

Beyond Consent: Moving toward An Integrated Approach to Sexuality and Sexual Assault

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within [Culture](#), [Education](#)

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It's time to change the way we talk about sexual assault on campus. The second of a two-part series.

As [we outlined yesterday](#), a culture that relies upon the use of other persons for one's own pleasure has contributed to the epidemic of sexual assault on college campuses. Not all hook-ups are assaults (thankfully, most are not), and sexual assault is a problem that has existed for millennia before hook-ups became a dominant social force. Nonetheless, any conversation about how we ought to address the pervasiveness of sexual assault on our college campuses needs to take the hook-up culture into account.

Fortunately, university administrators and other campus leaders have a very real opportunity to change the tenor of the conversation around sexual assault for the better and radically improve campus sexual culture as a result.

But how? Well, you can't just change the way people think overnight. But you might just be able to do it in four years.

Dining Halls & Campus Norms

Campus norms can change quickly. Students typically stick around a campus for about four years before they move on. Because the institutional memory of the student body doesn't last very long, college norms and "traditions" have a way of changing much more quickly than we think.

Here's an example. Not so long ago at Princeton, our *alma mater*, it was generally accepted that *no one*—at least, not anyone with aspirations for social normalcy—would have a dining hall plan for all four years of college. This had much to do with the fact that residential colleges historically provided dorms only for students' first two years, and the norm was reinforced by the social dominance of [the eating club system](#). Upperclassmen joined eating clubs or cooking cooperatives, went "independent" and cooked for themselves, ate take-out in town—you name it. But *no one*—save for the resident advisors, who were literally paid to eat with freshmen—ate in the dining halls for their junior or senior years.

The social stigma associated with twenty-one and twenty-two-year-olds eating in a dining hall at Princeton today? It's gone. Many students still choose eating clubs and cooking cooperatives, but now dining halls for upperclassmen are a perfectly reasonable and respected option among many.

This change in students' perceptions didn't happen by accident; it was the result of a deliberate effort. University administrators saw that other options were often more expensive (joining an eating club) or less healthy ("cooking" ramen noodles every night), and they concluded that it would be good for students to have an alternative choice. They changed policies—now all students remain associated with a residential college for all four years, for example—and changed the messages students were sent about dining halls and choices for upperclassmen. For instance, many residential colleges now host wine, cheese, and dessert receptions where upperclassmen in the dining halls can chat with both their classmates and professors.

This is obviously a frivolous example, especially compared with the gravity of sexual assault. What is important to note, however, is that the policies that universities put in place and the messages they send to students—especially to incoming freshmen through their RAs and orientation programming—do have a significant influence in shaping students' ideas about what is "normal."

Freshman Orientation and Sexual Assault Education

University administrators know they have a unique opportunity to shape the way incoming freshmen think about college life during freshmen orientation. That's why they take advantage of the chance to address the issue of sexual assault at the time when students are both least aware and most vulnerable. In our experience, however, the good intentions of those who would seek to teach and to foster a productive conversation go very wrong.

Sexual assault education at Princeton, which seems typical for elite universities (Harvard's is much the same), takes the form of a play entitled *Sex on a Saturday Night*. The play is graphic and crude, if occasionally humorous. By portraying various sexual and/or romantic interactions on a "typical" Saturday night on campus, the play sends the message that hook-ups and casual sex are the norm.

It would be problematic enough if all this did was to instill in the freshman class a sense that they were not normal if they didn't come to college to party and sleep around. Likewise, it would be problematic enough if the purpose of the crude humor was to shock freshmen out of the potentially old-fashioned values of their upbringing. (It's worth noting that this same mentality of wanting to shake someone out of their "repressive" or "backward" understanding of sex is what drove two of the assault stories we recounted yesterday.)

But the most serious cause for concern about this approach to sexual assault education is that it is no education at all. At best, it is entertainment. Vulgar, crass, mandatory entertainment. It sets precisely the wrong tone for such a serious matter. For what other crime would we, wanting to raise awareness of it as an issue to be taken seriously, reduce the discussion to the level of bathroom humor?

Think for a moment of the way we raise awareness of—and adamantly warn against—drunk driving. With memorials of students killed in car crashes on prom night, high school administrators rightly make the issue sound deadly serious. Why should we not be equally serious when educating impressionable teens about the dangers of sexual assault? We claim we want to teach students to be perceptive and careful when considering a sexual relationship (however brief) with a peer, but we delude ourselves if we think that’s the message they will take home from events like Princeton’s *Sex on a Saturday Night* or Harvard’s *Sex Signals*.

