



STUDY THE SCHOOLS

# A Safer Campus Culture



Schools aim to prevent sexual assault while protecting the rights of victims and the accused

by **Beth Howard**

**I**n a class called “Flip the Script,” designed to help women avoid a sexual assault, Abigail Brickley practiced martial arts-like self-defense maneuvers and learned to identify potential perpetrators, such as men who try to isolate women from a group or insist that they have another drink even after they’ve refused it. The for-credit class also focused on “getting the narrative of weakness out of our heads and promoting confidence in ourselves,” says Brickley, a junior at the University of Iowa.

The new elective is among the myriad ways that colleges and universities have doubled down to combat sexual violence on campus since 2011, when the Department of Education put schools on notice that they needed to do a better job of protecting students or else they would risk losing federal funding. During the Obama administration, the DOE launched more

than 300 investigations into schools’ handling of complaints, as potential violations of Title IX, the landmark legislation guaranteeing women equal rights to education.

Some critics have said the new rules don’t adequately protect accused students – and Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos has taken steps to address that criticism. Meanwhile, many schools remain committed to reforming campus culture and educating all students about healthy relationships and anti-violence measures. These initiatives are now taking place against the backdrop of the #MeToo movement, which has rocked so many sectors of society, including academia.

A key component of reducing incidents of sexual assault is to assess how pervasive it is and what circumstances contribute to it. The Sexual Health Initiative to Foster Transformation, a research project completed at Columbia University and



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BACKGROUND

Barnard College in New York, revealed that, in 2016, 22 percent of students who participated in the survey reported experiencing some sort of unwanted sexual contact. This figure is consistent with studies from other universities, noted SHIFT's two lead researchers, Claude Ann Melins, a professor of clinical psychology at the New York State Psychiatric Institute and Columbia University, and Jennifer S. Hirsch, a professor at the Columbia Mailman School of Public Health.

### The results showed that heterosexual women experienced

the greatest number of incidents, while the rates were highest among LGBT and other students representing sexual minorities. The data also found that more than 12 percent of men studied had experienced sexual assault. The researchers examined not just experiences of sexual

assault, but the social circumstances in which they're most likely to occur.

Increasingly, schools are drawing on research like that from SHIFT to help craft effective prevention strategies.

One approach – something every new college student will likely encounter during orientation or early first semester – is mandatory school-sponsored training on avoiding or preventing situations that can lead to sexual assault. Definitions of consent are apt to be covered, too, particularly as some states have passed or are considering laws that define consent as a voluntary, affirmative, and mutual agreement. Called affirmative consent, or “yes means yes,” such policies sharply depart from past practices where the absence of a “no” counted as consent, whether or not a stu-

### A THEATER WORKSHOP AT THE UNIVERSITY OF OREGON HIGHLIGHTING THE IMPORTANCE OF CONSENT

dent was inebriated or passed out. Along with California and New York, a number of schools have affirmative consent policies, including the University of Minnesota, Texas A&M, the University of Virginia, Indiana

University and the University of New Hampshire, according to End Rape on Campus, a victim advocacy group.

How this information is conveyed varies. At the University of Oregon, for example, all freshmen are required to view the “It Can’t Be Rape” theater production, which “details an experience of sexual assault and the impact it has on the survivor, the perpetrator and their friends,” says Abigail Leeder, director of the university’s Experiential Education and Prevention Initiatives. The production touches on issues of alcohol use and sexual identity, and it defines sexual assault and consent.

At the play's end, students get handouts that cover campus resources when they break into smaller groups to debrief.

Incoming students at the University of Wisconsin–Madison and Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh must complete an online module on sexual violence before school starts and then undergo in-person training when they get to campus. The University of Maryland–College Park is working to implement sexual violence prevention programming into all four years of student life.

Schools are also getting better at supporting victims by offering counseling and survivor support groups like those at the University of Florida and the University of Michigan. And more campus health centers are staffed with Sexual Assault Nurse Examiners trained to provide specialized care to victims, conduct forensic exams and give expert testimony if a case goes to trial. Likewise, colleges nationwide are expanding the ranks of Title IX coordinators and other professionals tasked with handling complaints of sexual violence, and otherwise keeping the school in line with federal requirements, such as promptly investigating all complaints filed and protecting victims' confidentiality.

Whether many of these new initiatives are paying off is still being determined in many cases, so schools are expanding their data collection with campus culture surveys and are investing in programs that do have clear track records. One encouraging approach: tapping the power of other students to reduce campus assaults. Under the 2013 Campus Sexual Violence Elimination Act, bystander programs that teach those who see trouble brewing how to intervene effectively are now required at U.S. colleges.

### **“Engaging bystanders is the most promising way to mobilize a**

community around this issue and help people build skills they need to contribute to a solution,” says Lea Hegge, vice president of program development at Alteristic, the nonprofit that licenses the Green Dot bystander program. Green Dot has been implemented at more than 100 U.S. colleges. A 2016 study supported by the University of Kentucky and the Cen-

ters for Disease Control and Prevention showed that students who participated in Green Dot training had a 17 percent lower risk of interpersonal violence. And, says Bob Ritter, head football coach at Middlebury College in Vermont, who provides the training to athletic teams at the school, “This approach resonates with our guys more than anything else that was tried in the past. It allows them to speak up about assault in ways that they wouldn't have known about beforehand.”

Both Green Dot and another proven program – Bringing in the Bystander, which originated at the University of

**Schools are also getting better at addressing the needs of victims.**

New Hampshire – help members of the campus community quickly recognize situations that might be concerning and come up with strategies to safely avert an incident, from confronting a potential perpetrator in a sketchy situation to turning up the lights or turning off the music at a party where things are getting out of hand. For instance, one student started a conga line when she saw how uncomfortable her roommate looked when a guy wedged close to her on a couch.

“It's easy for some students to put on their superhero cape and be direct in stopping something that doesn't look right. But most aren't comfortable with that,” says Sharyn Potter, a sociology professor at UNH and executive director of research for the university's Prevention Innovations Research Center, which also pioneered the related social marketing

campaign Know Your Power. Bringing in the Bystander is now in place at some 600 colleges and universities across the U.S. and Canada, including Georgetown University in Washington, D.C., and the University of Kansas.

Yet bystanders are present in less than 20 percent of sexual assault situations, so colleges need to employ multiple tools to spark real change. That's why new approaches are being developed, such as Flip the Script, which originated in Canada and is formally known as the Enhanced Assess, Acknowledge, Act Sexual Assault Resistance education program. The initiative is now available at the University of Iowa and many other U.S. colleges and universities.

The program emphasizes that “sexual assaults are most commonly perpetrated by someone you know and should be able to trust,” says Charlene Senn, professor of psychology and Women's and Gender Studies at Ontario's University of Windsor, who developed it. “And they occur most often in social situations that people don't consider dangerous.”

The workshop features role-playing scenarios that often precede sexual misconduct and allows participants to practice various strategies to foil an assault. It also addresses self-blame. “When women blame themselves or feel guilty for what's happening, they're actually less likely to resist,” says Sarah Deatherage-Rauzin, a health promotion coordinator at Florida Atlantic University, which offers the program. Flip the Script was found to cut the number of rapes experienced by women who participated nearly in half and the number of attempted rates by a remarkable 63 percent, compared with a group of women who didn't attend the classes, according to tracking surveys for up to two years after the training.

Schools are also revamping their adjudication processes, which some believe have been historically stacked against victims. In the past, students complained that colleges allowed those found responsible for an assault to remain on campus or blamed victims for their own attacks. While some have called for campus sexual assault cases to be turned over to local po-





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lice, the idea is controversial.

Advocates for victims say many do not want to file criminal charges against their alleged attackers. According to the Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network, a national anti-sexual violence organization, less than 4 percent of rapes reported to police end up being referred to prosecutors, and less than two-thirds of those few cases result in felony convictions. By contrast, schools must adjudicate all cases brought before them. Court records are also public, and victims may fear retaliation – or at least a protraction of their trauma.

While most colleges have been using “preponderance of the evidence” – the civil court standard – to determine responsibility, this has raised concerns about whether the accused are being treated fairly. A slew of lawsuits directed at colleges in the past few years by accused students have claimed violations of due process. Some see these suits as a needed correction to colleges’ swinging too far to protect accusers’ rights. Others view them as a defense attorney tactic “to silence survivors and exhaust their financial resources,” says Carly N. Mee, the interim executive director of SurvJustice, a not-for-profit organization that offers legal assistance to sexual violence survivors.

**AT COLUMBIA  
UNIVERSITY,  
WHERE  
RESEARCHERS  
ARE STUDYING  
SEXUAL ASSAULT**

At press time, news reports suggested that DOE was drafting new rules governing how schools handle sexual assault cases. According to The New York Times, these potential changes include providing more protections for the accused and narrowing the liability of colleges to assaults that are committed on campus and reported to designated authorities. Earlier guidance from DOE gave colleges the choice of using either a preponderance of evidence standard or the stricter “clear and convincing” evidence standard. (The latter is still a lower threshold than the beyond a reasonable doubt bar that must be reached in criminal court.) The DOE called the reports “premature” and “speculative” and declined, through a spokesperson, to comment.

Recent cases suggest that, at least under current rules, some victims are prevailing against their attackers. Like other schools, the University of Notre Dame has increased its prevention efforts and protections for victims of sexual assault through programs like Green Dot and by requiring mandatory training for students, faculty and staff. When a Notre Dame student told a friend that she’d been sexually assaulted by another student in December of 2016, the friend convinced her to go to the

hospital and have evidence collected. She struggled with depression and thought about dropping out of college before she finally reported the crime to the university the following spring. “I had heard that the process was brutal,” she says. “But I knew what had happened was wrong.”

She and the accused student made statements to the school’s investigators, and at a hearing that July, members of a three-person panel drawn from the school’s administration asked them questions and heard witness testimony. She informed U.S. News that in August 2017, she received a letter from Notre Dame advising her that the accused had been found responsible for the assault and expelled from the university.

Notre Dame declined to comment as per policy on any student case. However, in the formal adjudication letter the young woman provided to U.S. News, university officials confirmed that the accused was “more likely than not responsible” for violating four of the school’s Standards of Conduct, including those related to sexual assault and harassment. “I finally feel safe on campus again,” the young woman says.

That’s the ultimate goal, says Barbara Scales, director of Middle Tennessee State University’s June Anderson Center for Women & Nontraditional Students. “We can’t afford to go backwards,” she says. ♦