

Students Speak Out!

A Nationwide Talk Back About
Sexual Violence on Campus

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Authors

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Acknowledgments

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This report was authored by SAFER board members Jennifer Snow, MS and Megan McKendry, MPH. It was contributed to, and edited by, SAFER board members Anya Glowa-Kollisch, Sherine Andreine Powerful, Anna Utsinger, Marybeth Seitz-Brown, and Tracey Vitchers. Listening forums were coordinated by SAFER board member Eliza Straim. Report layout and design by Renée Heininger.

Introduction

In the past year, the discussion and activism surrounding sexual violence on college campuses has virtually exploded. Movements to combat sexual and interpersonal violence have sprouted around the country, elected officials at all levels of government are writing legislation to tackle the issue, and media coverage of the topic continues to grow.

The movement is led by student activists, many of whom are survivors. Students launched **Brandeis University’s** SpeakOut! and **Wesleyan University’s** Silence is Violence, websites to give other students an opportunity to recount their own experiences with sexual violence. **Temple University’s** Princess Harmony Rodriguez and **Tufts University’s** John Kelly have worked to ensure that their schools protect all students—including male survivors, survivors of color, and LGBTQ community members. Emma Sulkowicz carried her mattress with her every day that the student who raped her remained on the **Columbia University** campus, inspiring a nationwide campaign of supporters who pledged to help “Carry That Weight.”

For more than 15 years, SAFER has worked to strengthen students’ movements to combat sexual violence on their campuses. We are dedicated to providing students with the resources and training they need to create change in their communities. Through our listening forum tour, we heard from students attending private and public universities and community colleges about what is happening on their campuses. Some of their successes, challenges, needs, and lessons learned are shared here.



The progress we have seen in the national dialogue about sexual and interpersonal violence is a testament to the power of student activists and survivors who devote their time, energy, and skills to this movement. We are deeply grateful for their work and passion, and we hope that by sharing their experiences here, we can all learn how to be supportive and contribute to the fight to end sexual assault on campuses across the United States.

Overview

Purpose of the Listening Forums

SAFER initiated this project with the overarching goal of hearing from student activists across the country about culture, campus climate, policy, and activism related to sexual assault on their campuses.

Organizing the Listening Forums

Early in 2014, SAFER began reaching out to student activists and administrators working on sexual assault prevention and response, and allied nonprofit organizations to gauge their interest in hosting listening forums. SAFER leveraged its existing network of student activists, school administrators, and nonprofit professionals when deciding whom to contact about this opportunity. Each potential listening forum organizer received a document summarizing the project, including: a description of the purpose and format of the event, the geographical scope of the project, SAFER's role, the expected role of the organizer, information about data collection, and SAFER's plans for disseminating findings. To capture as much information as possible about student activists' experiences, SAFER asked organizers to recruit student participants from diverse identities and multiple local or regional colleges and universities.

In the fall of 2014, SAFER confirmed one listening forum site in three different U.S. regions. Students organized listening forums at two of the sites, and an allied nonprofit organization executed one listening forum at the third site. SAFER provided the organizers at each site with a maximum of \$1,000 to coordinate their event. These funds were used to rent space and audiovisual equipment, purchase food for participants, and advertise the listening forum. SAFER provided organizers with a professionally designed event flyer and used a web-based event platform to track RSVPs for the organizers. SAFER also advertised the listening forums on its social media accounts. Finally, SAFER deployed at least two members of its team to conduct each listening forum at no expense to the organizers.

Conducting the Listening Forums

The listening forums ran for 60 to 90 minutes. Across the three sites, a total of 45 participants representing nine institutions of higher education participated. Most of the participants identified as students (n=37), but some identified as faculty members (n=2), school administrators (n=3), or alumnae (n=2).



At the beginning of each listening forum, SAFER explained to participants that the session would be recorded and later transcribed for analysis. SAFER further informed participants that all transcripts from the project would be de-identified to ensure confidentiality. Each listening forum began with a round of introductions, after which the facilitator guided a discussion through three pre-determined focus areas;

- 1) Participants' perceptions of their institutions' current responses to sexual assault
- 2) Activism activities and strategies currently underway to create change
- 3) Support needed by student activists

Analyzing the Listening Forums

SAFER had listening forum recordings transcribed and de-identified by a professional transcription service. The transcripts were then analyzed by hand using traditional coding techniques. Two SAFER board members worked independently to develop codebooks and later met to discuss codes and reach consensus on key themes and implications. Themes were organized based on the three focus areas used to guide discussions during forums.

