Students for Access to Fair Education (SAFE): Sexual Assault on College Campuses

I. THE PROBLEM

Background:

For decades, universities across the nation have been grappling with the difficulty of properly addressing the problem of sexual assault on their campuses. Due to several interconnected issues, most campuses have failed to sufficiently tackle the problem thus far. The overarching issue is a lack of accurate statistics on the prevalence of sexual assault. The problem of accurate statistics is perpetuated by the following:

Inconsistent definition of sexual assault: Policymakers, elected officials, activists, and citizens have yet to come to a consensus on what constitutes “sexual assault”. Three of the most commonly cited studies on the prevalence of sexual assault found vastly different results. A 2007 study conducted by the National Institute of Justice sampled two universities and found that one in five women have been sexually assaulted in college, according to their definition of sexual assault which included “forced kissing” (Schermund 78). That same year, a national survey done by the Medical University of South Carolina reported findings that 5% of college women were raped annually, coming out to approximately 300,000 cases per year (8). Nine years later in 2016, the Bureau of Justice Statistics found the rate of sexual assaults amongst college women nationally to be 6.1/1000; however, researchers working on this study concluded that the low number was due to a broad definition of sexual assault, which contributed to underreporting (80).

Underreporting and/or lack of reporting: A victim may not report his or her assault because they may not understand what happened to be sexual assault. For instance, the victim may been kissed or fondled against their will, or the perpetrator may not have fully completed the assault. Other common reasons victims may not report include shame, embarrassment, self-blame, and fear of retaliation (Bernstein). Due to the interplay of these complex reasons, it was found that less than five percent of university students who experience sexual assault actually report the crime to their school (AAUP).

Existing incentives for universities to underreport: A range of systemic incentives are in place for universities that contributes to the culture of underreporting. The 1990 Jeanne Clery Disclosure of Campus Security Policy and Campus Crime Statistics Act (or the Clery Act) serves as the
federal mandate for campus crime reporting and includes loopholes that work to universities’ advantages when drafting annual security and crime reports (AAUP). Specific loopholes that affect the schools’ sexual assault reports include: requiring the assault to occur on or near campus--and excluding it if it occurred during a study abroad program, in off campus housing, or in a fraternity house; misclassifying sexual assault; allowing school counselors to withhold information regarding a sexual assault if said counselor can be covered by confidentiality protections; and not mandating the inclusion of assaults if a victim reported the crime to police but not campus officials.

University administrators also possess fear of the negative effect sexual assault reporting might have on their reputation, which represents a less institutionalized but still problematic incentive for these institutions to underreport (AAUP). Many administrators feel that bringing attention to this matter would hurt their institution’s educational mission and promote distrust toward their efforts to address campus violence. Money also plays a role, as these institutions fear the loss of donations and potential fines or legal settlements.

Cultural Challenges

In addition to the problems laid out above, cultural challenges persist on college campuses on a micro-scale, which compounds the issue of toxic masculinity on a societal level. Rape culture is perpetuated by Greek life in particular, in which fraternities (i.e. male dominated peer groups) reinforce misogynist beliefs through groupthink and rape-supportive attitudes (Jozkowski). Fraternity members are three times more likely to rape than their male counterparts who do not join fraternities. Sorority members, or women who are more likely to socialize with men in fraternities, are 74% more likely to be sexually assaulted than their non-Greek counterparts (Valenti).

Our North Star

We envision a future in which all genders have positive and fulfilling experiences within their educational institutions, free from sexual harassment and assault. To achieve this long-term goal, we will need to address the following components:

Occurrence accuracy: When reports of sexual assault or violence are made, improved accountability is essential. This can be accomplished by removing the legal loopholes that are currently in place; changing the incentives for schools to report accurate statistics rather than collectively underreport rates of sexual assault; and streamlining communication between university administrators, local and campus sexual violence centers, and police.
**Culture change:** Instead of contributing to a climate where schools are encouraged to share inaccurate statistics on rates of campus sexual assaults, we propose a cultural shift that incentivizes and prioritizes female students’ safety (who constitute the majority of sexual assault victims and also represent approximately half of educational institutions’ student populations) over universities’ fears of a ruined reputation. Creating this shift should lead to long-term changes such as safer college campuses for all students and a more realistic understanding of the prevalence and urgency of addressing campus sexual assault.

**Education:** In order to address the problem of sexual assault on college campuses, we must first create a universally understood definition. We propose a two-fold approach that 1) removes the existing confusion on whether kissing, groping, and attempted assault constitutes sexual assault; and 2) dismantles the “rape myths” and stereotypes that perpetuate false narratives surrounding sexual assault.

