Shifting the Conversation: How Academic Institutions Can Change the Culture of Sexual Assault

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THESIS

The District of Columbia should standardize time requirements and curriculum for all new university students. Students will participate in six in-person hours of intervention education, focusing on a curriculum that reflects contemporary research regarding impactful approaches. These efforts can shift the culture for young people throughout the District.

BACKGROUND AND ANALYSIS

Sexual violence is pervasive on college campuses across the U.S. and particularly poignant in the District of Columbia. In 5 women and 1 in 16 men experience sexual assault while in college. In 2015 alone, 25 reported rapes occurred on the campus of the George Washington University (GW). Sexual assault is most likely to occur early in a student’s first year.

At GW, all incoming undergraduate students participate in one hour of online learning and one hour of in-person instruction about sexual assault prevention. In contrast, the Office of the Dean at the Catholic University of America organizes various efforts, including awareness month campaigns and a peer network support system. The District lacks a unified strategy based on existing research about how to maximize the effectiveness of prevention strategies.

The D.C. Council previously attempted to address sexual assault, and at the request of Mayor Muriel Bowser, it has recast its focus on this issue. Currently, legislation examining a judicial approach exists in the Council. In 2016, Councilmember Anita Bonds introduced a bill to regulate sexual assault information sessions on college campuses. Due to lack of input or engagement from stakeholders, namely impacted organizing by students and administrators, this legislation never advanced to a committee vote. No legislation around education currently exists to parallel efforts related to the judiciary.

TALKING POINTS

• Sexual assault education increases knowledge and creates attitudinal shifts, transforming long-term campus and professional culture around sexual violence and harassment.

• Approaching these issues in a unified way across D.C. contributes to a District-wide cultural shift, particularly across campuses, professional settings, and neighborhoods populated by young people.

• Based on existing research, the most effective interventions focus on culture, myths, and facts about rape, risk reduction strategies, and effective bystander strategies.

• Longer and more ongoing awareness efforts around these issues proved more effective than one-hour information sessions.

POLICY IDEA

This policy requires any first-year undergraduate, first-year graduate, or new transfer students for all licensed universities whose primary student base is in the District of Columbia to complete a set of standards around sexual assault education and prevention.
Currently, each of D.C.’s seven colleges and universities takes its own approach to sexual assault prevention, with varying degrees of incorporation of contemporary research regarding the most impactful interventions. Depending upon the scope of involvement and the curriculum directed at students, sexual assault education efforts vary in the ways in which they affect campus life. With sufficient efforts, though, these initiatives have proven to shift attitudes around sexual assault, and they similarly increased the efficacy of bystander intervention. Addressing the statistical prominence of sexual assault during a student’s first year, greater awareness efforts among this population transform the environment that these students occupy during this particularly dangerous time and for the remainder of their educational tenure. In addition, a policy that compels schools to provide clear norms for student behavior in a unified manner sets clear expectations between institutions and neighborhoods. Students and alumni who have experienced this enhanced training would serve as ambassadors across D.C., facilitating a citywide shift on these pervasive issues, their visibility, and their acceptance, including in future professional settings.

Linda Anderson and Susan Whiston’s meta-analysis of 69 sexual assault prevention efforts provides watershed evidence about the best practices in this field. The study found a positive correlation between the duration of prevention efforts and positive changes to attitudes about rape. The emphasis on risk reduction, gender role socialization, and rape facts/myths in this policy stems from the conclusions about the most likely factors contributing to attitudinal change observed in this research. Likewise, additional studies point to the positive impacts of bystander intervention training, clarifying resource availability, defining consent, and addressing the effect of alcohol consumption on attitudinal, reflecting the curriculum requirements in this policy.

The D.C. Council sets the requirements for licensure for universities in the District. Licensure requirements are enforced and authorized by the Higher Education Licensure Commission. This policy would pertain to colleges and universities whose primary student base is in the District of Columbia, tying licensure of a D.C. university to these standards. As chairman of the Committee on Education, Councilmember David Grosso could champion this legislation as a measure to provide more comprehensive protections for young people against sexual violence, which connects to his current efforts against child abuse in the District.

Ideally, Councilmember Grosso would convene a policy roundtable with student advocates and Title IX coordinators from all of the affected universities, incorporating their input into the final legislation. Title IX staff at the various universities could also serve as liaisons to higher administrators and the Consortium of Universities of the Washington Metropolitan Area.

This framework requires students to complete at least six in-person hours of intervention before or during their first semester. Learning outcomes would be set by the District government, covering gender-role socialization, myths and facts, risk-reduction strategies, effects of alcohol, consent, and bystander intervention. The policy would also convene a body of knowledgeable members in the field, including Title IX officers, curriculum developers, relevant faculty, and student leaders to consult the Deputy Mayor of Education in curating a model program for universities to implement.

**POLICY ANALYSIS**

Next Steps

The U.S., 1 in 5 women and 1 in 16 men are sexually assaulted while in college.

While the national average of rape per 1,000 students is 0.62 students per 1,000, the D.C. average is 1.49 rapes per 1,000 students.

In a meta-analysis of 69 sexual assault education programs, a statistically significant positive correlation was found between the length of intervention and positive change in rape attitudes.

Likewise, risk-reduction and information-based intervention strategies were found more effective in changing rape attitudes than a rape-empathy based approach.

**KEY FACTS**
ENDNOTES

7 Campus Sexual Assault Victims Assistance Act of 2016, B21-0889, DC Council, Council Period 21.
8 Anderson and Whiston, “Sexual Assault Education Programs.”
10 Anderson and Whiston, “Sexual Assault Education.”
12 Anderson and Whiston, “Sexual Assault Education Programs.”
13 Ibid.
16 Anderson and Whiston, “Sexual Assault Education Programs.”
17 Ibid.