Steps Toward Safety for Students: Sexual Assault Prevention on College Campuses

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Abstract

The deaths of Wendy Martinez and Mollie Tibbets gained national attention and raised awareness on the current issue of violence against women. Several reports of sexual assault or domestic violence have been reported at Germanna Community College and it is time to act to reduce the number of cases to zero. Movements like #MeToo and #TimesUp have been momentous and one could argue the power of right now to make college campuses a safer place. The risk-factors are many for sexual assault and violence on college campus, but the damage can be a heavy weight to carry. Betsy Devos has recently redefined sexual assault and harassment on campus. Potential solutions to ending sexual assault on campus include film analysis, panel discussions and role-playing. These activities would be carried out through the creation of a student-led club called SAS-V. There are some drawbacks to the proposed solutions, however the benefits would be enough to overcome the perceived challenges. Making changes at Germanna Community College would be an honorable contribution to the global initiative to end violence against women.

Keywords: prevention, sexual assault, violence against women, college, campus
Introduction

On Tuesday September 18, 2018, CBS News reported that Wendy Martinez was senselessly murdered on her jog near her home nearby Logan Circle in NW Washington D.C. She was stabbed multiple times by a man she did not know (“Surveillance Video Shows,” 2018). News of Wendy's death came just weeks after the nationally reported death of Mollie Tibbets, who like Wendy, was brutally stabbed while on a run by a man she had little affiliation with (“Mollie Tibbets,” 2018). Wendy and Mollie, both women adored by those closest to them, were simply engaging in daily activities when they fell victim to violence against women or VAW. Globally, 35% of women who had been in relationships reported that they were victims of physical and/or sexual violence and while neither Wendy Martinez nor Mollie Tibbets were intimate with their killers, their deaths serve as an unsettling reminder that women are disproportionately affected by violence as the result of gender inequality and gender-based violence (Choup, 2016; World Health Organization, 2017). According to Mark Haines (personal communication October 11, 2018), Assistant Dean of Student Development at Germanna, there were approximately 10 formal complaints of sexual assault or domestic violence during the 2017-2018 school year. A single case of sexual assault or violence is one too many and bringing awareness to the problem is a start towards bringing it to cessation. With only 1 in 5 college-age women reporting sexual violence to police, as reported by the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services (2018), the possibility of more than 10 instances is likely. To minimize violence against women on campus to zero cases, Germanna should adopt an awareness-based approach that aims to educate and raise overall campus awareness through the following: timely and thought-provoking movie screenings, informative panel discussions, and realistic role-playing experiences through the establishment of a student-led club responsible for spreading the
awareness of sexual assault and violence against women. Meaningful action at Germanna’s campus would be a progressive step in securing safety for women around the world.

**Defining the Problem**

Violence against women is a global concern that has heartbreaking effects on the physical and mental well-being, reproductive health, and socio-economic livelihood of women and girls (Mbadugha, 2016). According to researchers at Harvard Medical School and the University of Massachusetts, there are many reasons why sexual assault and violence disproportionately affects women (Gefter, Rood, Valentine, Bankoff, & Pantalone, 2017). For example, Gefter, et al. (2017) claims the factors that contribute to violence against women carried out by men or men’s violence against women (MVAW) are mainly sociocultural and include influences at both the individual and societal level. Therefore, perpetrators of MVAW may be influenced by personal experiences such as witnessing violence in their homes, through consumption of media portraying violence as respectable behavior, or presumed societal norms and expectations (Gefter et al., 2017). Gefter and his colleagues also concede the historical oppression of women by men stating that feminist theorists believe MVAW takes place because of implied gender roles and power dynamics within the patriarchy. They propose that men’s violence against women is caused by “permissive cultural attitudes” towards violence to include rape myths and victim-blaming (para. 3). General misconceptions about how and why sexual assault occurs remain a core contributor to the issue. Researchers at the University of Wisconsin and Michigan State University agree stating that the belief of rape myths is further facilitated by their widespread presence on television, noting that 10% of all sex-related dialogue on television conveys sex-related crimes (Kahlor & Eastin, 2011). Victim-blaming refuses to acknowledge a man’s role in
men’s violence against women and because of this violence against women sees no boundaries in the scope of women it affects, damaging communities worldwide.