**Survivor support:** Providing accessible support services to victims of sexual assault is critical to prioritizing the safety of all students, and ensuring that educational institutions are positive, empowering, and supportive places to learn. Services can include counseling, support groups, safe spaces, legal protections, and trainings for staff, students, and administrators. These services should be easy to identify and access, sufficiently staffed, and include trauma-informed approaches and research-backed processes.

II. TRADITIONAL POLICY PROCESS

*A brief discussion on Title IX*

A discussion on the epidemic of sexual assault on college campuses is incomplete without addressing Title IX, which was enacted in 1972 to prohibit federally funded educational institutions from discriminating on the basis of sex. Since its inception in the 1970s, Title IX has supported universities to increase athletic and professional opportunities for women, and has since morphed into a “code” that dictates how campus communities must respond to sexual violence (Jones 1).

Reformers and advocates have shaped the policy debate regarding Title IX applications through involvement with the criminal justice system, private lawsuits, regulatory efforts, and public perception. Dissatisfied with the criminal and civil justice systems, today campus advocates and sexual assault survivors are advocating for increased accountability on college campuses. This community stands by the notion that universities must take a more comprehensive and standardized approach to respond to allegations and provide support for survivors of sexual violence (3).
In 2011, the Obama Administration issued the “Dear Colleague” letter to support this victim-centered philosophy and prompt reform on college campuses. Through the Department of Education, the Office of Civil Rights’ policy outlined protocols that institutions should follow to remain in compliance with Title IX (Triplett 487). While advocates in the survivor community considered this a step in the right direction, the letter also prompted more questions than answers for many institutions. An internal debate has ensued around the appropriate legal and moral balance between ensuring adequate due process for the accused, and protecting the rights of victims throughout the process (489).

In 2017 under the current administration, Education Secretary Betsy DeVos rescinded two sets of Obama-era guidelines on campus sexual assault. The most publicly controversial move involved swapping the “preponderance of evidence” standard (the lowest standard of proof) for a higher standard of “clear and convincing evidence” (Saul et al.). She also eliminated a requirement that investigations be completed with a 60-day timeframe. Critics of the policy changes have noted that this will prompt further confusion for educational institutions, helping to unravel the progress that many made after the Dear Colleague letter was issued. Survivors of sexual violence will be hurt the most as a result (Saul et al.).

Research on college sexual assault prevention

College sexual assault programs have been found largely ineffective at reducing sexual violence, primarily due to the fact that most interventions are “one-dimensional.” These programs are typically implemented in just one setting, and use a limited set of strategies to address individual attitudes and knowledge about sexual violence (De Gue et al. 356). Furthermore, “knowledge and attitudes” are assessed and addressed most frequently through prevention programming with college students. Research suggests that although these measures are related to reducing sexual assault, attitudes actually account for a small proportion of change in behavior surrounding sexual violence (347).

In addition, researchers have concluded that longer programs spanning multiple sessions tend to be more effective for audiences (347). Programs that consist of single-gender audiences are more effective as well, when they focus on attitudes, knowledge outcomes, and empathy relating to sexual violence (348). Finally, there is evidence that content extending beyond the individual level--including peer attitudes, social norms, and other organizational realities--determine the efficacy of sexual violence prevention interventions (356).

Example of Success

In 2015, Ohio’s “Changing Campus Culture Initiative” was enacted to support universities’ efforts to respond to and prevent sexual assault. Within this initiative, the Ohio Department of Education rated all colleges and universities within the state on five criteria: use
of data analysis; empowerment of students, faculty, and staff; effective communication
techniques; response planning; and survivor-focused resources (Cleveland State University).
Cleveland State University received a 100 percent score and was judged to have met all five
criteria in its sexual violence prevention efforts. This example of a successful sexual assault
prevention program demonstrates the extent to which multiple intervention points are critical for
achieving true change in this area.

**Affirmative Consent Policies**

The research is also mixed on affirmative consent policies that have proliferated the
policy landscape surrounding sexual assault in recent years. Affirmative consent is the process of
achieving agreement to engage in sexual activity through positive (“affirmative”) verbal and
nonverbal communication. The policy is meant to decrease common barriers in reporting sexual
assault, as college students have been found to display a sometimes limited ability to identify
sexual assault outside of “stereotypical” rape scenarios (LaBore 16).

