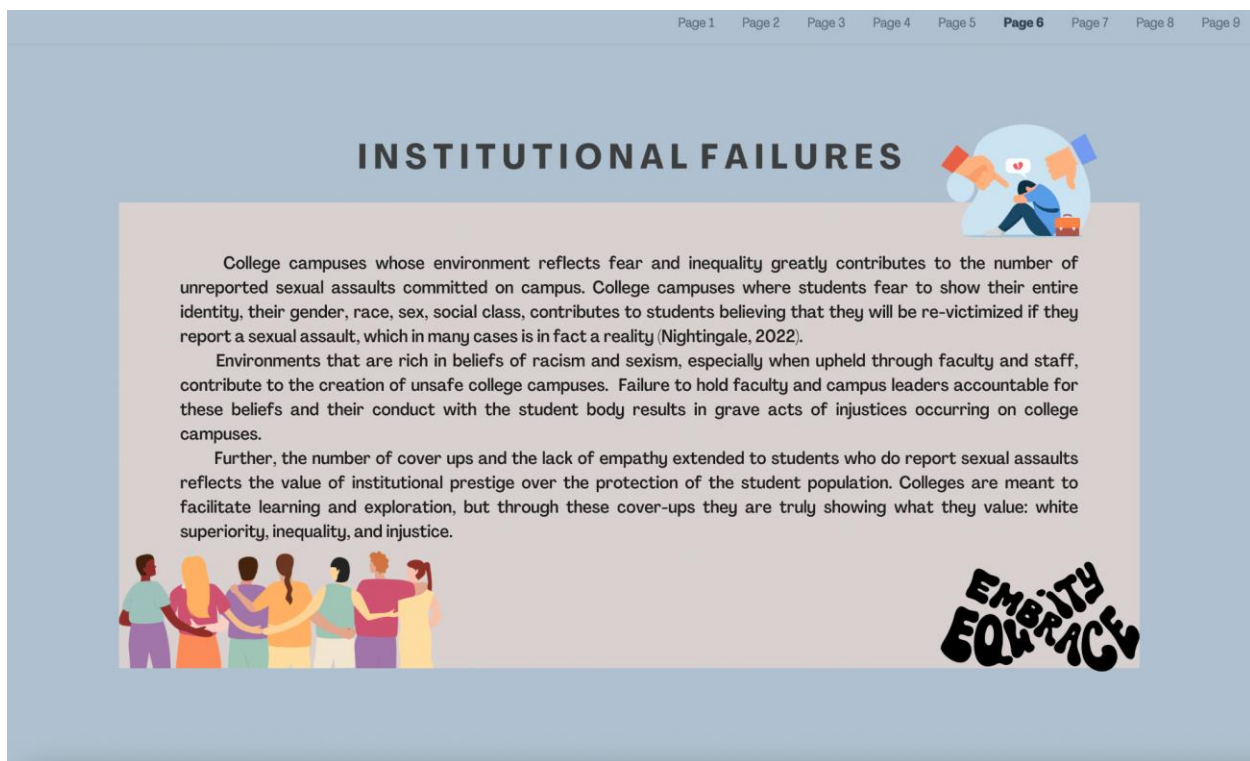


Figure 4. Image depicting the role institutions can play in prevalence of crimes of sexual assault.

What We Can Do: Practical Strategies

Now that we understand the true problem and why sexual assault continues to plague college campuses despite campus wide regulations, we can begin to craft effective and sustainable policies that will truly provide justice and advocacy to survivors of sexual assault.

Supporting Survivors of Sexual Assault

What first must be discussed when creating policies is what to do when someone discloses a crime of sexual assault to you. Figure 5 from my website discusses the importance of having empathy in these scenarios.



Figure 5: Image from my website depicting the importance of empathy.

When someone discloses a sexual assault, your first response may be that this needs to be reported to legal authorities right away. However, this statement may be doing more harm than good. When someone discloses a sexual assault to you, their freedom of choice has already been violated, which is why it is imperative that you do not force another decision onto them. Be a support system who is there to listen, not someone who is there to make decisions for them. Listen to how they are feeling, what they fear, and ensure that they know you will be a support system through this entire process. It is crucial that you educate yourself on the nuances of sexual assault.

