Beyond Bad Apples: Assessing the Fight Against Sexual Violence

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"If we have a problem with sexual assault, we will fix it. We have a zero tolerance for sexual assault within our community and any individual found to be responsible will be held accountable for their actions." Sound familiar? It should. This simple declaration has been made by many a student leader, institution news office, and inter/national headquarters staff. It is simple, concise, and sounds wonderful.

But is it true? Has our nationwide focus on Title IX and bystander intervention education yielded concrete results in challenging sexual assault on college campuses in general and fraternities/sororities in particular? On its face, that statement does not admit we have a problem which speaks volumes about how far we still have to go.

In the past three years, we have seen an unprecedented level of media attention regarding fraternities and sororities. We have seen chants of "No Means Yes, Yes Means Anal," email chains promoting sexual assault, alumni claiming "drunk women as the gravest threats to fraternities," a move to limit female access to fraternities in the evenings, private Facebook groups collecting pictures of people passed out in various stages of undress, and worse. It is not just sexual assault. This year alone, more than 100 chapters have been closed for hazing, racism, sexual assault, and other dangerous incidents (Otani & Diamond, 2015). As John Shertzer wrote in his blog, Fraternal Thoughts (2015), "What's inherently wrong with Greek life that it requires so much education and support for it to live?"

Chapter closures can be a positive indicator, however. They show there is a culture shift taking place. After decades of silence around sexual assault, the rise in reports can also be viewed as a positive indicator survivors feel a) they will be supported by their universities, and b) the chances for accountability have increased (Jones, Alexander, Wynn, Rossman, & Dunnick, 2009; Mengeling, Booth, Torner, & Sadler, 2014). But reporting is just one step in culture change. Fundamental culture change around sexual assault is inhibited by several crucial factors; The first, interventions primarily focused around individual, educational remediation that do not acknowledge social-ecological factors, the second, prevention models focused on harm reduction rather than culture shift, and the third, accountability driven in part by media attention rather than consistency.

Our current educational initiatives are embedded in a bystander framework which only works if participants buy into the concept that there is a problem to begin with (Gidycs, Orchowski, & Berkowitz, 2011). Fraternities and sororities can create social environments where victim blaming, sex stigmatization, and social perceptions trump moral development (Bannon, Brosi, & Foubert, 2013; Asel, Seifert, & Pascalla, 2009). These problems are compounded when teaching strategies involve shame, or aren't inclusive of different ethnicities, religions, gender identities, and socio-economic backgrounds.

In spite of the rising tide of news articles, we still argue sexual assault is perpetrated by a "few bad apples." By focusing on bad apples rather than bad systems, it displaces the responsibility for cultural accommodation of these behaviors. It ignores how our cultures that blame survivors

for assaults while normalizing sexual violence and entitlement undermine our bystander education from the moment students step on campus (Insight Report, 2015). It is a red-herring defense of our community in the face of media inquiry that influences arbitrary reaction over consistent prevention. If we want to use studies like the UNILOA instrument and the Gallup/Purdue survey on life outcomes to justify the positive outcomes of the fraternity/sorority environment, then we must also apply a critical lens to our environment when it comes to sexual assault.

One way to move towards an evidence based, comprehensive prevention model is to engage in a critical environmental assessment. Critical environmental assessment is based upon the social-ecological model (SEM) utilized by public health initiatives worldwide. SEM based analysis evaluates violence in the context of the interactions between the individual, their social circles, the communities with which these social circles exist, and the broader societal expectations that influence implicitly or explicitly our own norms (World Health Organization, 2002). Both defenders and detractors of fraternities and sororities admit no organization operates in a vacuum. SEM based critical environmental analysis ignores superficial responses and attempts to understand the holistic environment in which individual and organizational behaviors occur.

Critical environmental assessment helps us move beyond the "bad apple" theory pervasive in our current conversation. Sexual assault, like hazing and racism, is a crime of power (Lisak & Miller, 2002). Research suggests most sexual assaults are acts of a small number of perpetrators who thrive in cultures that include a callous attitude towards sex & violence, lack of accountability, low levels of empathy towards others, high levels of entitlement and opportunities to exert control or coercion over others (Lisak & Miller, 2002; McWhorter, Stander, Merril, Thomsen, & Milner, 2009). According to David Lisak in his research on "undetected rapists," fraternities, athletic teams, police, and military organizations are all highly conducive to perpetrators. We see the impact of these climates, especially in fraternity and sorority life, in the higher victimization rates against affiliated women than general student populations (Mohler-Kuo, Dowdall, Koss, & Weschsler, 2004). We already see a disturbing number of people report engaging in coercive sexual behavior but do not describe it as rape (Edwards, Bradshaw, Hinsz, 2014).

Like alcohol, many students' knowledge and attitudes around sex are heavily influenced by their peers (Whitaker & Miller, 2000; Ward, 2002). This can be both positive and negative since we know fraternities and sororities can be insular organizations swayed easily by tradition, social norms, and community standards (Carol, 2009). When students see the community call for women to be prevented from going to parties or efforts to restrain investigations, it only gives rise to misconceptions about sexual assault. Such statements assign blame to women for their sexuality while rejecting the possibility men might not want sex in the first place. Our current fear of false reports, sexual entrapment, and the social norms around gendered expectations for sex creates a fear of female sexual agency, while ignoring male responsibility for sexual aggression and fraternity social host duties. Our responses are often built upon privileged assumptions that blind us to the problems faced by people of color as well as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans* students on college campuses (Walter, Chen, & Breiding, 2013; INCITE!, 2009). Our sexual education, at all ages, leaves men at the mercy of a sexual education derived

primarily from gossip, and the rise of violent pornography has a positive correlation with sexual aggression (Malamuth, Addison, & Koss, 2000). For women, it is not much better.

It is not all bad though. There is positive momentum to end sexual violence. Student activists have made tremendous gains in visibility around the issue sexual assault. Students of all genders and sexual orientations have made hiding sexual assault much more difficult. We are seeing more perpetrators being held accountable and the rise of survivor services available nationwide. This is leading to an increase in reporting which will lead to greater community responses. We are also seeing a significant rise in peer norming campaigns from inter/national organizations. The collaboration between some fraternities, sororities, and universities with the "It's On Us" campaign has begun to change the normative discourse within chapters. Students have challenged institutions of higher education to create more effective investigation and accountability mechanisms as well as survivor support services. Now we need to move beyond silo'd efforts to work together at the chapter, campus, and headquarters level to act together to shape cultural norms to promote a healthy respect for sex, foster moral growth and empathy, and deconstruct power dynamics that foster degradation of all peoples. We need to include not just the North American Interfraternity Council and National Panhellenic Conference but members from all umbrella organizations. We need to begin talking about sex and relationships as early as possible. If the first time a student hears about consent is college, then we have already failed. Most importantly, we need to look at sexual assault not just as a fraternity and sorority issue, but a community problem with community solutions.

But we cannot continue to collectivize our successes and privatize our failures. If we are to make progress on ending sexual assault, we need to recognize that the elements of our environment that help foster tremendous successes can also give rise to tremendous failure. We need to own that and we need to take action on that.

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