

## Using Brotherhood and Sisterhood for Violence Prevention

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With heightened scrutiny over sexual assault policies and procedures on college campuses, policies have been revised, campuses have been audited, and the media has taken a hard look at practices surrounding sexual assault in higher education. But, as administrators and student advocates, the question we may raise most often is: “How do we get students to care?” Bystander intervention and empowerment have quickly become best practices when teaching our students about preventing sexual assault. However, traditional application of this model may not excite students or encourage them to engage. Yet, when a student is asked if they would help someone in need, the answer is almost always a resounding “yes.” How do we reframe the conversation to inspire action in our communities? How do we leverage students’ presumed willingness and desire to help, along with their responsibility as a fraternity brother or sorority sister, to encourage them to intervene in potential sexual assault situations?

Instances which illustrate fraternity and sorority members’ lack of appropriate response and peer support in sexual assault situations are not uncommon. In Bannon, Brosi, and Foubert’s 2013 study of bystander efficacy and willingness to intervene in the fraternity/sorority community, men and women were found to have had nearly identical reported efficacy or know-how to intervene, but men reported a lower willingness to do so. Another study attributed bystander behavior among sorority women to the effects of peer pressure on younger members and “little empathy for the well-being of freshman sisters” (Wuthrich, 2009, p. 238). While working in a campus conduct office, as well as with the Dean of Students, I have experienced situations in which a woman’s friends defamed her character as part of their official testimony in a judicial case. I have even experienced situations in which the respondent in a sexual assault case recruited a woman’s sorority sisters to speak poorly of her choices and attitudes about alcohol or sex. As I read or encounter studies with similar data and stories of this nature, I pause. Where are the ideals of brotherhood and sisterhood in these scenarios? What happened to the concept of older members mentoring younger members? Did the spirit of leading by example disappear from our communities? Truly leading by example would include intervening in potential sexual assault situations, advocating for victims, and bringing awareness to the issue. It also includes not assaulting others, and not perpetuating a culture where sexual assault is okay or considered normal.

Many colleges and universities have recently revised their sexual assault and gender-based violence policies to be in compliance with the renewal of federal legislation and increased surveillance from the Department of Education’s Office of Civil Rights (New, 2014). The standard here focuses on policies explicitly defining consent, while revamping disciplinary procedures to reduce re-victimization and provide comprehensive resources and education to students. Many institutions have also adopted online training modules that each incoming student is required to complete prior to matriculation. Some institutions have also developed campaigns which aim to educate students about the concept of a culture of care for fellow students. To be successful, these types of initiatives cannot simply be about bystander trainings, meetings, talks, or events, but about creating a true sense of empathy and kindness toward classmates and others in the college community. It does not seem unreasonable to me to take these ideas and strategically apply them to our fraternity and sorority communities.

By highlighting brotherhood, sisterhood, and pride in our organizations, we can take these ideas and strengthen them through the shared values and bonds of our members. We cannot simply shove loads of information down incoming students' throats during an already exhausting orientation and expect that our job is done. Educational opportunities must be ongoing, and they must also be student-led. If initiatives are not student-led and staff-supported, buy-in will be low, and students will not tend to care about what we are trying to accomplish.

The Office of Health and Wellness Promotion was recently created at my institution to address a variety of issues, including creating "an environment that supports making healthy and responsible choices consistent with personal values" (Health & Wellness Promotion, 2014). Through a \$30,000 grant from the NCAA's CHOICES Program, the office has recently created an initiative that not only incorporates bystander intervention training, but also focuses on random acts of kindness and increasing school spirit on campus. These ideas can be directly applied to our fraternity and sorority communities. Indiana University's Culture of Care campaign has led to the development of Safe Sisters, an organization which "aids sororities in the creation of climates where freedom from sexual violence prevails," and Men Against Rape and Sexual Assault (MARS), "an all-male peer education group that consists of 300+ men who are part of a number of Interfraternity Council chapters" with the purpose of educating and engaging men about issues of sexual assault (Culture of Care Programs and Trainings, 2014). Initiatives and organizations like these can be introduced on nearly any college campus.

Ultimately, our fraternity men and sorority women care about brotherhood, sisterhood, and the safety of their peers. Colleges and universities must leverage this value and must learn to engage "in holistic education of Greek members. Simply providing harm reduction education separate or distinct from leadership programming, self-awareness, and new member education is a recipe for disaster" (Wuthrich, 2009). Discussions that encompass the full scope of what it means to be a bystander and mentor one another also must become a priority. We must start having open discussions with our students about what it means to be a brother or a sister, and ultimately, having the courage to truly care about one another, especially in terms of sexual assault and violence prevention. A community where care is a priority will allow safe spaces for these issues to be discussed, addressed, and tackled head-on by students who value each other as family.

## References

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