Affirmative consent policies have created a clear definition and standard of consent, but it
is unclear the extent to which policy definitions are congruent with student communications of
consent (5). Further research is needed on how to best implement and train students on
affirmative consent policies on college campuses.

**III. THE PROCESS:**

Our process will utilize a **Collective Impact Framework** to engage with the social
innovation process, from identifying key stakeholders, to constructing appropriate metrics, to
scaling and long-term diffusion. Collective impact initiatives consist of five characteristics that
create the groundwork for longer term social change (Kania et al.). These characteristics include:
1) a common agenda; 2) shared measurement systems; 3) mutually reinforcing activities; 4)
continuous communication; and 5) a backbone support organization (Kania et al.).

We propose engaging with a **nonprofit organization** who will serve as the backbone
support organization during this social innovation process. The backbone support organization
serves the critical role of organizing disparate partners into a cohesive group with a
well-articulated vision; to do this, the organization must guide vision and strategy, build internal
and public will, coordinate activities and data collection, and mobilize policy (Turner et al.).
Within this nonprofit organization, **Students for Access to Fair Education (SAFE)** will
embody a collective impact initiative to support our North Star outlined above.

This NGO, which will catalyze the work of the SAFE Initiative, must be advocacy-based,
support women’s initiatives, and envision a future free from sexual violence. Beyond these
characteristics, the backbone support organization must have demonstrated success with
coalition building, utilize innovative approaches to achieving its goals, and represent leaders from various industries.

1. **Key stakeholders:** *Coalition building among key stakeholders is critical to our social innovation process. Different stakeholders--primary partners and supporting participants--will be engaged in various capacities as we move the project from pilot phase to scale.*

- **PARTNERS:**
  - *University administrators, faculty and board members* will be essential for gaining initial cooperation from specific universities and colleges. They will be the gatekeepers to student participation during the various stages of the social innovation process. They are also crucial for program execution.
  - *Police* and *local nonprofits*, such as community centers trained to respond to sexual assault allegations and trauma, are important for identifying campus-specific needs and developing improved communications to address the disconnects in sexual assault reporting.
  - *Domestic violence advocacy groups* will be critical for developing holistic strategies for survivors throughout the social innovation process. They will also assist in stigmatizing noncompliance should potential university partners decline requests for participation.

- **SUPPORTING PARTICIPANTS:**
  - *National fraternity and sorority umbrella organizations* will be needed for compliance, specifically during the needs assessment and implementation phases, given that SAFE plans to target the cultural challenges within male-dominated spaces and organizations.
  - *Student activists, survivors, and allies* are useful for providing insight into the scope of the university’s current shortcomings during the needs assessment phase and will be helpful in spreading awareness during the piloting stage.
  - *Parents*’ support of the program is helpful, though not essential, for gaining university cooperation. Furthermore, given the age of college students and the fact that they are still influenced by older adults in their lives, it will be easier to capitalize on their support to prompt long-term behavior change.

2. **Needs Assessment:** *After identifying the key stakeholders who will be involved in this social innovation process, the backbone support organization will organize a “Needs Assessment” on three target campuses to identify where the primary gaps exist in attitudes, knowledge, and behavior surrounding sexual violence.*
Our three-pronged strategy will emphasize garnering buy-in, support, and community involvement from the campus stakeholders. It will include the following:

**Targeted interviews:** These interviews will be conducted with key campus leaders and select student survivors. Questions to address and analyze in the aggregate include: 1) do student experiences and support services differ depending on the size of the institution? 2) do student experiences differ--primarily with the police, surrounding community, and through campus attitudes--depending on whether the campus is in a rural or urban community? 3) How do student experiences differ depending on the size and strength of Greek organizations? 4) How do student experiences differ in regards to the ratio of male to female students?

**Survey:** A mandatory survey will be distributed to senior students that must be completed before registering for spring semester classes. The survey will cover attitudes about sexual assault on a student’s particular campus. It will include multiple choice and free response questions surrounding the perceived prevalence, risk factors, backlash, and impact of sexual assault on the student’s particular campus, and include a free response question on defining sexual assault.

**Focus Groups:** Depending on the size of the student body, several Focus Groups will be arranged on each campus within the needs assessment phase. These groups will represent a random sampling of students, from all grade levels and all genders. They will also be facilitated by trained and licensed professionals not affiliated with the particular universities.

The SAFE backbone support organization will organize, compile, and analyze the data from these three Needs Assessment components into a comprehensive report that they will discuss in depth during a convening process with key partners.

