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# The Special Needs of Women on College Campuses

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Running Head: Special Needs of Women

The Special Needs of Women on College Campuses

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### Abstract

The authors embarked on a journey to understand the special needs of women college students. They discovered two major themes that were explored in greater depth in an attempt to explain why these themes were more specific to college women than other populations. Although these needs may be extrapolated to other populations of college students they were of particular concern to the female college student population. The authors began by selecting a non-scientific restricted pool of female college students that spanned first-year, second-year and junior or third-year students. This student sample was interviewed to discover their concerns or perceptions about violence and sexual discrimination against women on college campuses. The interview questions and responses were abbreviated and included, followed by a discussion of each theme.

The interview subjects stated that violence was not a major concern however; they did offer suggestions to improve safety. This led the authors to conclude that although they did not explicitly state violence as a concern it remains an implicit concern. The second theme explored was discrimination based on gender. The interviewed sample had a varied response to having been the victim of gender discrimination. Of greater concern was the perception of what constituted gender harassment, what procedures and processes were in place and available to respond to these occurrences and how to report an incident.

## Introduction

Female college students have special needs regardless of their racial, cultural or socioeconomic backgrounds that must be met in order for them to flourish academically and personally. The college student population, as a whole, would share some of the female college students needs these needs are particularly concerning for female students.

The authors embarked on a journey to understand the specific concerns of female college students. A non-scientific restricted pool of students were chosen and interviewed. The pool consisted of three female college students who were in various stages of degree completion at a medium sized public university located in south central Kentucky. The pool was comprised of one first-year student, one second-year student and one junior or third year student. The students were asked specific open-ended questions covering three main themes the authors identified as being of particular concern to female college students. The themes were campus safety, sexual harassment or sexual discrimination and relationship changes.

The authors will cover each theme in turn beginning with the interview questions and responses relating to that theme. For brevities sake the interview answers were abbreviated. Once the interview questions and responses have been introduced a discussion of that particular theme will follow.

### *Campus Safety Interview*

Interviewer: "Do you feel safe at the college you are attending? Please explain why or why not."

First-year: "Yes, I feel safe on my campus because our campus does everything they can to keep students safe."

Second-year: "Yes, the campus has the emergency button all around campus as you walk and usually everything is well lit."

Junior: "Yes, I have never felt threatened by anyone on campus. I also don't usually walk alone at night."

Interviewer: "What improvements would you make in order to make a college campus safer?"

First-year: "Metal detectors"

Second-year: "More lights around campus would be a good improvement to make it safer."

Junior: "More lights across campus because some areas can be pretty dark at night. Police officers patrolling campus or stationary in problem areas at problem times."

Interviewer: "As a woman on campus, do you ever feel nervous walking by yourself? If so, what makes you feel nervous?"

First-year: "I feel nervous at night because there are certain shady people on campus."

Second-year: "Yes, I feel nervous walking by myself at night but not because I don't think the campus is safe, it's because of the stories that I hear from other women or other things that have happened at different colleges."

Junior: "Not really."

Interviewer: "Did the crime rate at your college influence your choice to attend there?"

First-year: "Honestly, I didn't even think about crime at all when I applied here."

Second-year: "No, I didn't even check the crime rate at the college."

Junior: "No."

Interviewer: "If there were a series of serious crimes at your college, would you consider transferring to a different school?"

First-year: "Of course."

Second-year: "Probably, at that point I would feel unsafe."

Junior: "[t would] depend on the crimes and who they affect. If it was targeting a certain group of people, I'd be more tempted to consider transferring, but if they were more random and had no connection I wouldn't."

### *Campus Safety Discussion*

The authors discussed the findings of the non-scientific pool results and agreed that safety and violence against women could not be confined to a college campus but could occur at anytime and anyplace. Since female students are not restricted in their personal interactions to the college campus but have exchanges and experiences with the larger community. Using the premise that whenever two or more persons interact there is always the possibility of conflict, misunderstanding or misinterpretation the authors approached both the larger

topic of violence against women as a whole and to violence against women on college campuses.

Specific statistics concerning violence against women have not been published separately by the United States Department of Justice but have been included in the information contained in the statistical analysis of *intimate partner violence in the U.S.* (Catalano, 2003). In this study intimate partners were defined as current and prior boyfriends, girlfriends and spouses. In this data the rate of violence was found to be 2.3 per 1,000 population members in 2003. The study suggests that violence against women has been steadily declining since 1993 when the rate of violence was 5.8 per 1,000 population members (Catalano, 2003). This does not mean that violence against women has reached a level where, as a society, we no longer need to be concerned about the causes and effects of violence against women but the data indicates that violence in intimate relationships, as a whole, have been declining (Catalano, 2003). This violence, at 2.3 per 1,000 population members, if it were to remain stable through July 2008, would result in 3.5 Million women being victims of violence from an intimate partner (CIA, 2008). The most prevalent type of intimate partner violence has been termed dating violence by the National Center for Victims of Crime. Despite the overall decline in violence, the analysis discovered that approximately 96% of intimate violence was directed against women and women were almost twice as likely to be a victim of homicide than men (Catalano, 2003).

In the *Campus Security Report 2007* issued by Western Kentucky University Police Department indicates a steady rate of crimes involving violence

over the years 2004 through 2006 (WKU Police Department, 2007). This report does not differentiate violence against women versus men but merely reports an overall occurrence of violence. The report does separate the college community into smaller areas, such as On Campus, South Campus and The Center, and reports them separately. It does not indicate if On Campus includes all properties owned by WKU or if this only encompasses what would be considered the main campus. Using this report and presuming that On Campus does not include all properties owned by WKU it is interesting to note that in 2004 there were only 13 person-to-person violent incidents reported. In 2005 this number rose to 21 but in 2006 it declined to 17. Person-to-person violence includes violence that requires a minimum of two persons to be present; one victim and one perpetrator. This indicates a relatively stable trend (WKU Police Department, 2007).

There seems to be some disconnect between what is stated in the WKU report and the anecdotal evidence relayed from female students encountered on the WKU campus. This disconnect could be from students not reporting incidents to the authorities, the manner in which the campus police categorize the complaints or a combination of the two. No university wants to be known as the most violent or the campus where a student is most likely to be victimized. Although we would hope that our campus police would be more interested in performing their duties in a transparent fashion and meeting the needs of the student population, it becomes confusing when reviewing the U.S. Department of Education. The *Campus Security Report 2007* does not agree with data listed by



the U.S. Department of Education for Western Kentucky University during the same time period, which raises questions about the manner in which the information is maintained and reported.

Recently anecdotal evidence suggests that a campus groper exists, who engages in touching women in a sexual manner. The groper is nocturnal and seeks female victims walking on campus who seem to be temporarily functionally impaired. It has been discussed that this person approaches the victim and begins to touch them in inappropriate places. All of this is done without the victim's permission. In the previous paragraph it was opined that there seemed to be some disconnect between reported incidents and categorization of those incidents. In a case such as this it could easily be categorized as a simple assault instead of a sexual assault, which is not reported separately or even, if one were to take a cynical approach, it could be categorized under a heading that is not reported to the U.S. Department of Education.

Before we begin to look about in a paranoid manner, it would be prudent to spend a little time thinking about some of the situations that can occur and lead to violence against women. In the publication *Campus Dating Violence Fact sheet*, 77% of men and 55% of women report taking drugs, including alcohol, prior to an incident of dating violence (Office on Violence Against Women, 2002). The National Center for Victims of Crime defines dating violence as controlling, abusive, and aggressive behavior in a romantic relationship. It occurs in both heterosexual and homosexual relationships and can include verbal, emotional, physical, or sexual abuse, or a combination of these (Wasserman, 2004).

The inference could be made that a party or dance club would be a prime area for the undercurrent of emotion to begin to simmer. Since alcohol in small amounts, leading to a blood alcohol level of less than 12%, result in what we might term a buzz. A person under the influence of the buzz would have lowered inhibitions, increased self-confidence but also suffer from a shortened attention span, have some coordination problems and exhibit diminished judgment (Boggan, 2003). A person who enters the buzzed state and exhibits decreased inhibitions and elevated self confidence might be considered the life of the party; someone who draws attention to themselves leading others to focus on their activities. A study by Giancola et al in 2002, demonstrated that the consumption of alcohol, in low amounts, increased male aggression but did not seem to effect women. This may account, in some instances, for the phenomena of dating violence. As males become less inhibited and more aggressive they will start to demonstrate more basal instinctual reactions. A primary instinctual response would be to pass their genes to the next generation e.g. mate. Approximately 60% of dating violence, specifically acquaintance rape, occurs on college campuses. The authors do not mean to suggest that all men are victimizers but it is interesting to note that 51% of college males admitted to one or more sexual assaults during their college experience (Office of Violence Against Women, 2002).

Human beings exist as a tribal society and prefer the company, as a whole, of groups with similar behavior, lifestyle and moral attitudes. This may also account for some instances of elevated dating aggression. Using the

premise that if the victim did not want to participate they would not be with the group. Although this train of thought does not hold up to scrutiny, it may seem perfectly reasonable when coupled with alcohol consumption, while the person is exhibiting diminished judgment and increased aggressiveness.

Males are not the only ones to blame in these situations. In the study *Women and Violence on Campus*, as reported by Wasserman, female students considered at least one type of violence as acceptable in a dating relationship more than 70% of the time. These students viewed physical violence as acceptable and a larger percentage could relate their own stories of when physical violence was used in their relationship and thought it was acceptable. A shocking discovery was revealed when researchers, looking specifically at campus sexual assault, found that;

“...some perpetrators admit they have committed acts that meet the legal definition of rape, although most do not label it as such, and other students report they would commit rape, in some circumstances, if they believed they could get away with it. At the same time, female rape victims frequently take responsibility for what happened to them, and the majority do not define their experience of rape as a crime, even when the men who raped them do” (Wasserman, 2004).

This may seem like a remote limb from the stated topic of women's safety but I believe it illustrates the point that violence against women is under reported.

Victims are more likely to tell a friend than the authorities of an encounter that resulted in sexual violence. In that statement lays the fundamental crux of the issue. Women are willing to readily accept violence that originates from someone they know; a current or previous love interest or even an acquaintance. This acceptance, whether by active means or passive acquiescence to the situation transforms the victim into the role of an enabler. It allows the perpetrator to continue on their chosen course believing that they have done no wrong or have gotten away with it.

Now that we have discussed the major safety issue regarding female college students, it is time to examine what steps Western Kentucky University has put in place to make the campus a safe place for all students to reach their full potential.

As with any community, the residents of that community are the first line of defense with regard to safety. Residents would include students and employees, whether faculty or staff. It is the responsibility of all citizens to report illegal activity they observe to the proper authority. They should also report any activity that seems unusual or suspicious. As a high school student, the author was part of a research effort to discover shopping mall parking lot security and the level of citizen participation. During the research a team of two students were to walk through a mall parking lot and look in the windows of the vehicle, being careful to never touch any vehicle, and visually determine if the automobile was locked or unlocked, whether the vehicle had valuables in plain sight and a simple description of the vehicle. The research was conducted during the summer

break. The team the author participated on examined a local shopping mall. We had free reign for approximately three hours before people started to congregate and point towards us; no citizen approached us. Approximately 30 minutes after the citizens began to congregate a security vehicle approached and asked what we were doing. We explained our project and were promptly ordered to leave the premises; this was fine because we had finished our project. The gist of this story is to illustrate that we conspicuously walked from one car to the next peering into the windows for about three and a half hours before we were even approached about our behavior. The research demonstrated that people do not want to be involved in issues unless they are specifically challenge by them. This attitude is dangerous. Citizens must stand up and defend, not only their rights but the rights of others. To paraphrase the Bible, are we our brothers' keeper?" Yes, we are our brothers' keeper.

According to the Campus Security Report 2007 issued by Western Kentucky University's police department, the university has policies covering what areas a person who is not enrolled at the university may have access to. The first line of defense is the resident hall director. The resident hall director is charged with verifying the identity and authorizing the admittance of guests to their particular residence hall (Western Kentucky University, 2007).

The campus has 68 emergency telephones located across the university. These phones, when activated by pushing a red button, automatically connect the campus police and a blue flashing light is set in motion. The police are able to determine the exact location of the phone. By knowing the exact location of

the emergency phone it allows a quick response to the site. The flashing blue light is also a deterrent on two fronts. The first front is that it draws attention to the site and second we have been conditioned to associate flashing blue lights with the police, so even though they have not arrived yet subconsciously they are already there.

Students who want to learn about police operations and practices, with the objective of entering law enforcement, can become Explorers. Explorer Post 825 is located at the University and is affiliated with the campus police. These students offer escorts from dusk until dawn. A call was placed to the campus police to determine if the explorer escorts were required to report inebriated students to the police or if they would just escort them to their residence hall. The author spoke with a dispatcher who was unable to provide an answer and a message was then left on an answering machine for an officer, who would return the call.

Another option available to female students only, is the Rape Aggression Defense (R.A.D.) course. The training teaches basic defense techniques and is not martial arts. The aim of the training is to provide a woman with the basic skills needed to try to dissuade an attacker. Once a person has graduated from R.A.D. training they are eligible for free re-training at any R.A.D. site for life.

#### *Sexual Harassment / Sexual Discrimination Interview*

Interviewer: "Have you ever experienced any type of sexual harassment or discrimination while attending college?"

First-year: "Yes I have, I've been called various improper names."

Second-year:"No."

Junior: "No, I feel like I've always been treated the same as the boys that I walk with or have class with."

Interviewer: "Do you know what policies are in place that helps you deal with sexual harassment or discrimination? If so, name a few."

First-year: "No, I do not know."

Second-year:"I just know that sexual harassment or discrimination needs to be reported to the police or someone who can help."

Junior: "I don't know of any."

Interviewer: "How would you report sexual harassment or discrimination or would you report it at all?"

First-year: "I would most likely go to the police if it got really bad and file a claim. Otherwise, I wouldn't worry about it because people who say things don't matter to me."

Second-year:"It depends on how severe the sexual harassment or discrimination was before I would report it. However, if it was happening to someone else I would report it to the police."

Junior: "I would report it to someone with authority on the job and to an advisor or a professor I trusted on campus."

Interviewer: What do you think would help eliminate sexual harassment or discrimination on college campuses?

First-year: "Single-gendered classes."

Second-year: "I don't think there is anything that can be done to eliminate sexual harassment or discrimination, it will always exist."

Junior: "I think it would improve if people actually reported it."

Interviewer: What changes would you make to sexual harassment or discrimination policies on your campus?

First-year: "The policies would be very strictly enforced and there would be punishment."

Second-year: "I think when reports are filed on sexual harassment or discrimination their needs to be better consequences."

Junior: "No answer."

### *Sexual Harassment / Sexual Discrimination Discussion*

What are some things that come to mind when college is brought up in a conversation? Studying, athletics, Greek life, food, and even partying may all be mentioned as part of the discussion, but another topic that is both serious and pervasive on the college campus always seems to lack any proper mention: Sexual harassment. The importance of this subject matter, and its frequency of occurrence, becomes even more of an issue when its detrimental affects are examined against the female student body at any postsecondary institution. While other forms of discrimination are also prevalent and severe in their own right, there is no doubt that incidents involving discrimination of a sexual nature represents a disproportionately large number of occurrences compared to other



forms of discrimination/harassment at a university setting (Cantu-Weber, 1999, p. 40).

As a matter of fact, it has been recently documented that as many as two-thirds of students currently attending a postsecondary institution have experienced some form of sexual harassment (Hill & Silva, 2005, p. 14). With so many sexual harassment related occurrences erupting all over universities across the nation, one would think that various policies and preventative measures have already been developed and implemented. What is surprising is the fact that while this may be the case at some campuses; the vast majority of other universities are not adequately prepared to handle such matters. Such deficiencies in addressing sexual harassment related violations on the college campus generates a need for female college students to be able to find outlets and a means to be able to effectively deal with acts of sexual harassment and discrimination.

So what is sexual harassment? Sexual harassment is defined as any form of sexual discrimination that violates Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 ("Facts about," 2002) according to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, and while this definition sounds plain and simple enough to grasp, the actual meaning and subtleties involved in its definition turn out to be far more complex upon closer examination. This turns out to be especially true when the context involving an occurrence of discrimination shifts from a setting that is primarily work oriented to a setting that is primarily academically oriented. That being said, "in the educational context, sexual harassment is unwelcome

behavior of a sexual nature that interferes with a student's ability to learn, study, work or participate in school activities" ("Sexual Harassment," 2008, Introduction, ¶ 1). Given the complexity of defining sexual harassment in a college setting, an active effort needs to be invested into making female students aware of its prevalence and consequences.

Educating female students on campus about the adverse effects associated with sexual harassment can go a long way in bringing about a holistic awareness to the entire campus community. Only when the severity of consequences that can develop due to harassment is communicated effectively, can previous misconceptions that have been applied to this subject be dispelled. Current societal attitudes play a huge role in downplaying the significance of sexual discrimination; likewise, this notion is only reinforced at the postsecondary level by students who attribute the discriminatory treatment directed towards their peers as innocent "flirting" or "playing around." University wide educational initiatives targeted towards organizations that typically recruit large numbers of female members such as sororities, female intramural sports clubs, honor societies, and other such groups could assist women on campus to be more conscious about how they are treated by their male counterparts. Education and awareness efforts should also target freshman courses that typically contain a large number of female students, this way, awareness to sexual harassment is developed early on, which would help bring about a zero tolerance attitude towards such acts as students mature. Laying the groundwork for awareness will

also aid an institution in fine-tuning any existing sexual harassment policies and its procedures.

With the female student body, and the entire campus community, being better educated and mindful of sexual harassment incidents, it is only logical that they would be more likely to observe and report any future occurrences of this nature. Unfortunately, one of the major shortcomings for many universities lies in the weakness of their sexual harassment policy when it comes to addressing specific factors related to reporting and processing. More specifically, protection offered to the accuser(s) and accusee(s) during the investigation/complaint process is not adequately addressed; established timetables for filing complaints and conducting investigations are usually vague or missing; and confidentiality and impartiality are also typically lacking in most policies ("Resolving Harassment," 2005, p. 5). These inadequacies existing within sexual harassment policies create an obvious loophole for an aggressor to exploit in his/her favor; on the other hand, these same issues prevent the victim from making legitimate claims against any plausible acts of discrimination they have had to endure.

Due to the problems just discussed, postsecondary institutions need to make a concerted effort to update and revise their existing policy, and during the revision process, all of the criteria listed above should be scrutinized extensively. The revision and review process should also enlist involvement from students, faculty, and staff instead of just relying only on administrative personnel for input. Contributions from multiple viewpoints would account for a comprehensive, fair, and balanced policy that would offer proper protection, timeliness processing,

and impartiality to all parties involved in any future potential incidents of sexual harassment. Another lacking component in many policies involves designating a specific office or person for a victim to report to regarding potential dealings with discrimination (Hill & Silva, 2005, p. 34). When female students are taken into account, serious representational consideration should be given to advisors, club leaders, organization officers, and other individuals that traditionally have a lot of experience in dealing with female populations. Female resident halls and their directors would also serve as a great source of representation and point of contact for anyone who may require assistance when attempting to make a harassment related report.

Education, awareness, and policy revision can only go so far in aiding female students deal with a college atmosphere that is wrought with sexual discrimination. To further engage the female student population, as well as the entire campus community, programs and interventions must be developed to reinforce the awareness generated by early efforts to educate the student body. Workshops that emphasize conduct training between male and female students should be directed at incoming freshman, and once again, female resident halls would serve as key staging areas for these types of projects. Living and learning communities, which have become an increasingly popular program on the college campus, could be customized to incorporate sexual harassment guidance ("2002 Results," 2002, p. 22), and doing this would also help prevent an institution from investing extra time and resources into developing entirely new undertakings. Even simple initiatives that are only temporary, such as

setting up "pledge" stations on campus to elicit student support against sexual harassment or rallies held at university sanctioned events that are aimed at delivering information regarding discrimination, could result in gradual improved behavioral changes for an institution's student body.

Outlets that allow female students cope with incidents of harassment that have already affected them will also need to be created after preventative measures have already been established. Starting up a university hotline that allows female students to report harassment anonymously can greatly reduce the problem of tracking unreported occurrences. A sexual harassment hotline can also serve as a great tool in mitigating initial problems before they become too unmanageable (Marquet, 1998, p. 1). Besides hotlines, support groups are another outlet that can bring about healing and resolution, which can also act as a medium in promoting further awareness and education regarding sexual discrimination. Members can be instructed on how to access any avenues of available assistance at their institution during gatherings, and policy interpretations regarding protection or impartiality can also be clarified during the reporting and/or investigation process. State statutes and laws pertaining to sexual discrimination should also be addressed at such meetings, and increasing student comprehension of this information could very well lead to a reduction in reckless litigation caused by a lack of law understanding.

There are a variety of ways to combat the growing problem of sexual harassment directed towards women in the postsecondary setting, but awareness and education are two crucial steps that are often overlooked, which

could prevent this problem from escalating. Female resident halls and campus organizations that typically recruit mostly women are great areas to direct any type of education or awareness initiative, but great importance must also be directed at policy revision and program implementation. Having addressed these two major aspects, it would then be logical to implement reactionary protocols. Outlets such as women's support groups could provide them with invaluable guidance and information, and this alone can vastly reduce the tolerance for discrimination towards women on campus. Although it may take a concerted effort by the entire institution to carry out this comprehensive plan of action, the potential financial, social, and academic benefits gained from such actions would easily justify any time, personnel, and/or resources invested towards this goal.

#### *Conclusion*

The authors discovered that although violence against women was not an explicit concern of the sample it remained an implicit concern. The subjects stated that they felt safe and the university was fulfilling its responsibility to keep them safe. They did voice suggestions to enhance the feeling of security which led the authors to conclude that they had an implicit concern that could be generalized across multiple populations and might not be specific to the female college student population.

The authors identified gender or sexual discrimination as an area of concern because of the latitude in understanding, not only of what gender discrimination is but also how and to whom it should be reported. One subject identified gender discrimination being "...called various improper names..", and

that it should be reported"...to the police...", where she could "...file a claim..."

None of the subjects could identify a policy or procedure specific to the university but when asked what changes should be made to these policies, the first-year and second-year subjects reported that the policies should be enforced more strictly. Leading the authors to conclude that although the subjects had no idea what the policies and procedures were, and thus no idea as to whether they are being enforced or not, they felt that this was an important area not necessarily for themselves but to other women college students.

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