To ensure that the student body is informed to the reality of sexual assault formats like an extension of my website or an informative and representative module on canvas need to be

implemented for every student to complete and interact with. These formats, either in website or module form, must truly address why sexual assault is an expansive problem and the realities behind it. It needs to convey a clear definition of sexual assault and provide an expansive list of the different forms of sexual assault. It needs to clearly define the legal policies of Title IX and the Clery Act but must also clearly convey where these policies have jurisdiction and where their limits are. It must also address all the cultural narratives that members of the student body may face, including those revolving around race, gender, sex, immigration status, and disability. It must truly address and represent not just the heteronormative student body but must also represent those individuals in the LGBTQ+ community, undocumented students, first generation students, and those from marginalized communities (Bloom, 2022). It should depict what to do and what not to do if someone discloses a crime of sexual assault to you. The resources for survivors of sexual assault provided by each university should also be listed on these modules.

These modules should not be a checkbox for students to complete but instead should be an interactive model that truly addresses every person in the student body. These modules should be emphasized and addressed by peer mentors, faculty, and staff, and should especially be emphasized to each new entering freshman class. Instead of saying you need to complete this, instructors and students in leadership positions should emphasize the importance of having empathy and compassion when you are completing these modules. They should be taken seriously. Including all these factors in these modules, allows the student body to be adequately informed on sexual assault. These modules should not just be completed once a year but should be periodically discussed and sent to the student body multiple times throughout the semester. Students should be well informed of the sexual assault resources that are provided to them on campuses (Bloom, 2022). We cannot truly address and create policies to prevent sexual assault if we continue to sugar-coat the problem.

Training For Reporting Officers

Reporting officers, faculty and staff must be trained in conducting trauma-informed responses. Instead of asking “why” questions to survivors, like “why were you out late” “why did you not report sooner?”, reporting officers need to be trained to phrase questions like “tell me what happened”, “tell me where you were”, “tell me how you felt in the moment”. While this may seem like a minor change in questioning, transitioning from “why” to “tell” questions creates an environment where survivors do not feel blamed or victimized. This way of questioning allows survivors to tell their own stories about how the sexual assault happened, without any fear of judgement or blame from anyone present (Lonsway, 2022).

Trauma-informed interviews allow for trust, respect, and empathy to be formed. When correctly conducted these types of interviews do not re-victimize the survivor. Further, this idea of the “perfect victim” continues to impact the way reporting officers conduct interviews. By undergoing training for trauma-informed interview styles and completing in-depth canvas modules, reporting officers can truly see that sexual assault is not a depiction of what the survivor should have done, but what systems in place allowed the perpetrator to act the way they

did. It is mistakenly believed that a “credible” sexual assault survivor is one that reflects stereotypical gender roles and imagery, which is simply not true (Murphy-Oikonen, 2022). New training that is centered on survivors telling their stories and feeling empowered will allow for environments to be created where survivors feel they can report a crime and get justice.

This training should not just be limited to reporting officers but should also be extended to student leaders as well as faculty and staff. They should be trained to identify warning signs, when to intervene, and what to do if someone discloses a sexual assault to them (Bloom, 2022). Most importantly, these trainings that are extended to them must discuss adopting intersectionality perspectives, understanding others’ cultures, what barriers students may face when they consider reporting a crime. These trainings should not just occur once a year but should be monthly training, so people are aware of what is going on. By extending training to all faculty and staff as well as students, environments are created that further ensure that the entire student body feels as though they can report a crime of sexual assault without feeling ignored or dismissed, rather than just the white heteronormative population.

Additional Resources

Title IX offices and other offices need to add additional resources that adequately represent the needs of all members of their student body. Resources like interpreters, legal counseling, culturally informed counseling need to be implemented and made accessible to all members of the student body. Current and additional resources need to be promoted and made aware to the student body all year long, not just the beginning of the semester.

Survivors who report crimes of sexual assault must also be given a clear timeline of what is going to take place in the next few days and what their next steps are. Many times, officers do not follow up with reports, leaving survivors confused and more likely to blame themselves. By making the procedure of reporting, possible medical examination, and potential legal implications clear, survivors will truly feel supported in this already daunting process. This ensures that no one gets left behind, and that survivors know that there is someone out there advocating and fighting for them (Bloom, 2022).