To evince the violence women face today, survivors of sexual assault have taken to Twitter with over 1.7 million tweets in over 85 countries as of October 2017, recounting their trauma with the hashtag #MeToo, a movement first started in 2006 by Tarana Burke gaining national attention after sexual misconduct allegations against Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein came forth in 2017 (Park, 2017). In an interview with TIME Magazine, Tarana Burke stated the movement “deals specifically with sexual violence,” and “is a framework for how to do the work of ending sexual violence” (as cited in Langone, 2018, para. 7). A similarly used hashtag #TimesUp is a sister movement that works within the realm of #MeToo, focusing primarily on the safety and equity of women in the workplace (Langone, 2018). Its leaders include well-known women of Hollywood like Reese Witherspoon, Eva Longoria, and Shonda Rimes as they focus on “solution-based, action-oriented steps” (Langone, 2018, para. 23). In September of 2018, #WhyIDidntReport trended in support of Professor Christine Blasey Ford in response to President Donald Trump’s tweet questioning the honesty of Ford’s testimony during the 2018 Kavanaugh hearings (Sacks, 2018). These powerful displays of solidarity have initiated a larger conversation about fundamental women’s rights, served as a credible source of firsthand accounts providing invaluable insight, and have become an indispensible catalyst for healing in both women and men alike.

While social movements demonstrate the scope of women affected by sexual assault, in the realm of higher education, college-age women who experience sexual assault are more likely to suffer severe depression or anxiety, have trouble in their classes, or drop out altogether (World Health Organization, 2018). The U.S. Department of Health & Human Services (2018) reports
that on college campuses, alcohol, drugs, and peer pressure are among the top contributors to sexual assault, sexual violence, and unwanted sexual activity. They assert that being forced into unwanted sexual activity for social favorability is a form of sexual coercion, which can be against school and/or workplace policies and even illegal in some cases. The lines between consensual and non-consensual sexual activity are often blurred, especially in defense of the alleged aggressor; however, researchers at the University of Delaware, Brandie Pugh and Patricia Becker (2018), define sexual coercion as “a continuum of tactics to elicit sexual activity from unwilling partners” (para. 5). They claim this ranges from “non-forceful verbal tactics to physical force” (Pugh & Becker, 2018, para. 5). To prevent sexual violence against women through sexual coercion, states like California have implemented a change in the law and around sex education for teens and young adults, adopting the standard of affirmative consent or “Yes means yes” (Pugh & Becker, 2018, para 1-2). Affirmative consent is an attempt to solve the problems that surround consent by emphasizing the need for communication before, during, and after engaging in intimate activities (Pugh & Becker, 2018). Unfortunately, not all states, Virginia included, or institutions have adopted this standard leaving young women vulnerable to the use of manipulation tactics intended to strip them of their right to consent on and around college campuses. Without enlightened effort and increased awareness generating greater protection for women, consistent outcomes are likely to proceed.

Commitments to the protection of sufferers of sexual assault and violence on campus were invalidated on November 16, 2018, when U.S. Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos released her proposed set of rules governing sexual harassment and assault on college campuses granting the accused more rights in the investigative process which schools now must initiate. (Meckler, 2018) Her proposal narrowly defined sexual harassment as “unwelcome conduct on
the basis of sex that is so severe, pervasive and objectively offensive that it denies a person access to the school’s education program or activity” (para. 19). The notion that the unwelcomed conduct must reach a level of severity before the accused is held responsible for their actions is tremendous loss for victims, however, this only demonstrates the need for a comprehensive, sexual assault awareness program that provides substantial education, promotes an assault-free, harassment-free campus, and supports those who may be too afraid to seek help.