Limitations

These data do not comprehensively represent student activists' perceptions of their schools' efforts to address sexual assault, their strategies for creating change, or their areas of need. SAFER only conducted listening forums at three sites, and data saturation was not achieved—there is much yet to be learned about student activists' experiences. This report offers a glimpse of specific student activists' perspectives. Our hope is that this report helps advance both students' and stakeholders' understanding of activists' efforts, encountered barriers, and the resources and support needed to keep student movements flourishing at institutions of higher education across the country.

Key Themes

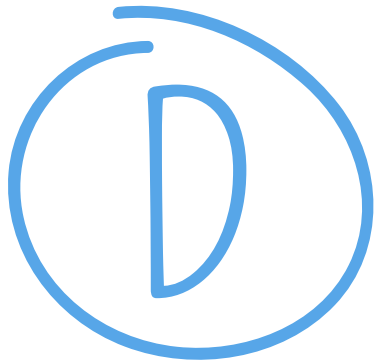
School Efforts

In order to gauge schools' efforts and, more specifically, student activists' perceptions of those efforts, SAFER posed the following questions:

- What grade would you give your school for its efforts to address sexual assault? Why?
 - ▶ What is your school doing well?
 - ▶ What should your school be doing that it is not?
- Has the school taken any other action to improve its efforts to address sexual assault?



Overall, students were unsatisfied with their schools' responses to sexual assault. Participants were asked to give their school a grade for their response to sexual assault on campus. SAFER used a real-time mobile polling application to gather participant responses. In the grading exercise, the



majority of students gave their schools Cs or Ds, with the number of Fs far outweighing the numbers of As and Bs combined. While students articulated that schools are taking some positive action, the overarching perception was that responses are lackluster, if not detrimental to the movement and to survivors' well-being. When asked to describe what positive steps their schools were taking, students also identified myriad gaps in their schools' responses.

The Current Response

Feedback from students about their schools' responses to sexual assault was not entirely negative. Most students noted that their schools have, at the very least, acknowledged that sexual assault is a pervasive issue at institutions of higher education. Schools are attempting to address issues of sexual assault, even if their approaches are not always well-received by their students. Students at all three listening forum sites reported that their schools have some resources for sexual assault survivors, including crisis counseling or rape crisis centers and programs that train students to deliver advocacy services to their peers. One university was even opening a new center with space allocated specifically for addressing sexual assault. However, several students critiqued that even when services existed in theory or on a school's website, in practice the services were absent or difficult to access, did not address survivors' long-term therapeutic needs, or did not specialize in handling violence-related trauma.

Students also identified that their schools are working to address student safety. One school has a safe ride program that drives student to various destinations late at night. However, students reported an instance in which a woman was denied a ride home because she was intoxicated. Notably, a program like this one may have a policy against transporting inebriated passengers for liability reasons. But, given that students are more susceptible to safety risks while under the influence of alcohol or drugs, this policy could limit a programs' effectiveness in terms of preventing a sexual assault. Another college was considering deputizing its campus safety office, which would give officers more authority to investigate sexual assault claims. However, students were ambivalent—if not critical of this program—citing that they had even less faith in the criminal justice system than the college administration, in terms of fairly, compassionately, and respectfully investigating sexual assault.

Adjudication was another topic mentioned when considering how schools are responding to growing concerns about sexual assault proceedings. One school is centralizing its procedure for processing reports of sexual assault in order to improve anonymity and ensure that well-trained staff handle each reported case. This centralization was also occurring on a policy level, by bringing together various aspects of disparate policies to create one policy that is “much more powerful and much more institutionalized.” A multidisciplinary committee with student representation oversaw these reforms.



Students also noted that most of their schools have specific personnel whose sole responsibility is addressing sexual misconduct. Attendees mentioned Title IX Coordinators and on-campus advocates. One college has attempted to clearly delineate which members of staff are trained responders and confidential resources and which are mandatory reporters. At other institutions, specially-trained staff members are taking actions like creating flyer campaigns intended to increase awareness about consent and direct students towards available resources.

In terms of education and prevention, students identified a few practices that colleges currently implement. Students from two separate universities mentioned a mandatory online safety module on sexual assault and consent. One student attended a mandatory workshop on sexual assault awareness and prevention. Despite these programs, an overarching theme across all of the forums was the need for more and better prevention education.

Inhibiting Practices

Listening forum attendees brought up several institutional practices that aggravate frustrations around schools' responses to student sexual assault. During two separate forums, students discussed colleges' attempts to inhibit student activism efforts. A student from one campus said, "it's easier to get expelled for being an activist for sexual assault [prevention] than it is for being a rapist." Students from another college received a cease and desist email regarding their attempts to increase awareness and knowledge about sexual assault through canvassing activities. A further example came from students explaining how the spaces they usually used to organize and discuss issues of sexual misconduct were re-appropriated "in the middle of the night" and given to another student organization.