3. **Design process:** After utilizing the findings of the three-pronged strategy described above to gain insights into existing shortcomings, SAFE will incorporate aspects of the collective impact framework and nine principles of prevention to develop strategies comprised of multiple intervention components and designed for use in multiple settings.

Successful prevention programs often include elements from the **Nine Principles of Prevention**, which include: 1) comprehensive services; 2) varied teaching methods; 3) sufficient dosage; 4) theory driven; 5) positive relationships; 6) appropriately timed; 7) socioculturally relevant; 8) outcome evaluation; and 9) well-trained staff (DeGue et al. 356 - 358). Our strategy, and final design outcome, incorporates these approaches.
throughout the different stages of the social innovation process. Note that the final design outcome will be informed by the findings from the Needs Assessment phase; general strategies are included below.

**Policy:** SAFE will work closely with key stakeholders, such as university employees, local nonprofits and police, to implement school-specific protocols for the purpose of addressing legal loopholes that exist in laws such as the Clery Act. Schools should ideally adopt policies that require counselors to report assaults to university officials (regardless of confidentiality protections), while respecting the victim’s desire to remain anonymous if stated. Policies should also consist of a mechanism to include sexual assaults that take place off campus and on school-sanctioned study abroad trips in their annual crime reporting. Finally, policies must create a consistent definition of sexual assault that includes acquaintance rape, forced kissing and/or fondling, and attempted or incomplete assaults. The eventual goal, after this process has been scaled and diffused, is for the federal government (regardless of political administration) to adopt these protocols as legal mandates, and thus incite nationwide compliance.

**Support:** This portion will rely heavily on the needs assessment phase in which issues and opportunities for support improvement are identified. Based on the current research, it is likely that this component will focus on improving university support services for victims, which may include instituting a 24-hour helpline or increasing health center staff trained in trauma-informed care approaches.

**Communication:** The communications campaigns will be comprehensive and address both male students and the general student body. The behavior change communications campaign targeting male students will focus on problematic beliefs and behaviors around consent, toxic masculinity, and sexual assault. This component may need to be further specialized depending on findings from the needs assessment. For instance, it might require customized messaging for fraternity members and leaders.

The other portion of the communications campaign will address the general student body and aim to create a consistent and agreed upon definition of sexual assault. The communication touchpoints will occur at appropriate and relevant times with the intention of creating maximum impact, and will be communicated consistently in order to have a lasting effect.

**Operations:** Solving and fixing the communication barriers between university administrators, police, and campus centers is critical in the quest to attain accurate statistics related to the occurrence of sexual assault on college campuses. A system must
be created to address the communication holes that are identified during the needs assessment, and may require hiring additional staff to serve as department liaisons or utilizing technology to create a streamlined reporting system.

**Partnerships:** SAFE will identify and partner with nonpartisan, socioculturally relevant organizations in order to share knowledge, gain access to their networks, and foster SAFE’s mission amongst local communities. On a national level, SAFE is interested in partnering with nonprofits focused on eradicating sexual violence, like the Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network (RAINN). Local partners would include university centers that offer sexual violence services and student groups devoted to female or LGBTQ empowerment and support.

4. **Pilots:** *During the pilot phase, we will focus on obtaining community buy-in and will utilize the lean experimentation model to identify effective (and ineffective) strategies for reducing sexual violence on specific college campuses. These strategies will later be scaled more widely.*

SAFE will manage the pilot phase and make use of lean experimentation by conducting small-scale experimentation, testing, and continuous research across targeted college campuses. SAFE will identify three participating universities and commit to providing the on-campus coalitions with monthly training and support calls, customized workshops to address their institution-specific needs, and experts trained to assist with improved reporting and compliance standards. Program testing will include feedback on 1) meeting attendance and scheduling 2) whether support being provided to partners is sufficient 3) effectiveness of institutional components.

In order to maximize the effectiveness of the communications campaigns, the messaging component will be deployed in a manner conducive to A/B testing. This will allow for further use of the lean experimentation model in which a minimum viable product is produced with the capability to modify and adapt before scaling more widely.

5. **Scaling and Diffusion strategy:** *After the pilot phase, our team will implement the strategy to scale, bringing more college campuses into the fold. Focusing on “impact” will allow us to bring our framework and mission to additional colleges.*

Creating a framework for success that is adaptable to specific contexts will help SAFE diffuse across college campuses. Our framework will emphasize robust peer networks, full-scale accountability and communication, and sufficient victim support. The
necessary strategies for diffusion of this process and model include outreach, custom needs-based solutions, access to expert and partner insights, and student support.

