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## Addressing Campus Sexual Assault Awareness Through Service Learning

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# Addressing Campus Sexual Assault Awareness Through Service Learning

## **Cover Page Footnote**

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## Addressing Campus Sexual Assault Awareness through Service-Learning

Sexual assault on both male and female college students has become a growing problem on college and university campuses in the United States over the past three decades. Statistics estimate that one in five female students fall victim to a sexual assault during their college careers, although these assaults occur primarily during the freshman year (Burrows, 2014). In fact, a new, large scale study (<http://www.aau.edu/Climate-Survey.aspx?id=16525>) of more than 150,000 students at 27 institutions of higher education across the United States indicates that the incidence of sexual assault and sexual misconduct due to physical force, threats of physical force, or incapacitation among female undergraduate student respondents was 23.1 percent (“AAU Campus”, 2015).

Building awareness of this problem is critical, as is examining the subject through both a feminist and paternalistic theoretical lens. During the spring semester of 2015, my Advanced Composition service-learning class at Old Dominion University applied rhetoric techniques to create and implement a public awareness campaign to inform students about the issue of campus sexual assault. This article will overview the problem of sexual assault on U. S. college campuses, describe theoretical frameworks for understanding the problem, and explain the activities my service-learning class undertook to design, implement and evaluate a sexual assault prevention public awareness campaign on our campus.

Sexual assault has become such an important problem that it has received much attention from the press. In most cases, this media attention has helped to build public awareness of the problem; however, not all publicity has helped to accurately inform the public. For example, the popular magazine, *Rolling Stone*, published an account of a gang rape on a female student by several members of a fraternity house at the University of Virginia college campus in November,

2014, which was later retracted by the magazine as unsubstantiated. Despite these unfortunate circumstances of ‘drive-by’ journalism, there appears to be a growing public awareness of the need to address the social problem of sexual assault in the United States. For example, on September 19, 2014, President Barack Obama launched a new public awareness campaign aimed at campuses across the United States to prevent sexual assaults. This new “It’s on Us” campaign (<http://itsonus.org>) is designed to encourage college students to play active roles in preventing sexual violence before it occurs. President Obama’s campaign will feature a strong focus on engaging college-age men to take part in bystander intervention which may help to prevent assaults and to raise awareness of the problem of sexual assault on college campuses. The Rape, Abuse, & Incest National Network, known as RAINN (<https://rainn.org>), is an anti-sexual assault group that has joined the “It’s on Us” campaign as a partner to help bring attention to the important roles that students play in keeping their friends safe and aiding in preventing sexual assaults on university grounds.

Colleges and universities have made great strides in their attempts to educate college freshmen students about the dangers that can lurk on campus. Security has been increased on college campuses and services for those who have been victimized have been established. Three organizations that have been founded and run by young people are Students Active for Ending Rape (<http://safercampus.org>) Know Your IX (<http://knowyourix.org/title-ix/title-ix-the-basics/>), and FORCE: Upsetting Rape Culture (<http://upsettingrapeculture.com/contact.php>). In 2014, Erin Burrows, educator and organizer of the Counseling and Mental Health Center at the University of Texas, stated, “These three organizations utilize the power of social media to leverage substantial change in individuals, communities, and society by incorporating strategies that demand accountability on all fronts, from federal agencies to individual offenders.”

## Theoretical Frameworks for Understanding Campus Sexual Violence

Despite organizations like these, sexual assaults continue to occur. Viewing the subject of campus sexual assault through a feminist and patriarchal theoretical framework may help to shed light on why this problem persists. The NOW Task Force on Rape, a second wave feminist movement headed by Betty Friedan, did an excellent job of increasing awareness about sexual violence during their marches in the 1970s when the term ‘rape culture’ was coined. According to the Women’s Center at Marshall University, a rape culture is defined as an environment in which rape is prevalent and in which sexual violence against women is normalized and excused in the media and popular culture (2015).

Bestselling author Jon Krakauer has recently published a book in which he examines the rape culture in Missoula, Montana. His book, “*Missoula: Rape and the Justice System in a College Town*”, explores students’ experiences of sexual assault at the University of Montana that occurred during the years 2010 through 2012. Using a feminist theoretical framework, he states that he believes that women who have been sexually victimized continually have their character examined, and, sometimes, they may be defamed. Having personally known a victim of sexual violence, he relates that this woman exhibited symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, known as PTSD, much like soldiers who have endured war (Krakauer, 2015, p. 349).

