

## Uncomfortable Truths About Rape on College Campuses

Last weekend was pretty cool, because my alma mater was the subject of a front-page story in the New York Times. Unfortunately, they got there because they utterly crapped the bed at handling a sexual assault case. Hi, I'm JF Sargent, and this is my article about post-secondary rape.

The frustrating part for me, as a Hobart and William Smith grad (technically just a Hobart grad, because it's actually two schools that share faculty, campus, dorms, and an administration), is that it's not that surprising. It was well-known for my entire four years that the campus was what I should probably call "a less than safe space for women" but will instead call "kinda sorta rapey." At the time, I genuinely thought it was because HWS was just a particularly terrible place (although I always really admired my professors), but now that I have some distance from there, I've realized that I was just a dumbass kid with no perspective: This is actually a national problem. It's happening in colleges across the country, because apparently no one can figure out how to deal with this. And I think I know some reasons why. First of all ...

### Doing the Right Thing Will Hurt the Colleges

With colleges around the country blowing up with sexual assault reports, it seems pretty clear that rape is worse than it's ever been. So what the hell is the problem? Are kids these days just total assholes, especially if they attended college with me?

Well, no, because rape reports going up is actually a good thing. Feel free to quote me on that.

The reason an increase in rape reports is a sign that things are getting better is because it's actually getting reported. Sexual assault is one of the most underreported crimes in the world, with only 40 percent of cases ever going beyond private conversation, and 1 in 5 women have been sexually assaulted -- a number that's always seemed a little lower than what's real to me, frankly, but that's just speaking from anecdotal evidence. So as these reports go up, they're actually trending toward reflecting the actual amount of sexual assaults that happen. It's roughly analogous to realizing your home has cockroaches: It's a painful shock, but at least you now know to buy some bug poison.

Still, you're gonna be a lot more careful where you step once you know there are roaches running around, which is probably why colleges with higher reports of rape see a drop in enrollment, despite the fact that they may not actually be the worst places to be.

But from the administration's perspective, making it easier to report rape basically invites controversy, since stories that might otherwise have blown over are suddenly major stories. That may make college administrators sound like heartless bastards, but in their defense, it's really easy to not feel guilty about things you don't even know are happening. And besides, I don't point out how evil college administrators are until this next point ...

## College Administrators Are Experts at Shutting Down Activism

Colleges have a reputation for being a hotbed of political activism. You have a boatload of people away from their homes for the first time, being exposed to incredible ideas with an outrageous amount of freedom and more energy than they'll ever have again in their lives, so it's natural that they're going to want to stir things up. And historically, this has been pretty good: Activism on college campuses has played a key role in some pretty important parts of our nation's history. But from an administrator's point of view, it's always been a pain in the ass. Protesting comes with frantic emotions and injuries. On top of that, if we're being honest, college students aren't always particularly discerning as to what they get fired up about.

A week after the *New York Times* story ran, I contacted some current students to ask them how the campus had responded. What they told me sounded pretty optimistic: Coalitions are being created! Meetings are scheduled with the president of the college and the director of student affairs! Student government is working closely with the administration, and they've never been more receptive. There's been an "outpouring of empathy, love, and support," as well as the assurance that change is imminent. It all sounded great, and really, really familiar, because all that same crap had been happening when I graduated in 2010, and apparently our impact was zilch. Because when you're a student trying to create an impact with the administration, their priority is to control that impact.

"They keep tenured faculty in control using similar means: They treat them as personal equals, they encourage them to form committees, study problems, provide the administration with advisory reports," says Robin J. Sowards, an English literature professor who used to teach at Hobart. "And by the time the administration has unambiguously ignored the faculty's advice, so much time has passed that the faculty has forgotten the problems or is just too tired to fight for the solution. It's even easier with students because they're gone in four years, and over the summers." Keep in mind that he's not just talking about the HWS administration -- this is how every college functions. (I reached out to my alma mater's administration for an interview as well, but never heard back. Probably because instead of being a serious journalist I'm just a writer who doesn't shave.)

College administrators want students to feel like they can only get something done if they work with the administration (even though that's not true), because putting out fires by making kids feel like they're making a difference to keep them effectively sedated is their job. And their job is easy, because they only have to keep students distracted for a few short months: College students spend their first two years experimenting with drugs and freedom, and only really get a sense of their relationship at the end of their tenure. And once they're gone, they stop caring, because they have a different community to want to change -- not because they're fickle and selfish, but because that's how activism works. Priorities shift. Overall, this is a good thing, but it also keeps every college campus in the country stuck in a weird, culturally adolescent funk.

## **Rape Prevention Training Is a Massive Undertaking**

When I matriculated to Hobart in the fall of 2006, part of my orientation was a sexual assault prevention program. It involved me and like six other dudes from my floor going into a room and being told by a fellow student, "Don't sleep around all crazy, they'll accuse you of rape." There was some other stuff he mentioned about how sexual assault is, like, super not cool, but that was the line that stuck with me the most and made the most sense, because it made me feel like the real concern was that I could be a victim.

"Finally," I thought, "Someone who acknowledges me! The most important person! Being accused of rape is the worst thing involving rape that could happen to someone!"

Look, I understand now that that's dumb as a bag of rocks, but give me a break. At the time, I was 18. In my entire life, I had had exactly two thoughts about sexual politics and gender dynamics: "Why aren't I having sex right now?" and "Yay! I'm having sex right now!" I'd never had a reason to think about rape in any detail, or consider that it might happen to people close to me, and, I wasn't particularly predisposed toward prioritizing someone else ahead of myself. When I thought about rape, the first person I considered it affecting was me -- which is the exact reason why I needed that training.

Studies have found that men will admit to rape if you don't describe it as rape. This doesn't mean that all men are rapists, or that men are evil or stupid or anything; it means that they're not educated about sex, what it means, and how to go about it. And we're going to stay that way if left to our own devices, because there's an inherent terror in discovering that something you thought was OK is actually hurting people, because no one wants to think of themselves as scum.... Well, most people, anyway. It'll take way more than a half-hour seminar to get over that kind of mental block, but gosh, I'd argue it's worth the time.

But this is really just the treatment. I'd argue the real problem is ...

## **We Are Terrible at Thinking About Sex**

original intention here was to make a point about sexual assault law, but I ran into something of a problem: I am profoundly stupid, and there are a lot of big words in law. So I read a load of articles about the morality of sexual assault, about the relationship between intoxication and consent, and I realized one thing: We suck at thinking about sex.

There are all kinds of reasons men commit sexual assault: they think it'll make them powerful, maybe they think they can't have sex otherwise, or maybe they think it'll give them value as a person. But all those things reflect a fundamentally wrong perception of what sex is. Sex is collaborative. It's impossible to force it on someone, because the second you force it, it becomes something else.

And why is rape underreported? Because doing so changes the way other people see you. You become part of a national controversy. If your friends and family find out, they might start condescending to you by warning you off of certain movies or TV shows, assuming that you're suddenly a fragile piece of china

that must be constantly protected. Reporting an assault isn't just one difficult conversation, it's thousands. And in every single one, there's the risk that that person won't believe you.

Anything involving sex isn't polite conversation, even though it's a guaranteed way to get someone's attention. On the Internet we know that putting "sex" in the title of an article gives it a significant traffic boost. We're starving for knowledge about what other people are doing with their parts, about what we should do with our parts -- and yet, if I tell you that I'm touching my parts right now, that would be inappropriate. My point is that we need to change the way we think about sex.

Nothing I'm saying should be taken as an attempt to take pressure off of criminals. Rapists should be punished. I seriously can't stress that enough. But I'm not content to merely punish people after a crime is committed -- I want to prevent that crime from ever happening at all. And I think making people feel more comfortable with themselves, their urges, and their parts might be a good way to accomplish that. It's worth a shot, right?

### **This Isn't a "College" Problem**

If you Google "college sexual assault," the entire Internet explodes at you. That's been the story we've been sold after the past few months: Colleges have become hotbeds of rape, and we need to figure out how to fix them. But colleges aren't to blame here.

Look, the terrible thing is that criminals aren't created by governments. They aren't created by schools. They aren't created by drugs or violent video games or sugary foods. They're created by a big, hairy mess of all those things. Like I said at the beginning, students are only in college for four years, and although it happens to be a really volatile and formative four years, those people are already the people they are before they show up on campus and make ill-advised dorm-room lighting purchases.

Besides, if you finish school and go into graduate school, you're still going to have to deal with rape. If you go join the Peace Corps, you're still going to have to deal with rape (hey, did you know that Mark Gearan, the current president of HWS, used to run Peace Corps? Not implying anything there; just pointing out that this guy has been in charge of two places that suck at dealing with rape). Hell, if you Google "rape [your future profession]," odds are you're going to get some hits that depress you.

Everywhere is terrible. Everywhere.

My point is, colleges aren't especially messed-up places; they're just where the pimples pop. But it's still the responsibility of colleges to clean the pus up, because this is literally the job they signed up for. Besides, we gotta start making a difference somewhere, so why not a place of learning? Seems fine to me. But if you prefer dog parks, that's cool, too. Whatever. Let's just make sure we get started soon, because there are little girls in my family, and this isn't the world I want for them.