The perception across all three forums was that college administrators are more interested in protecting their institutions from law suits than working to assist survivors. Students expressed general distrust of the administration and a lack of compassion on the part of campus security officers. One student described much of her school's response to sexual assault reports as victim-blaming and shaming. There was also consensus that student voices were not being heard and most activist activities were not leading to detectable change, particularly in terms of policy reform. On every campus, students expressed frustration that policies were being created without student input or with only limited input from non-representative or non-engaged students with little knowledgeable about the issue. On two occasions, students opined that their current policies were in violation of various Title IX requirements.

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Students also raised concerns with their schools' processes for investigating and adjudicating reports of sexual assault. One student described the process as "re-traumatizing." Another described the adjudication panel as a board of peers with no formal training in sexual assault-specific issues. In fact, the adjudication process was the same for reports of sexual assault as for reports of academic cheating. A particular issue on one campus is that students must choose whether to go through the investigative process with the school or with the police, without the option to pursue both paths. Another student explained that the investigating body is not required to publicly announce its decision on any specific case, in order to protect anonymity. Withholding decisions from a survivor violates her/his right to know the outcome of proceedings and is problematic as she/he may not know whether she/he would continue to the accused around campus.

Students thought that their colleges further perpetuated negative experiences for survivors and the community by advertising services that either do not exist or are inappropriate for sexual assault survivors. One survivor recalled how she was directed to the counseling center after her assault, only to later be told she needed to be referred to an outside provider. According to the survivor, the on-campus counselors were only trained in basic transitional depression and not to handle sexual assault cases. One student described the situation as a "maze of services" survivors must navigate in an attempt to find support and justice.

Missing Pieces

While discussing schools' responses to sexual assault, students identified various programs and policies not currently being implemented that could benefit the overall campus climate, as well as sexual assault survivors. Mandatory, comprehensive consent education was one crucial piece that came up in every forum. Students stated that many of their peers do not understand specific concepts within affirmative or enthusiastic consent, and that proper education and prevention activities are desperately needed on campus.

Another ubiquitous need was a mechanism for students to evaluate schools' responses to sexual assault, evaluate compliance with Title IX, and voice concerns with their schools' stated policies. Several students explained that while their policies seemed good on paper, they were not being implemented fully in practice. Students need a way to hold their colleges accountable to national standards, as well as to the college's own policies and promises. Colleges also need a formal mechanism for evaluating and amending campus policies with student input.

Students identified that another crucial gap is a lack of awareness of both sexual assault in general, and specifically, of the process for reporting sexual assault. In each listening forum, students expressed concern that survivors did not know what to do or where to go in the event of an assault. Further, it was very difficult to determine who on campus were confidential resources and who were mandatory reporters. Students felt that, in many cases, faculty and staff need better training in how to respond to reports of sexual assault and in the resources they should offer students with regard to support services and reporting options.



Student Activist Efforts

- Have students mobilized to improve the school's sexual assault efforts?
 - If yes, what were the successes? What were the challenges?
 - ▶ What strategies have been successful in making change?
 - ▶ What are the barriers to making change?
 - If no, why?
 - ▶ What are the barriers to making change?

After describing general perceptions of their schools' responses to sexual assault, students were asked what types of activities are currently underway to improve these responses. Students in each of the listening forums were engaged in myriad activism activities aimed at creating positive social change in the community. Activities were largely focused on raising awareness, advocating for policy and procedural change, and supporting sexual assault survivors. Some schools have various activism organizations that plan and execute activities, while others have more informal groups of students or individual champions. However, a small number of students reported that there was no activist presence on their campus.

Activism activities on these campuses include demonstrations, petitions, events, protests, rallies, surveys, letter writing, and building collaborations with other student organizations. Demonstrations were usually used to raise awareness in the community. Students used petitions, protests, and letter writing to advocate for policy change and action from administrators. Students described various events, including opportunities for survivors to share their stories and training workshops for student groups around consent education.

While most of the students described their activism activities as positive steps towards influencing change, there was a consistent theme of dissatisfaction. Many students thought that their activities were not generating the desired results. Some expressed thinking that the administration was largely ignoring student movements or only taking surface-level action to pacify students. Students' barriers include: skepticism of ability to affect change, suppression by the school, unsupportive campus culture, lack of/need for student input, dead-end meetings, lack of space, and challenges sustaining activist movements given the transient nature of student populations.

Student Activist Needs

Given the challenges student activists face, participants were asked to identify resources that would help fuel future activities.

