

Combating the Campus Rape Crisis

College is back in session, and that means it's time for a lot of ineffective pageantry on rape prevention. Don't our young women deserve better?

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The college students are back. They're in the grocery stores, stocking up on Top Ramen. They're at IKEA, buying oddly shaped pillows for their dorm rooms. Very soon, they'll be at parties, doing things that would give their parents full-on coronaries. And that means it's time for a classic college ritual, adult-style: freaking out about the safety of our girls.

At about this time every year, adult anxiety about sexual assault reaches a tipping point and gives way to an avalanche of advice to young women from campuses, commentators, and parents alike: Don't hook up! Don't dress provocatively! Watch your drink! Actually, don't drink at all! Always stay with a friend! Don't stay out too late! Don't walk home alone! Etcetera, etcetera, ad nauseam.

And every year, it fails to work. A 2007 Department of Justice-funded trend analysis of rape studies over time revealed that rates of rape haven't declined in the past 15 years -- in fact, they may be increasing.

Why hasn't it worked? Perhaps it's because making rape prevention the responsibility of young women teaches students that guys can't be expected to be responsible for their own actions. Not surprisingly, that results in student bodies eager to let rapists off the hook and campus policies (like the one recently implemented at Tufts that forces victims into "mediation" with their rapists) that treat rape as an unfortunate disagreement instead of like the violent crime it is. Make no mistake about the danger of these equanimous attitudes -- in his 2002 landmark study of 1,882 male college students in the Boston area, Dr. David Lisak demonstrated that most campus rapes are perpetrated not by well-meaning boys confused about consent but by repeat-offender sociopaths who know exactly what they're doing. Treating rape like an unfortunate but understandable miscommunication doesn't just deny victims justice and downplay the traumatic nature of the experience -- it allows rapists to remain free to rape again and again.

Meanwhile, we set an impossibly high bar of behavior for young women -- one that they're bound to miss at some point, because, just like the rest of us humans, young women sometimes choose short-term pleasure over the abstract possibility of risk. And when a guy

rapes a young woman while she's violating the Rules of Safety -- let's say she's at a party and dancing and she's flirting -- what follows are questions about her behavior, how much she'd been drinking, how she might have led him on.

Rape on campus is a very real problem. Cautious estimates suggest that nearly one in every 10 female college students will be raped while she's at school. With an estimated 18 million students attending college in the U.S. this year, that's (conservatively) over 150,000 young women who'll be raped while at college this year alone. That's a public health crisis. It's time to start treating it like one.

What would it look like if colleges did just that? For starters, they would provide in-depth programs on healthy sexuality and sexual safety, instead of getting by with a pamphlet and an hour demonstration at orientation. Schools would stop telling girls to mind their liquor so they don't "get themselves" raped and start teaching young men that alcohol is never an excuse to "get away" with anything. They would offer bystander training, so that all students on campus know what it looks like when someone's sexual boundaries are being violated and what to do if they see that happening. They would teach students that the only real consent is the kind that's freely and enthusiastically given, removing the "she didn't exactly say no" excuse that too many rapists hide behind. And their campus policies would support prevention, recovery, and justice, not dismissiveness, victim-blaming, and denial.

A few schools are doing some of this already. But there's no systemic oversight into who's doing what, and all signs point to the fact that most schools are doing far too little. That's especially alarming when you consider that Title IX -- the federal law guaranteeing equal access to education for all genders -- requires schools to take strong, active steps to prevent rape on campus. That means they need to be implementing real policies that work, not just going through motions that make them look concerned.

All of us who care about the safety of girls ought to be doing the same. It's not even that hard. Imagine what would happen if each of us called a school we care about today and let administrators know that we're watching and that we expect them to do what we all should be doing: taking responsibility for rape prevention off of the potential victims and placing it where it belongs -- with the potential perpetrators and with the adults and institutions whose job it is to keep young people safe.