Krakauer (2015) also examines whether justice can prevail within the criminal justice system or if internal college- and university-run educational tribunals are better prepared to decide guilt or innocence regarding these sexual assault cases. He states:

Criminal investigations of students accused of rape should be undertaken *in addition* to universities’ disciplinary proceedings, not in lieu of them. The criminal justice system simply moves too slowly and is constrained by too many

procedures to adequately punish campus rapists and remove them from the academic community (2015, p. 345).

Krakauer (2015) believes that expelling a rapist is not an ideal outcome, a response that often leaves the offender on the loose. He further states that “he does not believe campus disciplinary proceedings cannot, and should not, be held to the same restrictive standards as criminal proceedings because they do not result in incarceration or require the rapist to register as a sex offender” (Krakauer, 2015, p. 346). Therefore, he concludes that the combination of college disciplinary proceedings and criminal investigations are the best course to take regarding the sexual victimization that takes place on the nation’s university campuses.

In contrast, Heather Wilhelm writes from a patriarchal theoretical framework. Ms. Wilhelm (2015) does not believe a rape culture exists on college campuses today, and instead believes that the term rape culture on university grounds is a lie. In her 2015 essay entitled *The ‘Rape Culture’ Lie*, Wilhelm states, “the perpetrator, ironically, isn’t a massive, oppressive ‘rape culture’. It’s the ‘sex means nothing’ culture, together with the ready embrace of a radical feminist worldview that holds women always blameless—even when they are self-destructive—and men always guilty, simply because they are men.”

Many in the public now believe that our nation’s college campuses support a rape culture. Research which was begun by M. Burt in 1980 and continued by N. Yamawaki through 2007 addresses patriarchal attitudes that exist on American university campuses. Their findings, based on a Patriarchal Gendered Schema Score, indicate that many college students exhibit beliefs that men should be the powerful, dominant figure in the relationship and women should be passive and submissive. These attitudes can influence how one would respond to questions regarding rape, while also making remarks such as, ‘A woman who teases men deserves anything that

might happen”” (Swope, 2014). Ongoing patriarchal attitudes such as these appear to be alive and well on our nation’s college campuses, although in our modern times patriarchal attitudes may seem to have vanished. According to Dr. Kristen Jozkowski (2015), who received her doctorate in Health Behavior from the Department of Applied Health Science at Indiana University, “Sexism, patriarchy, and hegemonic masculinity pervade college campuses, just as they do in society as a whole. They contribute to and facilitate sexual violence” (p. 17).

Regardless of their ascribed theoretical framework, a growing number of both university student and faculty leaders agree that campus sexual violence is a problem that must be addressed. It is extremely encouraging to note that most universities and college campuses have now instituted online sexual assault awareness campaigns on their college websites. Table 1 overviews several exemplar college and university websites that provide resources for support and prevention of and response to sexual violence.

Table 1: Exemplar College and University Web Resources for Responding To and Preventing Campus Sexual Violence

University /College Name	Website URLs	Exemplary Characteristics
Duke University	<a href="https://studentaffairs.duke.edu/conduct">https://studentaffairs.duke.edu/conduct</a>  Additional URL:	<b>Duke University</b> has a very strong commitment to Title IX. This commitment is outlined on the page that explains Title IX and its commitment to sexual misconduct, which includes links to other important information.