Collaborations and Campaigns

Students continue to be unaware of the resources that are on campus that are dedicated to helping survivors of sexual assault. More campaigns and collaborations must occur on campus, to make students aware of all the resources and who they can reach out to if they need help, want to report a sexual assault, or just need someone to talk to and make sense of what has happened to them.

Collaborating with sexual assault awareness campaigns like RAINN, allows for an extension of resources for students to be made. RAINN has a 24/7 hotline where survivors can call and reach out for support. This support hotline is managed by individuals who are trained in trauma-informed counseling and who can empathetically, effectively, and confidently give support to those who have been sexually assaulted (RAINN, n.d). Making a collaboration with

an established national program dedicated to combatting the expansive problem of sexual assault like RAINN allows for students to know that the university is taking sexual assault cases seriously and provides students with even more support and resources to them. By collaborating with RAINN students are not just confined to reporting to Title IX or do not have to fear repercussions from other students, as they would be disclosing their assault to trained officials that work outside the university. These officials are trained not just in initial disclosure, but how to deal with trauma, when to seek help, how to identify warning signs, and how to simply talk to students in a way that does not contain any judgement, victim blaming, or disdain. This collaboration must be promoted year long.

Universities should also promote student-led clubs, sororities, and fraternities to create campaigns on sexual assault awareness. This further builds student community and advocacy around this issue and ensures that policy change on an institutional level continues to be advocated for. By having student led organizations advocate for increased education on sexual assault, students feel as though their student led community supports them if they ever need to report a crime of sexual assault. Further, having student-led campaigns further ensures that diversity and intersectionality are at the forefront of these campaigns. Student led organizations are expansive, and truly demonstrate the diversity of the student body and by conducting these campaigns students become even more involved and aware of the discrimination and lack of inclusivity that prevents many sexual assault survivors from reporting crimes of sexual assault. These campaigns and collaborations should be promoted throughout the entire school year, not just opening week. Students must be aware that support for sexual assault survivors is a yearlong, 24/7 process and not one that just is made aware at the start of every semester to just be forgotten. To ensure these new techniques are beneficially impacting the student body, climate surveys must be sent out every 6 weeks to the entire student body. From this we can get more accurate data on what crimes of sexual assault are being reported, why students may continue to not report sexual assault crimes, what is and what is not working, and other potential policies that also need to be implemented (Bloom, 2022).

Limitations:

Given the current governmental and political environment, federal funding of educational based programs has become scarce and limiting. This could hinder all parts of this plan coming into action. This paper has not considered the budgetary accommodations needed to be taken into consideration. Further, some universities may be hesitant in implementing these plans because of their own political and social beliefs. However, even with these obstacles it is still necessary to begin the first step in this process. It is still necessary to advocate for change, even if it starts by students themselves rallying and campaigning for change and the implementation of a canvas module or a website depicting the reality of sexual assault.

Conclusion:

Understanding sexual assaults and its presence on college campuses, requires an in-depth analysis on how legal policies, culture, and institutions all play a role in both the prevalence of sexual assault as well as the number of unreported crimes of sexual assault on college campuses. It requires adopting a new perspective to see how current policies aimed at lessening sexual assault in actuality promote beliefs of patriarchy, gender roles, and misogyny. To combat this problem, it truly takes dedication and empathy. Finding a solution to combatting sexual assault cannot just occur with a snap of our fingers. Instead, we as the student body need to continuously advocate and fight for legal and policy changes on both a federal and institutional level.

Combatting this requires having empathy for those who have been wronged by the very system that was designed to protect them. This solution that I have proposed above is only the first step in creating a sustainable and effective solution to this problem. There are many other variables and steps to be considered in order to ensure a dedicated and effective solution remain on all college campuses for decades to come. However, if we as a student body remain consistent and dedicated to advocating for change, eventually there will come a time where students will be able to live on college campuses with safety policies that are not rooted in misogyny, patriarchy, and gender roles, but instead ones that promote equality, empathy, and justice.

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