- What kind of support do student activists need to mobilize for change?
 - How can SAFER support the efforts of student activists?



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Some participants described the emails their school send out notifying the campus about assaults (required by the Clery Act) as victim-shaming and re-traumatizing. In order to have a positive dialogue, many activists felt their institutions need to get better at talking about sexual assault and recognizing the true needs of their community. Student activists also expressed that more direct institutional support, in the form of budgets for and formalized recognition of their organizations and events, would significantly benefit their movements.

Students also want to see more ‘cross-pollination’ among student groups both at their school and other schools around the country. Participants continually asked, “What’s working at other schools?” They would like better mechanisms for sharing information and best practices across the nation in order to learn from other activists. Some participants also felt it would be beneficial to share skills and experiences, as well as lessons learned.

Finally, national-level policy interventions came up in almost all of the listening forums. Students had varying levels of knowledge about existing federal policies and current policy work, but they were consistently anxious to see change. Most students felt that while their administrations may not prioritize being accountable to their students, it is likely they would attempt to be accountable to federal legislation.

The first and most fundamental need students brought up was a lack of physical space. Neither individuals nor student groups have a reliable, accessible space to organize and plan their activities. Participants in two of the listening forums also expressed that there was not a designated space on campus where survivors could go for reliable support.

Institutionally, participants requested a more formal mechanism for voicing suggestions and concerns. They also desire more accountability for the administration to address student concerns about sexual assault and general campus climate issues. Students expressed frustration that there was no process in many of their schools for amending broken policies and fixing procedural barriers. Many students also welcomed the idea of outside advisors coming in to help activists dissect institutional policies, strategize around activism, and help navigate the often informal or unstated process for affecting change.

Also at an institutional-level, students want to see more prevention efforts and changes to the way their school speaks about sexual assault.



Implications

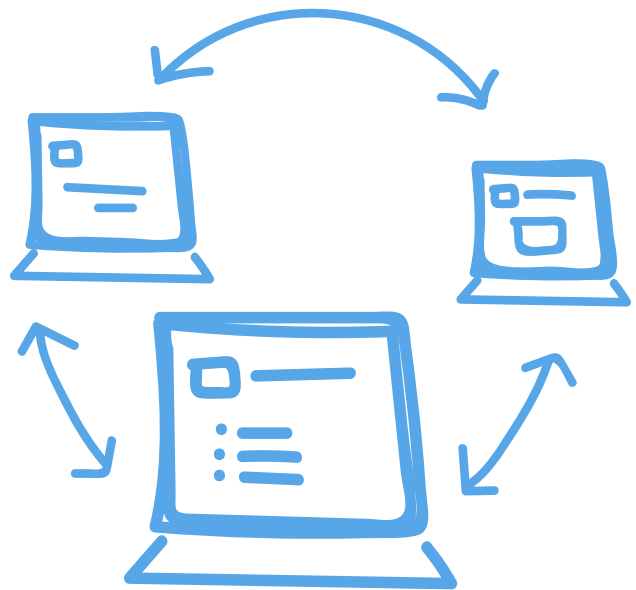
For University Students

Participants in these forums represent students from across the United States involved in diverse activities to raise awareness and change the culture around sexual assault at colleges and universities. These students are starting to impact their campus culture in sometimes small, but crucial ways. Students, however, are frustrated. In every forum, organizers heard different challenges students are facing in their attempts to motivate change on campus. Whether overtly or subtly, many universities are not creating a positive environment where students feel their voices are heard and concerns are addressed. The overall implication of these findings is that current action is positive and critical, but not sufficient, and that student activists are not receiving the support they need.

One major identified need that could vastly accelerate student progress is a network for sharing information. Students want and need to know what activities are working at other schools and among other student groups. This network could provide a support system for activists and survivors across the country and help publicize/promote effective techniques. While a formalized network does not currently exist, student activists could leverage existing social media platforms to connect with one another and share experiences.

SAFER and other organizations looking to aid students in preventing campus sexual assault could take on a role in developing this network. Working on long-term activities with college students is inherently challenging, given the transient nature of student populations. Organizations like SAFER can play a critical bridging role for maintaining connections between student groups, even after specific cohorts graduate and move on. Student-support organizations can also serve students by providing opportunities to gain concrete skills and tools around advocating effectively and enhancing their activities. Students are not alone in this fight. Resources are available, but students are often either not aware of them or not able to access them. We must shine a light not only upon the truth about sexual assault in higher education, but also upon the wide networks of stakeholders working towards changing this reality.