	<p><a href="http://studentaffairs.duke.edu/conduct/z-policies/student-sexual-misconduct-policy-dukes-commitment-title-ix">http://studentaffairs.duke.edu/conduct/z-policies/student-sexual-misconduct-policy-dukes-commitment-title-ix</a></p>	<p>Psychological services, support services, and resources are also included for those who have suffered sexual victimization.</p>
<p>University of Michigan</p>	<p><a href="http://www.sapac.umich.edu">www.sapac.umich.edu</a></p> <p>Additional URL:</p> <p><a href="http://studentsexualmisconductpolicy.umich.edu">http://studentsexualmisconductpolicy.umich.edu</a></p>	<p>The <b>Sexual Assault Prevention &amp; Awareness Center (SAPAC)</b> website includes links to explain what SAPAC does to help victims of sexual victimization and many articles including facts regarding sexual assault, feelings and recovery, medical concerns, criminal and civil justice, resources, and how to get involved by volunteering.</p>
<p>State University of New York</p>	<p><a href="https://www.suny.edu/violence-response">https://www.suny.edu/violence-response</a></p> <p>Additional URLs:</p> <p><a href="http://system.suny.edu/university-life/sexual-assault-prevention/">http://system.suny.edu/university-life/sexual-assault-prevention/</a></p> <p><a href="http://system.suny.edu/compliance/topics/safety">http://system.suny.edu/compliance/topics/safety</a></p> <p><a href="http://system.suny.edu/compliance/topics/safety/title-ix/">http://system.suny.edu/compliance/topics/safety/title-ix/</a></p>	<p>The <b>Sexual Violence Prevention Workgroup</b> provides biographies for each of its 30 members, a link for comments, and an explanation regarding its policies. On each webpage there is a dropdown box which explains SUNY's policies regarding a variety of questions and concerns. SUNY also includes a page devoted to its commitment to Title IX with other valuable information.</p>

<p>University of Virginia</p>	<p><a href="http://www.virginia.edu/sexualviolence/sexualassault">www.virginia.edu/sexualviolence/sexualassault</a></p> <p>Additional URLs:</p> <p><a href="http://www.virginia.edu/sexualviolence/resource/titleix.html">http://www.virginia.edu/sexualviolence/resource/titleix.html</a></p> <p><a href="http://www.virginia.edu/sexualviolence/resource/clery.html">http://www.virginia.edu/sexualviolence/resource/clery.html</a></p>	<p><b>UVA's</b> website incorporates its own definitions of sexual assault along with the Virginia Criminal Code of Conduct definitions. Resources include Title IX and Clery Basics. Additional links include survivor support, emergency contact numbers, stalking, law enforcement and legal options, and where and how to seek medical attention.</p>
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### **Service-Learning Class Prevention Awareness Campaign**

During the Spring 2015, semester, my Advanced Composition class at Old Dominion University created a service-learning public awareness campaign to make female and male students aware of alarming campus sexual violence statistics and to help them understand where and how to obtain support when needed.

Service-learning projects not only engage the students themselves, but they also reach from the classroom into the community and can become a rewarding experience in and of themselves. Our Advanced Composition class service-learning project focused on developing a public awareness campaign through careful consideration of these key rhetorical skills: (a) identifying our key audience, (b) clarifying our purpose and genre, (c) applying critical thinking skills, (d) polishing our writing and visual presentation style, (e) and evaluating our products for effectiveness and credibility.

Our first step in developing a successful public awareness campaign was to clarify who our key audience would be. Our group determined that undergraduate students were the key audience, and worked to develop all materials and activities in our campaign to target this

specific campus population. Secondly, our purpose in presenting this service-learning project to the college community was to inform each student about the growing problem of sexual assault on college campuses and ways that it can be prevented. Through our experiences of talking with students, we were able to apply critical thinking skills to the subject of sexual violence on college campuses. We studied different theoretical frameworks such as feminist, patriarchal, and Marxist, which we applied to our own unique situations which we encountered during our service-learning project.

Next, through developing our service-learning public awareness program regarding sexual victimization on university campuses, we refined our writing and visual presentation skills. We each wrote a reflective essay regarding our service-learning public awareness program and we provided information aimed at students in a concise, professional, and pleasing visual style. Our tables at Webb Center and the Virginia Beach atrium exhibited well-thought-out information in the form of brochures, pamphlets, bulletins, and important information from RAINN and Damsel in Distress. Damsel in Distress (<http://damseldefense.net/>) is an online organization that sells products which aid individuals in protecting themselves before they become victims of sexual violence. The organization's motto is equip, empower, and educate. By encouraging their customers to take self-defense classes and equipping them with tools to use in case of a sexual attack, victims become empowered with the knowledge that they can protect themselves. These pre-printed organizational materials demonstrated effectiveness and credibility. We also made individual packets which we handed out to students with more information about Denim Day, along with handmade ribbons and candy.

