

Addressing Sexual Violence on Post-Secondary Campuses is a Collective Responsibility

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Abstract:

The purpose of this essay is to examine the relationship between sexual violence on campus and teaching and learning, and to argue that addressing sexual violence is a collective responsibility. Taking up sexual violence as a collective responsibility in a post-secondary setting means that everyone in the campus community is, at some level, engaged in anti-violence work including students, senior administration, faculty, staff, and even visitors to campus. This stance challenges the idea that eliminating sexual violence is a “women’s issue”, or an issue that is only of concern to those who experience that violence. However, the acknowledgment that everyone has a role to play must be balanced with the recognition that not everyone can, or should, do the same kind of work. Based on our collective experience of over 10 years of working on issues related to gender-based and sexual violence on campus and in the classroom, we provide insights into what we believe it means to practice collective responsibility and collective action within post-secondary institutions.

Key Words:

sexual violence, collective responsibility, gender-based violence, anti-violence, safer campus.

Sexual Violence on Campus

We should all assume we have survivors of sexual violence in our classrooms, regardless of the subjects we teach or the faculty we teach in. Empirical studies have shown that the rates of sexual violence on post-secondary campuses are high. The classic Canadian study conducted by DeKeseredy and Kelly (1993) found that one in four women-identified students have been sexually assaulted while completing their studies. In addition, many of our students arrive at university and college with historical trauma. Findings from Senn and colleagues' (2014) research indicates that over half of first-year female students (58%) at three major Canadian universities had experienced one or more forms of sexualized violence since the age of 14. Moreover, while the majority of survivors of sexual violence identify as women (Benoit, Shumka, Phillips, Kennedy, Belle-Isle, 2015; Sinha, 2013), men and gender non-conforming individuals (including trans* and non-binary) also experience considerable levels of sexual and gender-based violence (Bauer et al., 2015; McDonald and Tijerino, 2013; Stotzer, 2009).

Findings from The National Sexual Assault Study in the United States provide similar numbers, indicating 19% of female participants experienced an attempted and/or completed sexual assault since entering college (Krebs et al., 2007). Carey and colleagues' (2015) recent study also confirms high prevalence rates, finding that in the first year of college 15% of women report experiencing incapacitated rape (attempted or completed) and nine percent report experiencing forcible rape (attempted or completed). These researchers conclude their study with a pressing call to action: "Both incapacitated and forcible sexual assaults and rape have reached epidemic levels among college women. Interventions to address sexual violence on campus are urgently needed" (Carey et al., 2015, p. 678). *Urgently needed.*

Given these numbers, have you thought about the implications this issue has for your teaching? Or what impact this level of sexual violence may have on learning in your classrooms? Whether you teach chemistry, business, archaeology, math, or women's studies, it is a statistical certainty that over the course of your career, you will teach multiple student survivors of sexual violence. If you are teaching about topics related to gender, sexuality, and/or trauma and violence, you may have already thought about these issues. Perhaps, for example, you have considered the role of warnings or cautions in relation to course material (Godderis and Root, 2016). But even if the substantive area you teach doesn't have anything to do with these subjects there are still many important ways you can be thinking about how sexual violence is related to teaching and learning at your institution, and in your classroom.

For instance, what if a student were to disclose an experience of sexual violence to you and ask for accommodations—what would you do? Do you feel prepared or know how to respond? (Root and Godderis, 2016). How might students' feelings of safety or their ability to concentrate on their studies be affected by experiences of sexual violence? Are the conditions of your classroom creating a more vulnerable situation for some of your students in comparison to others? For example, do the course expectations for a biochemistry class require students to come into a lab at off-peak hours to complete work? When do students have access to these labs? How are these

spaces monitored? Who might feel more or less safe to engage in this after-hours school work? And what impact might this have on differential opportunities to learn? Our goal in this essay is to encourage every instructor at post-secondary institutions, and in fact every single person within our campus communities, to think deeply about the extraordinarily high rates of sexual violence on university campuses, and what that might mean for teaching and learning.

The problem of sexual violence on campus is not new. Anti-rape activists have been drawing attention to the high rates of sexual violence on university campuses since the 1970s (Warshaw, 1988). In the 1980s, Mary P. Koss and colleagues' groundbreaking study reported much higher rates of rape and other forms of sexual violence in post-secondary student populations than previously thought to be the case. In *The Scope of Rape*, authors Koss, Gidycz and Wisniewski (1987) report that, since the age of 14, 27.5% of college women experienced an act that met legal definitions of rape, and that during the previous six months women experienced a rape victimization rate of 38 per 1000, including attempted rapes. These numbers mobilized feminist and anti-rape activist communities and informed many of the intervention models we continue to use today in anti-violence work. And yet, close to 30 years after *The Scope of Rape*, the statistics are essentially the same. There remains an *urgent need*. It is shocking. We should all be shocked. How can our campus communities be considered spaces where teaching and learning can occur when there is such a significant threat against the bodies of so many of our students?

This lack of attention to the problem of sexual violence has led to national and provincial governments in the United States (U.S.) and Canada taking action in relation to sexual violence, especially on university and college campuses, in an attempt to address the issue in a sustained way. For example, in 2014 the *First Report of the White House Task Force to Protect Students From Sexual Assault* was released in the U.S. Hand in hand with this report, the U.S. government launched the "Not Alone" website to provide information and support to survivors of sexual assault, and to help universities and colleges fulfill their obligations to protect students from sexual violence. In Canada, the Ontario Government released *It's Never Okay: An Action Plan to Stop Sexual Violence and Harassment* (2015) including *Safer Campuses* as a key pillar of its approach: "This is not a new problem. Student leaders have been calling for action for decades, and now it's time to act. We want to eliminate rape culture on campus. We want school environments to be safe and respectful" (p. 27).

University and college campuses reflect a wider culture of gender inequality, but we cannot simply point to the problem as being "out there" in larger society. We also need to act within our own communities. If as educators we continue to ignore the impact of sexual violence on our campuses, we are complicit in the negative educational outcomes students experience as a result of that violence. However, to actually reduce incidences of sexual violence and make campuses safer spaces it is essential that *everyone* in the institutional community take responsibility for addressing sexual violence. Below we describe how responsibility for addressing sexual violence has traditionally been placed on individuals, provide an initial framework for thinking about a different approach inside of post-secondary institutions, and end with a call for collective action.

Individual versus Collective Responsibility

The responsibility to prevent and eliminate sexual violence is typically framed as an individual issue, whether that rhetoric blames the victim for their own attack (“she shouldn’t have been walking alone at night”) or identifies perpetrators of sexual violence as aberrations (“he was just a bad apple”). As a result, the only solutions offered are also individually-based—she needs to walk with someone at night, and he needs to be sent to prison. The very framing of the problem limits the imagined solutions. Feminists and women’s collectives have argued for decades that the problem of sexual violence needs to be understood differently; to eliminate sexual violence we need to understand it as a structural problem, not an individual one (Bevacqua, 2000; Martine, 2005). Once we shift this view and consider the role of systems, we can begin to analyze how ideas and actions that reinforce sexual violence, including rape myths and stereotypes, have been embedded into the inner workings of our institutions, our policies, and our “common sense” (Krahe, 2016).

Understanding sexual violence as a structural issue pushes us to think about collective responsibility because even the most compassionate and well-informed responses from individual instructors, staff or administrators on our campuses will almost certainly be undermined by everyday institutional procedures, and formally approved policies, if this collective responsibility is ignored. As DeGue and colleagues (2012) note, most sexual violence prevention programs have focused on interventions with individuals while ignoring the importance of community-level strategies. Empirical evidence from these authors shows that changes in an individual’s attitudes or behaviours are unlikely to be maintained if that individual continues to live in an environment that supports, facilitates, or is indifferent to sexual violence.

In contrast, the concept of collective responsibility is at the centre of several highly successful interventions that aim to eliminate violence against women including the White Ribbon campaign (<http://www.whiteribbon.ca>), Kizhaay Anishinaabe Niin / I am a Kind Man (<http://www.iamakindman.ca>), and the Duluth Model (<http://www.theduluthmodel.org>). Within universities specifically, there is also a growing body of evidence that supports the need for post-secondary institutions to develop comprehensive strategies that recognize the collective responsibility to address sexual violence in order to create a campus climate where students are willing to report threats of violence, to intervene as bystanders, and to seek support following experiences of sexual violence (America Association of University Women, 2015; Ontario Women’s Directorate, 2013; METRAC, 2014, Sulkowski, 2011). Taking up sexual violence as a collective responsibility means that there is a collective intentional will to examine and address the full range of beliefs, attitudes, and actions that contribute to the perpetration of sexual violence on campus, from victim blaming attitudes to procedures for accommodations that require victims to tell and re-tell their story of violence. In other words, collective responsibility means that everyone in the campus community is, at some level, engaged in anti-violence work, including students, senior administration, faculty, staff, and even visitors to campus. This stance challenges the idea that eliminating sexual violence is a “women’s issue”, or an issue that is only of concern to those who directly experience that violence.

Practicing Collective Responsibility in Post-Secondary Institutions

The acknowledgment that everyone has a role to play must be balanced with the recognition that doing collective anti-violence work does not mean that everyone can (or should) do the *same kind of work*. Based on our collective experience of over 10 years working on issues related to gender-based and sexual violence on campus and in the classroom, we provide insights into what we believe it means to *practice* collective responsibility and collective action within post-secondary institutions. These recommendations are grounded in our experiences of working to mobilize vast amounts of practice-based and academic knowledge about the elimination of sexual violence in a variety of communities. It is important to recognize that any uptake of these ideas must take into account local contexts.

Fundamentally, it is vital to acknowledge that differences exist between institutional actors, their expertise, and their experiences with sexual violence. This, in turn, has an impact on the roles individuals should play in relation to decision-making about responses to sexual violence, whether these decisions are in the form of policies and procedures, training, support services, or research. We argue that differences related to sexual violence expertise and experience should be explicitly acknowledged and candidly discussed within each specific institutional context. For example, when members of a university community identify the elimination of sexual violence as a priority, those members should consider asking themselves: Who has expertise in the experience of surviving sexual violence? Are these survivors included at the most influential decision-making tables? If they are represented, are power dynamics addressed in such a way that their views are actually being heard and taken into account? Similarly, who has expertise in supporting survivors of sexual violence both within and outside of the campus community? Is this knowledge contributing to high-level decision-making? And who are the individuals in the institution that hold disciplinary and research-related knowledge in relation to sexual violence? Is this scholarly expertise and knowledge affecting the direction of policy and programming?

This is complicated territory that relates to questions about power and privilege. We know that disproportionate levels of violence are experienced by the most marginalized members of our communities. If we are to claim, as we are here, that it is survivors of sexual violence who have expertise then these individuals should be proactively invited to contribute to high-level decision-making about sexual violence policy and programming and their input should be treated with respect. This could happen through a variety of mechanisms such as attending meetings with senior administration and staff, providing feedback on drafts of documents, and being provided with explanations if their feedback is not included. This is likely to challenge the traditional institutional structure, as it demands that those who are not typically at the university decision-making tables (i.e., primarily young, woman-identified students who may be racialized, (dis)abled, queer or otherwise marginalized identities) are included in these processes. It also demands that those who are traditionally in charge of making decisions about the direction of the institution (i.e., often older, male-identified, highly-educated academics

and professionals) think about what it means to be an ally to those who have been most impacted by sexual violence, and how to stand in solidarity with survivors.¹

Recognizing expertise in the field also means engaging community partners, most of whom have vast amounts of experience supporting survivors of sexual violence. As Lalonde (2014) notes, universities have “often failed to utilize the expertise of the full campus community, which includes their community partners, such as sexual assault centres and community health resources” (p. 6). Proactively working with community agencies to determine best practices for supporting survivors and strategies for sexual violence prevention creates important opportunities for exchanging knowledge, while also honouring the tremendous legacy of activism, advocacy and support such organizations have been providing to survivors of sexual violence. While universities may be new (in relative terms) to the work of addressing and preventing sexual violence on campuses, there are many individuals and organizations that have accumulated decades of experience and knowledge. They are, unquestionably, experts in the field of sexual violence response and prevention, and as members of post-secondary communities, we should recognize, value, and rely on this expertise.

Finally, it can be highly assistive to turn towards scholars within your own institutions who have undertaken research in the fields of sexual violence, gender, and violence prevention. Faculty members with expertise and experience should be proactively sought out and invited to participate in institutional decision-making related to policy and programming, and these individuals should be positioned as authorities on these issues within the institution including in official communications. As part of this conversation, it is important to draw attention to the fact that pedagogy and research related to sexual violence is itself a highly gendered phenomenon. Woman-identified instructors and researchers are most likely to have engaged in research and/or advocacy related to the topic, they are most likely to speak about sexual violence in their classes, and they are the individuals who are most likely to receive disclosures from students. This final observation is supported by the work of Hayes-Smith and colleagues (2010), as well as Branch, Hayes-Smith and Richards (2011), who note that sexual violence disclosures are causing stress for women faculty members who often feel unprepared to receive disclosures and are personally affected by hearing survivors’ stories. It is essential that senior leaders in post-secondary institutions turn to these faculty experts to draw on their scholarly and experiential knowledge. Not doing so minimizes the contributions of women-identified instructors and scholars, but also makes invisible the additional emotional labour that many of these individuals contribute to the institution. Thus, as part of collective responsibility, we argue it is important to recognize that it is likely that some members of the institutional community are disproportionately bearing witness to sexual violence and, if this is the case, we must consider how to provide appropriate support to this group. This may include training, debriefing opportunities, and other forms of assistance. To be clear: the goal is not to stop students from disclosing to specific individuals, but rather to create an environment where the individuals who are receiving disclosures feel they are supported and can be sustained in this important work. This is especially important in contexts where speaking openly and honestly about sexual violence can also lead to backlash against these instructors. Our own

¹ For a general discussion of power, privilege and allyship please see: Bishop, 2015; Pease, 2010.

experiences bear this out, for example when students have made claims that discussions of sexual violence made the classroom “an unsafe space for men”. If we are continuing to rely on woman-identified faculty to assist the institution in addressing sexual violence through their teaching and scholarship, then we must also recognize the additional burdens they bear in doing so, and support them accordingly.

A Call to Collective Action

In other work, we suggest individual instructors and faculty members can prepare themselves to respond to disclosures of gender-based and sexual violence (Root and Godderis, 2016) and may contribute to addressing the reality of sexual violence within the context of their classrooms through the use of advisory or warnings (Godderis and Root, 2016). But it is vital to acknowledge that the conversation must extend beyond the individual instructor and their classroom. Our call to action is that *everyone* within universities and colleges must contribute to anti-violence work if we are to address sexual violence, but in practice this does not mean everyone should do the same kind of work to address the issue. As we have outlined, differences in expertise and experience should be acknowledged and explicitly accounted for at the highest levels of institutional decision-making. This is vital; however, it is also just the first step in articulating what it means to practice collective responsibility and collective action in order to attain the aspirational goal of eliminating sexual violence within universities and colleges. Therefore, we end this essay with a call to others to enter into the conversation about teaching, learning and the collective responsibility to take action to address sexual violence on our campuses.

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