Campus Sexual Assault Prevention: Supporting Male Student Allies in an Effort to Sustain Engagement

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Movements to engage college men as activists and allies working to end sexual assault have become increasingly prevalent in U.S. colleges (Barone, Wolgemuth, & Linder, 2007; Berkowitz, 1994, 2002, 2004; Fabiano, Perkins, Berkowitz, Linkenbach, & Stark, 2003). Unfortunately, studies have shown that college men who are involved in breaking down gender norms and working to end sexual assault face being ostracized by their peers (Antill, 1987; Archer, 1984; Barone, Wolgemuth, & Linder, 2007, McCreary, 1994). The author will make an argument elucidating the importance for student affairs practitioners to foster an environment that is supportive of men who do not subscribe to hegemonic masculine ideals to keep them involved in the struggle to eliminate sexual assault as a reality.

Research has suggested that nearly one in four college women will be a victim of a sexual assault between entering as a first-year student and graduating from college (Fisher, Cullen, & Turner, 2000; Koss, Gidycz, & Wisniewski, 1987; Warshaw, 1994). Although it is a very small number of men who commit sexual assaults, nearly 98% of all perpetrators of sexual assault, against people of any gender, are identified as male (Catalano, 2006). Regardless of the overall percentage of men who rape, all men can have an impact on the environment that permits perpetrators to continue victimizing women (Berkowitz, 2002).

Numerous programs exist to work with men to create male-identified allies and activists who persistently work to end sexual assault (Barone, Wolgemuth, & Linder, 2007; Berkowitz, 1994, 2002, 2004; Fabiano, Perkins, Berkowitz, Linkenbach, & Stark, 2003). Many of these programs work to dismantle the culture that supports an environment where sexual assault can thrive. Unfortunately, when men actively work to break down gender norms or do not subscribe to traditional gender norms and engage in public efforts to end sexual assault, they risk being ostracized and criticized by their peers (Antill, 1987; Archer, 1984; Barone et al., 2007; McCreary, 1994). Student affairs practitioners need to intentionally foster a supportive and affirming environment for male-identified students who are in-

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volved in sexual assault prevention efforts. Men who do not fit into what society has deemed to be traditional gender norms need the same support.

The Need for Male Allies

Historically, sexual assault prevention efforts have placed emphasis and responsibility on women to protect themselves. This form of victim blaming is a common mentality in North American society. Campus programs and classes teaching women how to defend themselves or how to reduce their risk of sexual assault are examples. There are also numerous studies showing the breakdown of victim demographics, but little research about perpetrators. In order to change this emphasis, student affairs practitioners must shift their focus to also include men's responsibility in preventing sexual assault.

The recent movements to engage men include programs designed specifically for men to increase their awareness of sexual assault and hegemonic masculinity and typically teach bystander intervention strategies. Most programs utilize ideas from feminist theory that gender is socially constructed and "loosely defined" (Gardiner, 2005, p. 35) rather than "natural" (p. 35) or "ideal characteristics of people with similar genitals" (p. 35). These programs encourage men to dismantle a rape-supportive culture by challenging traditional gender norms and by working alongside women in ending sexual assault (Barone et al., 2007; Berkowitz, 1994, 2002, 2004; Fabiano et al., 2003).

Although only a small number of men participate in such unwarranted acts, student affairs practitioners face the reality that men commit nearly all sexual assaults. Therefore, the recent trend of creating men's programs is a positive step towards ending sexual assault. Although it is difficult, student affairs practitioners must do their part to help engage men and to maintain and sustain their involvement. Men's involvement in gender issues is complicated because it means that a privileged group mobilizes and reflects on its own privilege in an effort to challenge it (Flood, 2005). In order to recognize male influence on the issue, further analysis of what contributes to sexual assault is needed.

Rape Culture

Sexual assault is more than individual acts of sexism and violence. A culture exists in our society where sexual assault is allowed to thrive through commonly held beliefs. Studies have shown that several myths about sexual assault exist among college students and contribute to rape culture (Barone et al., 2007). These myths include that:

1. Women deserve to be sexually assaulted for how they were dressing, acting, [or] behaving.
2. Most sexual assaults are stranger assaults.
3. Men have more power and are entitled and supposed to be dominant and in control in sexual interactions.
4. Once consent is given it cannot be taken away.
5. Men must be the initiator of sexual activity. (p. 589)

These myths all contribute to rape culture by making misinformation commonplace and distorting the realities that exist around sexual assault and violence against women. In turn, these myths allow men to distance themselves from the primary responsibility, which in reality, lies on the perpetrator and not on the victim.