Denim Day was established in 1992 after an eighteen year old girl was sexually assaulted by her driving instructor in Italy. The driver was convicted, but the case was overturned by the

Italian parliament who ruled that the victim was wearing jeans that were so tight that they could not have been removed without her help and consent. The Italian Supreme Court claimed that the assault would be considered to have been consensual sex, but not rape. Since then, women in the Italian parliament have worn jeans in protest, along with women in the California state senate (“Denim Day” 2014). My group, in our service-learning campaign, made sure that each student with which we interacted was given a bag that included important information about the sexual assault, the ensuing court case and the meaning of Denim Day.

Over the course of ten days while staffing our table in high traffic student areas on the Old Dominion University campus, we were able to interact with students and listen to their stories when they felt like they wanted to share them or make suggestions of their own which was rewarding to all of us. Our class established a Facebook page through social media which reached more people in the community and the page garnered 209 likes. We placed bulletins with removable tags which listed contact numbers to RAINN’S hotline number if anyone felt the need to use it or have it for reference. The measures we used to keep count of how many students we reached were (a) the number of bags with candy, ribbons, and brochures we gave out which totaled 705, (b) bulletins with removed tags which totaled 21, and (c) the 209 Facebook likes we collected. Our group believes that our sexual assault awareness campaign was a success and the only problem we encountered was that of time constraints. We believe that if we had had more time more students could have been reached with this important and valuable information.

We had a diverse group of students in our service-learning class that varied in age and background and allowed each person to demonstrate her own unique strengths. Shannon, our group leader, interacted with a young man who had been a victim of two sexual assaults which took place in the college dormitory. The fact that this young man felt comfortable enough to

open up to Shannon regarding his experience was rewarding for our group. I spoke with a young lady who planned to do a service-learning campaign on sexually transmitted diseases among college students and she was encouraged by our campaign concept. Both of these examples demonstrate how service-learning projects can be reciprocal experiences for both of the parties involved.

In becoming a part of this service-learning project, I learned that I enjoyed meeting and interacting with students while distributing our campaign materials. This was my first time working on a project like this and I learned to move out of my comfort zone and approach the students who, in turn, welcomed the information regarding sexual assault awareness that I offered to them. The other students on our team were easy to work with and we are all concerned about the subject of sexual assault awareness. We incorporated teamwork in this project and all the small and large details of our campaign were worked out in a timely manner. The Old Dominion University college community welcomed our approaches and appeared to be sincerely interested in what we were saying. It was a reciprocal and rewarding experience for all of us.

### **Conclusion**

There is no question that there is still much work to be done in assessing the need for sexual assault awareness on college campuses and this essay represents a call to action for the implementation of more prevention measures. Erin Burrows (2014) suggests:

Response services for survivors of sexual violence along with thorough reporting procedures, investigations, and accountability mechanisms are needed on all university campuses. Risk reduction tactics should be taught to students which would decrease the odds of them experiencing sexual assault violence. Bystander intervention would reduce the occurrence of assaults by empowering witnesses to

interrupt the potential for violence. Each student would practice the concept of consent and treat their fellow students with respect.

Accordingly, our service-learning project for Advanced Composition at Old Dominion University became a valuable resource to both the students of Old Dominion University and its surrounding community as we collectively address the subject of sexual assault. Not only did our class get the chance to learn, we were able to apply those lessons to exploring new subjects and learning about other individuals' experiences. Through writing projects and oral presentations, we honed the communications skills covered by the course objectives.

Ultimately, service-learning projects not only contribute help for and solutions to many community issues, but they also help students become more aware of those societal issues at the same time they are gaining academic skills in their majors. Since statistics have shown that one in five female college students will become a victim of sexual violence on college campuses during their time of attendance (Burrows, 2014), if more students could be reached with our information, perhaps those startling statistics would diminish significantly. It is only right that female and male students be able to attend institutions of higher learning without the fear of becoming victims of sexual assault.

### **Note**

I would like to take this opportunity to thank the three anonymous reviewers who gave me excellent feedback on how I could improve this paper. Dr. Lynn Pelco deserves a great deal of special thanks for her comments and suggestions which helped me to resolve issues that I was unsure about. Also, I want to thank my English instructor at Old Dominion University, Katherine Jackson, for supporting me throughout this endeavor and my service-learning group classmates.

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