



Men: n Campus

When Yes Means No

Thought Brief

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"As a survivor of sexual assault, I connect with victims on their loss of power, psychological devastation, and emotional trauma. As a man, I connect with the lack of understanding and delay in moral development some men experience."

As a student affairs administrator, I have encountered many challenges in my short time in the profession. One issue that continually presses me is the large number of sexual assaults on campuses. The most alarming aspect is the large number of males that do not understand the law, the influence of alcohol, and consequences of uninformed decisions. Let me provide an example.

A Graduate Assistant approached me with the following dilemma. One of his friends, Jim, had been charged with sexual assault on campus and faced possible suspension from the University. He wanted to know the best manner to support his friend. I asked him to share the situation.

Jim was a first year student who had been on campus for about two months. He went to a party over the weekend and decided to drink for the first time. He lost track of his tolerance levels and became slightly intoxicated. While at the party, Jim met a young woman who showed interest in him.

Jim had very little experience with women. In fact, the thought of speaking to them made him nervous. However, as they began talking, he became more comfortable. The evening seemed to be going very well. The two of them went back to her room. One thing led to another and the two had sexual intercourse.

Jim was overwhelmed by the experience for several reasons. Primary among them was his first sexual encounter. Although losing his virginity made him slightly uncomfortable, he felt that he made the right choice. He planned to get in touch with the woman again and pursue a relationship.

However a few days later, Jim received a letter from the University Discipline Office notifying him of pending charges. The woman felt she had nonconsensual sex with Jim and filed rape charges against him.

He was confused. He thought she cared for him. Jim was very confident in his case because the woman had verbally agreed to be intimate with him. Unfortunately, the woman was intoxicated at the time of the encounter and the University had a strict no consent while intoxicated policy. Subsequently, Jim was suspended from the University.

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This story is true and I have been unable to forget it. As a survivor of sexual assault, I connect with victims on their loss of power, psychological devastation, and emotional trauma. As a man, I connect with the lack of understanding and delay in moral development some men experience. As a member of the student affairs profession, I believe we have a responsibility to educate male students on our policies before they make life altering decisions.

Research has shown that while 25% of women in college report being assaulted during college, only 8% of men feel they are responsible for improper actions, (Caron & Brossoit, 1992). This deeply concerns me. Is it possible that college men understand sexual assault, but lack clarification on specific laws and University Policies? Perhaps we should be examining male responsibility issues rather than rigid policies.

Resoundingly, I believe that college men understand the physical act of sexual assault but lack the social and legal understanding of the crime. Over the last few years, I have had informal conversations with upper class males regarding decision making and alcohol. Not surprisingly, most men I have spoken with believe intimacy is justified while intoxicated as long as consent is given. When I explain that intoxication can prevent consent, most of them are puzzled. When I explore the notion that intoxication is relative to the individual, nearly all have questions. Most of their questions involve the following: What are the limits on consent? When does "yes" actually mean "no"? Who has the answers to my specific questions?

I appreciate programs that assist men in understanding the trauma of rape and sexual assault (Foubert & Marriot, 1996), but we fail to address an understanding of decision making. Once more, a majority of our attention is paid to members of the Greek system because they pose a higher risk (Sanders, 1990). I understand the fear of groupthink, but have we forgotten about the average male student?

We must continue a variety of educational programming for college men as it relates to sexual assault and rape. However, we must include an additional dimension that examines decision making and responsibility. Many colleges and universities have policies related to sexual assault and rape. Some of these policies include clear consent and ability to perform clauses which first year male students may not fully understand. We must break down these policies to their simplest forms. If we fail to do so, many college males may unknowingly ruin their college careers.

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