Solutions

Social justice experts around the world have long searched for effective methods to end sexual violence on college campuses, working closely with government agencies, officials, and feminist groups to create positive change within their respective communities. To tackle the problem on campus, a proactive strategy targeted toward young men- the primary perpetrators would be ideal; however, the initiative should also seek to educate and empower young women. Some potential solutions to educate and spread awareness at Germanna include hosting special events, for instance, movie screenings with space for thoughtful commentary, illuminative panel discussions and scheduled role-playing events through the start-up of a student led club.

Western entertainment to include music, movies, and television, has been scrutinized in the recent past for its often-immoderate content. The popularity of violent and misogynistic storylines and roles in Western film and television has subconsciously influenced the generations of yesterday and today. Most notably, it has contributed to the common perception some men have regarding rape myths in which the validity of sexual assault and violence cases are questioned and the actions of men in such cases are rationalized. Using movies as a tool instead to reverse these negative side-effects is one way to address the issue. Movies played at such an event could range from films depicting healthy, consensual relationships to more controversial
aspects of seeking consent and protagonist roles that challenge gender stereotypes. Movie nights concluding with an open discussion would give students an opportunity to express their concerns or appreciation for the films they have watched. Two suggested movies to watch would be *Sixteen Candles* (1984), and *Almost Famous* (2000). Both films bring forth opportunities to discuss consent and shifts in the culture regarding what is deemed appropriate behavior between young people with both male and female perspectives. To guide and lead the discussion, a student in a leadership position should watch the movies and prepare a few thought-provoking questions and/or topics to discuss and supply relevant information to tackle any misconceptions.

While watching films to end sexual assault may seem an impractical method, the efficacy of film as a teaching tool has been studied for years, while proving particularly successful in the training of counselors. According to researchers at Wake Forest University, Virginia Commonwealth University, University of South Carolina, and Long Island University, Mark Scholl, Donna Gibson, Joseph Despres, and Natalie Boyarinova (2014) claim that film reaches students on an emotional level and speaks to an individual’s intelligence, abilities, and interests. Due to their ability to elicit empathic responses from the viewer, films are likely to leave a lasting impression.

The incorporation of movies with learning is referred to as *experiential learning activities* and with its likely success at Germanna, this concept could easily serve as a model for similar programs in the primary years of education when formative ideas and values around relationships and consent begin to develop. The Sealy Auditorium, located in the Workforce and Technology Building (SP2), would be an accommodating location that’s easily accessible to students and donations could cover the cost of the films.

While films possess the power to resonate with students emotionally, panel discussions are another engaging way to bring people together with the added advantage of multiple experts
creating meaningful commentary in a virtual setting. Panel discussions are typically held in business and political situations, but a panel discussion can be used to convey information from the experts on a multitude of topics. Speakers for a violence against women prevention panel could include survivors of sexual assault, local psychologists, and staff members of a local domestic/sexual violence shelter such as Empower House. Craig L. Branch the Chief of Police at Germanna could also speak on the panel and provide insight as to what happens to the perpetrator during the trial process and after conviction. An effort to dissuade students from engaging in potentially violent sexual behavior would be meaningful. An honest and open discussion with room for questions would serve as another method to educate students and provide a more concrete example of how sexual assault affects the lives of real people.

Professional meeting facilitator Kristin Arnold (2014) attributes a panel’s success to the synergy created when multiple people come together with a common goal. Arnold states, “[One should] use a panel when [they] believe the group of panelists will generate something more interesting than any one individual panel member could generate on his/her own” (para. 8). Speakers with diverse backgrounds have the potential to create excitement about a topic, connect with their audience at varying degrees, and can provide a wider view of the topic. Panel discussions would be an advantageous addition to a program designated to prevent sexual assault and raise awareness.