Serious Crimes Merit a Serious Tone

College and university administrators should be lauded for their good intentions in making students aware of sexual assault at the time when they are most vulnerable, but they should reevaluate their approach by revising the tone to reflect the topic at hand. Inviting an assault survivor to speak about his or her experience would be a good start. Or perhaps a counselor or police officer could attest to the turmoil and pain experienced by victims. Admittedly, such a talk would be less fun and less funny than the sexual assault skits. But that’s just the point: there isn’t anything fun or funny about sexual assault. No one should pretend that there is.

Students look to their university leaders for guidance. If the administration demonstrates that it takes discussions of assault seriously, the students will follow suit. Unfortunately, the opposite is also true.

The plays performed during orientation contain intentionally ambiguous assault scenes. These scenes are meant to spark a conversation that leads students to the surprising conclusion that yes, even in this fictional situation that was designed to appear ambiguous, the law is clear: the hook-up that they witnessed was assault because the students had been drinking and therefore consent was absent. Discussion leaders are trained to emphasize over and over that *consent is the only thing that matters*.

Unfortunately, students just don’t get the message. As we observed yesterday, these conversations leave students with a sense of ambiguity because they can’t see the logic that any sexual encounter infused with alcohol could be legally considered assault while alcohol-infused hook-ups remain the campus norm, implicitly and explicitly sanctioned by the administration.

The message students get needs to be much more direct. One way to achieve this would be to separate male and female students for follow-up conversations with RAs. This may seem anathema in today’s climate, but most young men and women have very different questions on their minds after watching these plays. The guys are thinking: “What if I get falsely accused?” “How can those numbers really be true?”

or “How am I supposed to be a good friend in these situations?” The girls are more immediately concerned for their personal safety and the safety of their new friends. Discussion would be more effective and productive when the participants are all engaged and interested in the same conversation.

To be effective, however, the conversations can't end when orientation does. Fortunately, the administration, faculty, and staff are in a good position to continue setting—and elevating—the tone of the conversation. Administrators, academic departments, women's centers, health centers, and other campus organizations can sponsor events on this topic. The key is that, instead of reducing students to their sexual desires, such events should respond to their deeper longings.

Students don't just want an absence of assault. They want something more than consent. They want love, intimacy, friendship, and romance. They want to be unafraid of being vulnerable with another person. They even admit to wanting—someday, in that vast future of theirs—marriage and kids. But right now, they are isolated and lonely, even on a crowded campus. To help them, the conversation should focus on relationship formation in an increasingly individualized society—not on sex toys and sexually transmitted infections.

What Can Students Do?

Of course, it would be unwise to pin all our hopes for change on university administrators. Bureaucracy, even well-intentioned bureaucracy, is still bureaucratic. So what can the rest of us do?

First, students can both help support victims and prevent future assaults by listening to friends who come forward saying they are victims of sexual assault. Taking such claims seriously—and encouraging friends to report them—treats sex and sexual boundaries not as casual activities and irrelevant opinions, but as serious matters that need to be addressed with respect. Responding with compassion to assault is a way of acknowledging the fact that sexual assault is a real and grave violation.

Students can also help build an atmosphere that promotes strong friendships and relationships rather than hook-ups. The path forward lies in fostering one's own respect for boundaries and healthy sexuality and in speaking out when peers mock sexual restraint, chastity, and virginity as prudish, strange, or repressive. Friends should openly discuss their sexual boundaries and look out for each other at social events. It's best to err on the side of caution because it can be difficult to distinguish between cases of assault and hook-ups. If a friend is in a vulnerable situation, step in, help take him or her home, and be sure to follow up the next day.

Change the Conversation, Change the Culture

We admit, the measures outlined above cannot and will not end campus assault. Even if a radical cultural transformation were to take effect, assault would, sadly, still happen. Nonetheless, we believe that these are concrete ways that the university community can reduce the cultural incentives that allow many assailants to violate others.

Changing the messages and the tone students hear when it comes to sex—and sexual assault—can help students to take their own actions more seriously. In a culture that fosters a healthy respect for sex, survivors of sexual assault will be better understood, assault will be harder to commit, and a more robust vision of sexual freedom—one that respects and includes boundaries—can take root.

If we can change the conversation, we can change the culture. When we open up this conversation in a setting of respect, respect for ideas translates into respect for the persons who espouse those ideas. And isn't respect for persons what is really at stake? The real problem with sexual assault is not that it constitutes an assault against purity or against bodily autonomy. It is wrong because it is an assault against *a person*. In fighting sexual assault, we must build a culture that encourages a radical respect for the intrinsic human dignity of all people.

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