Another contributor to a rape-supportive culture is the gender roles that much of western culture has subscribed to for centuries. Thompson (2000) outlined six ways that boys have been taught by society to be successful men: (a) acting tough, (b) hiding emotions, (c) earning a substantial income, (d) having the right kind of occupation [as a doctor, mechanic, or business executive — not a nurse, secretary, or librarian], (e) competing powerfully, and (f) winning at any cost. Socio-cultural theory argues that these expectations of how men should think and act promote "restrictive gender roles where coercive sexuality is accepted" and that individuals learn "motives, attitudes, and rationalizations that promote sexually assaultive behavior" (Davis & Liddell, 2002, p. 36). Research links people who subscribe to traditional "socialization scripts" (p. 36) and hold attitudes that support rape. Men who act according to the aforementioned gender scripts are likely to exhibit beliefs and actions that contribute to rape culture.

Fortunately, additional research shows that a majority of men experience a level of discomfort with the expectations to be what society has deemed "masculine," including "how to be in relationship[s] with women, homophobia, heterosexism, and emotional expression, and that they are uncomfortable with the sexism and inappropriate behavior of other men" (Berkowitz, 2004, p. 3). This research gives practitioners evidence that many male-identified students have a desire to change. An atmosphere, however, must be created that is affirming and supportive of dismantling rape culture.

Gender socialization is not the only contributing factor to sexual assaults, since many men may not fulfill the roles normalized by society (Berkowitz, 1994). Simply because society provides an environment of support for sexual assault does not mean men are not responsible for their actions or that they do not have the ability to manage how they act. It does, however, make it more difficult for men to challenge the ways in which they were taught to act regarding these socialization scripts.

As a result, homophobia is very common among many college-aged men. Numerous scholars (Barone et al., 2007; Berkowitz, 2004; Flood, 2005) have stated that people who feel threatened by sexual assault prevention efforts may exhibit homophobic behaviors to discredit male activists. Homophobia occurs as a way of "policing heterosexual masculinities" (Flood, 2005, p. 464) and forces men back into the box of what it means to be "a man." All of these factors combine to create a culture that allows sexual assault to thrive.

Barriers to Retaining Men in Sexual Assault Prevention Efforts

Men involved with this movement challenge the dominant culture in an attempt to make the world a safer place for women and a healthier place for people of all genders. The difficulty with involving men and retaining their continued involvement may stem from the feedback they receive from peers, as well as from faculty and staff (Barone et al., 2007; Berkowitz, 2004; Flood, 2005). Negative verbal responses or even threats directed towards men involved in sexual violence prevention make it difficult to retain them. Although, at a moral and philosophical level, this should not be reason for men to relinquish their responsibility in deconstructing rape culture, it is a real factor in losing men who fight for an end to sexual violence. It is common for hate speech to be used against men doing this work. In the following excerpts from research on male-student experiences, this type of language is outlined in a fairly graphic nature to convey the extent of the reality for men who are involved in this movement. In a qualitative study of students who participated in The Men's Project at Colorado State University, Barone et al. (2007) found that homophobia was a barrier for men in breaking down gender norms and utilizing bystander intervention strategies in fear of being discredited by peers. One student stated, "Being told that you're gay [is a barrier to confronting peers]… It's like, you say something, and it's like, 'All right, fag,' and they walk away and completely blow you off" (p. 591).

Barone et al.'s (2007) study revealed another difficulty faced by men who are working on sexual assault prevention. One student said:

> And I think people can be really critical too, if you are trying to change your language, or be more inclusive…and people know that, and you slip up, people will call you out on that and make a big deal of it. (p. 592)

These hypercritical attitudes from people of all genders can be very difficult for male students to move beyond. People may be ready to "attack" at the slightest slip-up on the activist's behalf, whereas a male student who is not actively involved in ending sexual assault may not receive the same criticism.

Barone et al. (2007) also found that men are not always supported by women

when challenging their peers on language or opinions. In this case, hate speech was used once again against a male student. One student interviewed after his involvement in The Men's Project stated:

> I've even been told by women, like, I'll come home from class, and there'll be on my whiteboard, "Grow some balls, you fag," and I know it's from the women on my floor…they do it as a joke because a lot of them respect the things I do, but in a way they make fun of me. (p. 591)

This shows that, although most criticism and jokes come from other men, even female peers will make jokes about men who challenge masculinity. Even though women may be appreciative of men's efforts and their jokes are not intended to cause harm, this study shows that negative peer feedback is indeed a barrier to continuing to work toward becoming an ally.

Limitations

Men striving to end sexual assault must maintain a high level of responsibility and accountability to the women's movement when addressing the issue of sexual assault, so as not to overshadow the work women have been doing for decades. Often, men doing this work receive more credit for their efforts than women who are working on the same issues. Efforts by men to help end violence against women must occur alongside women and not come at the expense of or in competition with the initiatives for and by women that are currently in place (Berkowitz, 2004). Moreover, men's programs must not replace programs which provide resources to women who are survivors of sexual assault and domestic violence. Women's centers, rape crisis centers, victim's advocates, and political efforts for change are tremendously important. Practitioners need to ask themselves how and where they see men who are working to end sexual assault fitting into their current models of practice. More research is needed to further understand how men can help prevent sexual assault without overshadowing the work of women.

The male gender norms outlined earlier exist in many cultures across the United States, but variation exists across races, ethnicities, social classes, sexual orientations, religions, abilities, and other identities that intersect with the male identity. These differences should not be ignored when considering the experiences of male students and working to support the efforts of men who do not fit into U.S. gender norms. "As with every other issue, there is a danger of imposing definitions and understandings from more established violence prevention efforts (which, like the larger culture, is predominantly White and middle class) upon other cultures and communities" (Berkowitz, 2004, p. 5). Further research must question what barriers exist for men who have other identities that might affect how they are socialized to be men.

Students who fit into the gender binary can be affected by sexual assault in very different ways than transgender students. The issue becomes much more complex for students who identify as transgender since they may have been socialized as one gender, but may not identify with the gender they present as or with any gender at all. Over-generalizing when deconstructing masculinity can discount and ignore the experiences of transgender students, but it is necessary to label certain behaviors as more masculine or more feminine in order to begin breaking them down as norms. It is difficult to change socialization patterns without putting a name to the characteristics. More research is needed in order to begin understanding the experiences of transgender students as the victims and the perpetrators of sexual assault.

Implications for Practice

It is inspiring to see the increase in movements to involve men in ending sexual assault because of its prevalence on college campuses. Although many prevention efforts have placed emphasis on what women can do to reduce their risk, we are seeing more programs that engage men. These programs work to dispel rape myths, break down gender socialization scripts, and confront homophobia. Unfortunately, men who are involved face substantial barriers to remaining committed to the issue. Student affairs practitioners have the opportunity to support men who are working on this issue.

Practitioners can help to dismantle rape culture by making a conscious effort to not support rape myths, having conversations with students who believe any of these myths, and designing and supporting programs that focus on debunking misconceptions around sexual assault. Awareness-raising efforts can be very effective in dispelling rape myths. Practitioners of all genders must also challenge themselves to ensure that they do not subscribe to these myths. Actively self-reflecting on these beliefs can help practitioners to ensure they are not contributing to commonly-held fallacies.

Homophobic attitudes can hinder men from displaying the diversity of character that they have the capability to express. These attitudes can deeply hurt students who do or do not identify with the queer community. Student affairs practitioners must confront homophobic comments and attitudes in an effort to discontinue the environments that inhibit many men from speaking out against violence.

Practitioners must be sure to not reinforce or support behavior from other students that normalizes hegemonic masculinity or that negatively reinforces traditional gender norms. It is important to foster an environment where male-identified students may display behavior that might not fall under the definition of traditional gender norms. This can help to create a safe atmosphere for male

students working to break down these norms. They should not tolerate behavior that makes light of men actively engaged in ending sexual assault. Additionally, they should confront individuals who make these comments or participate in activities rooted in sexism. In doing so, they can create a space where there are fewer barriers for men to remain engaged in ending violence against women.

If a practitioner works with any male-identified students who are working to end violence against women, they need to be appropriately affirming of these students' actions. This means showing appreciation for the work they are doing and listening to their experiences while ensuring they understand the responsibility and what it means to receive credit for their work alongside women. While it is difficult to maintain this balance between affirmation and accountability of the student, practitioners must not support behavior from male students that, while done with good intentions, overshadows the work that women have done and are doing on this issue.

Finally, practitioners themselves should be knowledgeable and aware of the severity of sexual assault as a reality for all students. They should work to tailor their language and beliefs to reflect an attitude that helps to end sexual assault. Male-identified practitioners can work to break down gender norms themselves in an effort to not contribute to rape culture and hegemonic masculinity. Female practitioners can support this behavior through words of affirmation. Exemplary behavior helps to ensure that students understand the importance of ending rape and the culture that allows it to persist.

Without creating a supportive atmosphere for men who are working to end sexual assault, we are likely to see men fall away from the movement. It is vital for men to challenge themselves and one another to stop contributing to a rape supportive culture. If men are met with negative attitudes or no affirmation of their efforts, we will lose them and the cause of sexual assault is unlikely to be uprooted.

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