In addition to panel discussions, role-playing as an educational tool involves imagining realistic scenarios and acting within its parameters to prepare oneself for a time they may be confronted with a similar situation. According to the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services (2018), many women when faced with circumstances in which their right to consent is jeopardized, they comply with the abuser thinking they have no other option. Equipping students
with verbiage to dismantle attempts of sexual coercion could potentially rescue them from those unwanted experiences. Jaibunisha Ibrahim Shaikh (2016), student at D. Y. Patil University in Mumbai with a master’s in education, cites some of the advantages of role-playing to include increased self-esteem and confidence, leadership skills and creativity. He goes on to mention that sessions are low cost and usually kept short to promote mental acuity and prevent scripts from being used. Role-playing as a means of learning is built on the premiss of preparation and would make a sensible addition to the methods to resolve the issue of sexual assault and violence on college campuses. Furthermore, creating a student-led organization at Germanna committed to stopping sexual violence gallantly denounces violators and serves as an act of alliance with survivors, declaring the message that they are valued and that such acts will not be tolerated. Planting seeds of change locally holds the promise for growth that in time can spread globally.

**Evaluation**

Even with evidence supporting film analysis, panel discussions, and role-play as effective approaches in attempt to prevent violence against women on campus, there is no perfect solution. While the proposed methods do stress the importance of a conscious shift in culture, increased awareness and tangible experience, they fail to account for the component most vital to their success, participation. The largest flaw in student-oriented solutions is participation. Some students may not have the time or desire to attend events regarding sexual assault or violence against women on campus. To address this chance, incentives such as providing food or drink or extra credit in certain classes could be utilized. A solid approach would include staff and faculty. In addition, students may consider certain films to be offensive, while panel-discussions could overload students with information, and some students could struggle with shyness while role-playing. Careful consideration will be needed, but these are obstacles that can be overcome in
exchange for the lasting change it could bring. Watching movies, hosting panel discussions, and role-playing are realistic and inexpensive solutions. Educating the student body through these methods could prevent sexual assault on campus and elsewhere.

**Implementation**

Organization will be key to ensure that these solutions live up to their desired effects. The first step in hosting film screenings, panel discussions, and role-playing sessions is the establishment of a student club. The club could be called “Students Against Sexual Violence,” or SAS-V. According to the Germanna Student Handbook (2017), the first steps in starting a club at Germanna is the acquisition of at least 8 student members and a faculty member advisor committed to succeeding in the mission. A few forms are filled out with the specifics, and a Club Constitution is written up and submitted for approval by the Student Government Association (SGA) (“Student Leader,” 2017). Some obstacles that may occur include not getting approval from the SGA, or not finding enough members to take on responsibility in the organization. Despite the possibility of an initial rejection, the SGA exists to help students fulfill their needs and wants during their time at Germanna and could assist in finding potential members and restructure the intended goals of the club for approval. Finding an impactful solution for sexual violence requires the cooperation and input of everyone.

**Conclusion**

To deny the prevalence of violence against women today is, simply, to be misinformed. With a deep history of gender-based violence against women throughout many nations in the world, it is easy to be overwhelmed, and for some, skeptical, to the point of putting off any viable tactic to dismantle it with a sense of urgency. The progression of feminism has revealed the stark reality of the times in which we live. People are speaking up and ready for change. For
this reason, creating a program to align students with the growing sentiment that sexual assault and gender-based violence is unacceptable and has no place on college campuses would have a rippling effect within the community. A program providing education through the means of film analysis, panel discussions and role-playing has research to support its merit. Student attitudes that reflect proficiency in topics regarding sexual assault and violence against women should be the norm. Taking proactive steps to better protect ourselves and others, including the most vulnerable members within the community, should be a priority. A blended campus culture that embraces the rights of every student and staff member 100% of the time is what can be achieved. The establishment of a “Students Against Sexual Violence” club (SAS-V) would promote a healthy, nonviolent, environment at Germanna while bringing everyone closer to a world without violence against women.
References