To communicate the efficacy of SAFE and garner additional participation, we will focus on impact in the form of storytelling and data collection. The storytelling portion will include insightful case studies and ambassadors from previous programs. Data collection allows us to include real data that substantiates our past successes.

**IV. METRICS:** Assessing metrics is a critical component to any social innovation process. Metrics will be used to assess impact and continually refine interventions to best address the needs of the student and local communities where we are working. We will test different metrics in the pilot phase and the scaling phase, which represents one way to iterate on our design.

During the pilot phase, we will be testing the response on college campuses to new organizing techniques for sexual assault - i.e. what resonates among the campus community and what doesn't? This will be done through smaller chapters that are made up of a coalition of partners on individual campuses.

Metrics during the **pilot phase** include:

- Adoption on campuses
  - This might be measured through survey techniques that address the extent to which individual campus community members are aware of and support the ideas generated and activities of the new groups formed.
- Partner satisfaction
  - This will include feedback addressed in the pilot section, which includes meeting attendance and scheduling, assessment of partner support, and effectiveness of particular institutional components.
- Communications campaign metrics
  - Digital: click-through-rates and open rates, campus reach, individual impressions
  - Traditional: engagement, awareness

During the **scaled implementation**, we will be examining the following metrics on a yearly basis:

- Number of reports made
  - The percentage increase that we wish to see will be based off the specific need identified on each campus.
- Satisfaction with survivor services
○ A survey provides an effective tool to measure this on campuses that have shown dissatisfaction with survivor services (we anticipate that this will be most, if not all, campuses).

● Reduction in communication pathway disconnects:
  ○ This refers to the communication channels between communities, law enforcement, and universities.

● Stronger peer networks among male students (see Learning Objectives section).
  ○ This can be measured using survey tools.

V. LEARNING OBJECTIVES:

We are interested in discovering the important leverage points to activate long-term culture change surrounding sexual assault on college campuses, and toxic masculinity that contributes to this phenomenon more broadly. Scholarship on this topic points to the necessity of strong peer networks for improving male attitudes towards women, and thus mitigating sexual violence (Swartout 9). Therefore, our learning objectives relate to the specifics of developing these positive relationships among males.

Learning Objective 1: Which mechanisms help support stronger male networks? How do we characterize a “strong/positive male network” in the first place?

Learning Objective 2: How do mandatory bystander intervention trainings within male social groups (Greek organizations, for example) impact attitudes around sexual assault, and incidences of sexual violence on college campuses?

Learning Objective 3: What effect do behavior change communications campaigns on college campuses--specifically aimed at targeting toxic masculinity, or appropriate social norms in general--have on reducing incidences of sexual assault?

VI. FINANCING PLAN

The backbone support NGO that will facilitate SAFE will be responsible for mobilizing funding. This NGO will proactively focus on building relationships with philanthropic foundations that are poised to engage in this work. We believe that a foundation is best suited to finance this project. Many foundations have strategic priorities in line with supporting women’s rights initiatives, or a defined interest in sexual assault prevention. Foundations are also often well suited to experimentation, learning, and innovation, and many focus on systemic social change (Chertok et al. 48).
An initial five-year grant will cover these phases of the project’s financing. The budget will include, but is not limited to, the following:

- Backbone support organization personnel costs for those who are staffed to SAFE
- Training support and materials for all primary partners
- Travel budget to support partner convenings
- Stipend for focus group facilitators
- Communications materials for all communications campaigns
- Legal consultation fees on policy-related matters
- Resources for national Greek life organizations to personnel for trainings, and bring other materials to campuses
- Victim support services
  - Could include additional university staff trained in survivor support, counselors, additional spaces/infrastructure for convening survivor support groups, medical care, and additional rape kit infrastructure.

VII. CONCLUSION

To achieve the future we envision in our North Star, there are beneficial conditions for diffusion that must be in place. This moment in time provides a unique opportunity to capitalize on the current political climate which has created dialogue and prompted action through movements such as #MeToo and Time’s Up. Furthermore, there is clear institutional failure at play that has exacerbated the problem of campus sexual assault and has created an urgency for resolve.

SAFE’s strategy includes elements of social movement building, community organizing and collective impact frameworks. By using techniques from a variety of models and frameworks, in addition to learning from successes and failures of the traditional policy process, we propose a new social innovation process that will encourage safe and equitable access to college education for all.

Sources:


