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We must take a proactive approach to preventing sexual violence in higher education

October 26, 2015 (/forum/we-must-take-a-proactive-approach-to-preventing-sexual-violence-in-higher-education) · Meranda McLaughlin (../contributors/meranda-mclaughlin)



(../contributors/meranda-mclaughlin)

With a new school year underway, we are once again hearing about sexual violence on university and college campuses. The September news cycle included reports of sexual assault on the west (<http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/sexual-assault-university-of-victoria-several-men-sought-1.3246213>) and east (<http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/new-brunswick/sexual-assault-nb-universities-1.3231651>) coasts alike. It also documented institutional efforts to develop and implement stand-alone sexual assault policies (for instance: STU (<http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/new-brunswick/unb-stu-sexual-assault-policies-delay-1.3233424>), uSask (<http://globalnews.ca/news/2235518/university-of-saskatchewan-has-new-sexual-assault-policy-for-review/>), uRegina (<http://globalnews.ca/news/2266874/saskatchewan-universities-establish-new-sexual-assault-policy/>)). This has been a popular initiative in Canada and is certainly a worthwhile pursuit to help ensure cases are dealt with more effectively than they have been in the past.

But how much difference can a new policy truly make unless it is couched within a larger, proactive plan to improve the campus climate? In order for policies to effectively address and discourage sexual violence, members of the higher ed community need to

know that such policies exist, they need to understand what constitutes sexual violence, and they need to know whom to seek out on campus if they experience such behaviour.

I recently had the pleasure of interviewing human rights practitioners at several universities in Atlantic Canada, and I found that proactive measures, such as awareness and prevention programs, were top of mind for these individuals. They were passionate about the need for additional work in this area, but struggled to secure much-needed administrative support for their efforts.

The individuals I interviewed identified several key challenges reflecting a lack of prioritization at the upper echelons of their institutions. For example, it can be particularly challenging for human rights practitioners when their position is only part-time or when they are juggling many other responsibilities. Often this means practitioners have little or no time to undertake proactive measures because they are overwhelmed with managing complaints. Meanwhile, even those practitioners who do have the time to work on programs and services lack sufficient financial resources. Administrators have a responsibility to support efforts to address the well-documented issue of sexual violence on campus, and this means dedicating resources to educating the student body on the subject and ensuring they are aware of relevant programs and services.

Since universities and colleges have finite resources, I recommend looking to the evidence in order to determine how to best invest in a more positive learning environment. Not only will this help institutions get more bang for their buck, but it will minimize the risk of their services doing more harm than good. For example, awareness and prevention strategies that solely target women could suggest it is

women's responsibility to prevent sexual violence and thereby inadvertently lead to victim blaming.

Following extensive research, I have put together a short checklist for institutions to keep in mind when developing and implementing their response to sexual violence:

- Include male students;
- Target bystanders;
- Include longer, multi-session programs (more effective than one-off interventions);
- Use multiple methods, such as a combination of workshops, presentations and training with “boosters” such as posters or flyers (more effective than a single approach);
- Have sessions led by a combination of trained professionals and trained students;
- Tailor awareness and prevention programs to fit the specific needs of the university's student population; and
- Monitor awareness and prevention programs, adapting as needed.

Collaboration in both development and implementation can also save resources. The practitioners I spoke with were often interested in developing a program that was already available at another nearby institution. Yet little collaboration was happening between them. With so many institutions working toward common goals, there is a clear opportunity for cooperation and sharing of costs and resources needed to develop, implement, and sustain this work. Not long ago, Students Nova Scotia (<http://studentsns.ca/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/2014-01-12-sexual-assault-report-Final.pdf>) advocated for collaborative initiatives among Nova Scotia universities

—though I would suggest extending this to all institutions in the Atlantic region.

Ontario is setting an excellent example in this regard, as demonstrated in the release of a province-wide college sexual assault policy (<http://www.thestar.com/news/canada/2015/02/01/ontario-colleges-create-sex-assault-policy.html>) earlier this year.

On a final note, I urge PSE institutions to leverage expertise at their disposal, including in-house faculty, on-campus centres, and external organizations. You may find external groups are able to provide much-needed support and perhaps help to supplement resources dedicated to the issue of sexual violence on campus.

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