Our findings highlight an often antagonistic division between students and college administrators. Many students perceive that their college administrations prioritize avoiding potential legal challenges over the health and safety of their student population. While the few administrators who attended the forums explicitly expressed a desire to help students above all else, this perception of conflict is divisive enough to undermine trust and prevent the creation of positive change.



Better tools and strategies to connect students and administrators towards a shared goal—safe and healthy educations for all students—are sorely needed in this space. The movement towards ending sexual assault in institutions of higher education would benefit immeasurably from helping students and their administrators find common ground and work together towards change.

For College and University Administrations

These forums further substantiate a solid foundation of evidence that sexual assault on campus is a persistent and pervasive problem, and that universities are not doing enough to make students safe. While the interactions between students and administrators were not always antagonistic (students voiced that they do not think their administrators are intentionally ignoring their needs), some of the anecdotes shared by listening forum participants were troubling. Rather than stifling student voices, colleges and universities should be nurturing and responsive to student activists and encouraging students to work towards positive social change.

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There needs to be a lot more outreach, transparency and simplicity.”

At a fundamental level, many students think their peers are not getting the information and training they need to make healthy decisions about relationships and sexuality. Every student entering college in the United States needs to receive training on sexual assault, consent dynamics, negotiation skills, and healthy relationships. Further, it would be ideal for faculty and staff to receive training on responding to reports or suspicions of sexual assault and on resources available at the institution. Resources that exist on paper or on a website must accurately reflect what is available to students on campus. Students should receive education about what to do in the case of an assault and be able to easily navigate both available resources and their options for reporting or not reporting.

One major recommendation is to demystify the institutional response to sexual assault. Many colleges are taking steps towards addressing issues of sexual assault on their campuses. These efforts, however, are in vain if students are not aware of the changes taking place and how these changes may affect them. In addition, institutions need to develop a formalized process for students to provide feedback on proposed changes to policies, procedures, and major decisions. Several participants described proposed changes to their institutions’ policies—transitioning reporting and investigation of sexual assault incidents to the criminal justice system—as less survivor-friendly than the pre-existing policies, however their input was never solicited prior to the policy change. All colleges need a transparent and formalized procedure for students to express concerns and monitor their submissions to ensure that someone in the administration is considering their perspective.



One example from our forums suggests that the results of student and administrative collaborations are mutually beneficial and help to facilitate trust. Students at one college expressed concerns about a lack of space and resources for sexual assault survivors. Later that year, the administration approved a plan to specifically designate space and resources in a new student center to support survivors of sexual assault and the community at large. Students from this school felt much more positively about their school's response to sexual assault. They expressed that their administration was listening and trying to take positive steps towards change. Unfortunately, the vast majority of participants felt ignored by or even hostility from their administrations. This disconnect further underscores a need for better communication and collaboration between students and administrators.

Finally, campus sexual assault policies should abide by federal and state regulations and be implemented accordingly. Schools must ensure that what is articulated in their campus materials is internally consistent and reflects the interactions students can expect when engaging with faculty, staff, and other campus-sponsored resources. Better transparency, responsiveness, and engagement with students will likely result in positive changes to campus climate.

For the Wider Community

Estimates suggest one in five students will be sexual assaulted while attending an institution of higher education in the United States. Given that obtaining a college education is a goal for many young people in the U.S., sexual assault in colleges and universities is an issue affecting our entire community. Federal legislators have agreed on the significance of this issue, and have worked towards improving regulations and guidelines for preventing sexual assault.

Unfortunately, this report demonstrates that current reforms are insufficient. Communities should also be supportive of student activism and grassroots movements, while listening to student voices. Further, while institutions have been slow to respond to pressure from student activists, greater pressure from lawmakers, alumni, parents, and the larger community may prompt a more expedited and thorough response to concerns about sexual assault on college campuses. Our community must continue to have zero tolerance for sexual violence and promote a culture where every person, regardless of how they identify, can feel safe while pursuing a college education.



Conclusion

The movement to end sexual assault in institutions of higher education started with student activists and must continue to be led by passionate and dedicated students. However, we cannot expect nor allow them to stand alone. These students need support from their peers, their institutions, and their communities. Activism has long been the driver of positive social change and should be nurtured and promoted, especially for young people. Student activists are leading this movement, and will continue to serve as leaders through the rest of their careers. By supporting their efforts and being responsive to their concerns, we can create impactful change towards building a brighter future. SAFER is committed to providing support for these student leaders. We and others in this space must continue this support, but most importantly, we must listen to the concerns of students. By hearing their voices and working with them towards solutions, we are far more likely to promote lasting social and cultural changes that will protect every individual's right to a college education free from fear of sexual assault.



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