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What is the Role of College Faculty in Stopping Sexual Violence?

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What is the role of college faculty in stopping sexual violence?

BY ALISON C. CARES, ASSISTANT PROFESSOR, ASSUMPTION COLLEGE AND CO-PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR ON THE NATIONAL-SCOPE DEMONSTRATION PROJECT TO INTEGRATE CRIME VICTIMS' ISSUES INTO UNIVERSITY AND COLLEGE CURRICULA, AWARDED TO UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS LOWELL

One of my college presidents once defined the role of faculty as the production and dissemination of knowledge. However, I have realized how much more the role can encompass – faculty often function as advisors, mentors, role models, career counselors, supervisors, a resource for students in times of crisis and a stakeholder in the issues colleges face. Sexual violence is one of those issues, with an estimated 20 to 25 percent of female students experiencing an attempted or completed sexual assault during college.

There has been little attention paid to the role faculty can play in addressing sexual violence in our communities. While recognizing that faculty differ in their readiness and ability to do something about sexual violence, this article aims to get faculty and those who work with them thinking and talking more about what faculty can do. What can faculty do to address sexual violence in our communities?

Recognize what sexual violence is, that it is prevalent and that faculty have a role in stopping it

Every faculty member can assume there are survivors among our students. After the first step of becoming aware of sexual violence as a problem, faculty can think about what role they can effectively play in responding to it. This does not mean intervening beyond one's abilities but

involves educating ourselves about sexual violence and recognizing that students learn from us, not only from class content, but outside of class as well. Knowing about sexual violence in our community and doing nothing sends a message that sexual violence is not an important issue for our community or our students.

Provide support to survivors of sexual violence

Being a survivor of sexual violence can interfere with college success. When a student is struggling in a course, faculty can ask if there is something we can help with and be prepared for a student to disclose a sexual assault. Student disclosures of experiences with sexual violence can also come during class discussion, in assignments or in conversation or an office hours visit. This reflects that students see faculty as a source of support when they need guidance.

Responding to a disclosure of sexual victimization requires care and preparation, but faculty does not have to be experts or therapists. Some simple steps include showing that you believe the student, thanking them for sharing, asking how you can help, knowing the reporting requirements that apply to you and knowing the campus and community resources to which you can refer. The Office for Victims of Crime (OVC) materials referenced on the next page and the resources of NSVRC can help.

Teach about sexual violence in a responsible manner

Teaching about sexual violence requires planning so that material is presented in a way that dispels misconceptions and is sensitive to survivors of sexual violence. This, for example, starts with crafting a syllabus that includes guidance for discussion of sexual violence and self-care if course material becomes difficult, and referral resources for support. There are free materials available to help from the OVC-funded *Integrating Crime Victims' Issues into University and College Curricula*, including

guidelines for teaching about victimization as well as curricular materials faculty can adapt for their courses. The materials are available online at www.uml.edu/vic.

Be an active member in the campaign against sexual violence

This includes faculty making efforts inside and outside the classroom (including online virtual classrooms) to raise awareness of sexual violence and help students, faculty and others see a role for

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themselves in stopping sexual violence. Academic efforts could include integrating content on sexual violence in courses, promoting structured outside-of-the-classroom learning experiences (such as community service learning with organizations working against sexual violence), encouraging students to consider working with victims of sexual violence as a career option or conducting research on sexual violence. Students also learn from faculty outside of the classroom, where we lead by example. Faculty can speak out against sexual violence and the culture that contributes to it – the inappropriate jokes, gender stereotypes, rape myths and blaming of survivors — and be active by advising student groups, attending awareness-raising events, getting involved in the policy process, and advocating that

colleagues do the same.

All faculty members have a role to play in creating a climate that reduces sexual violence, and everyone's role will look different. Faculty from all along the continuum of awareness from knowledge to action can join together to be leaders on this issue. A joint effort by faculty can:

- Validate survivors and communicate that they are not to blame, they are not alone, and help is available.
- Dispel myths about sexual violence that silence victims and create a climate that facilitates perpetration.
- Facilitate student interest in sexual violence services as a career or volunteer choice.
- Prepare students to encounter survivors of sexual violence in their personal and professional lives.

Taken together, these efforts can motivate students, fellow faculty, and others to help rid campuses of sexual violence. 