

## **Sexual Assault in Higher Education**

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### **Abstract**

Sexual assault involves any behavior where one individual makes sexual contact with another without explicit consent (Department of Justice, 2017). More than 20% of females and 11% of males in undergraduate programs are victims of sexual assault annually. Sexual assault can significantly impact survivors' academic performance and progress and may result in a survivor dropping out of school. Despite the many support services available on most campus, more than 90% of sexual assault incidents are left unreported. Sexual assault can have devastating and long-term effects on its victims. Even with proper policies and practices (e.g., Title IX), students within colleges and universities do not report or seek support services. This integrative literature review explores literature on how sexual assault impacts victims.

Keywords: Sexual assault, Higher education, Disclosure

### **Sexual Assault in Higher Education**

Sexual assault involves any behavior where one individual makes contact with another without explicit consent (Department of Justice, 2017). Sexual assault can include forced sexual intercourse, touching, fondling, forcible sodomy, molestation, and attempted rape (Department of Justice, 2017). At least 20% of college women have been sexually assaulted since they enrolled in college (Hossain, Memiah, & Adeyinka, 2014; Krebs, Lindquist, Warner, Fisher, & Martin, 2007; Voth Schrag, 2017). The consequences for these victims include depression, post-traumatic stress, suicidality, low GPA, withdrawal from school, and an increased risk for potential victimization (Jordan, Combs & Smith, 2014; Walsh, DiLillo & Messman-Moore, 2012). The negative outcomes of being a victim may intensify over time if the victim does not receive adequate support and assistance (Holland & Cotina, 2017, p. 50).

In 2008, Title IX legislation was ratified, resulting in many American universities enacting or reevaluating their administrative policies to improve their responses to and assistance for victims of sexual assault (Richards, Branch, Fleury-Steiner & Kafonek, 2017, p. 104). However, evidence of university compliance with federal policies is scarce (Gregory & Janosik, 2007). The Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, also known as OCR, provides guidance around sexual assault, mandating that universities appoint a Title IX coordinator to assume the responsibility of compliance with Title IX, handle complaints, train employees, and provide additional services to victims (Ali, 2011; Holland & Cortina, 2017).

### **Background and Problem**

In 2018, *The Chronicle of Higher Education* published a special collection of articles focusing on sexual assault in higher education, asserting that colleges' and universities' management of sexual assault allegations produce significant emotional disadvantages for students. The overarching commentary suggests that the treatment of and intervention for victims unfortunately depends largely on the organization and requires understanding the interrelated

factors that are a part of sexual assault allegations. Such factors include the university enforcement of Title IX, laws applicable to sexual violence, best practices for evaluating incidents, and university personnel training.

The U. S. Department of Education’s Office of Civil Rights reported more than 458 investigations on cases of colleges and universities mishandling of sexual assault between 2011 and 2018 (Chronicle of Higher Education, 2018). Oregon State University, Baylor University, and the University of Alaska Fairbanks are among a few universities that have offered public apologies to victims of sexual assault for their mishandling of cases. For victims of sexual assault, an acknowledgment of colleges’ and universities’ mishandling can take decades, as in the case of the University of Oregon’s apology 20 years after a woman reported being gang raped by members of its football team (New, 2016).

The mishandling of sexual assault cases and mistreatment of victims has created a culture barrier in colleges and universities that discourage students from disclosing sexual assault incidents (Harper, Maskaly, Kirkner, & Lorenz, 2017), which can result in long-term victimization (Gidycz, Hanson, & Layman, 1995). The long-term effects of sexual victimization are manifested in high rates of psychological and physical health concerns of victims (Palm & Follette, 2008). As a result, there is also a residual effect of sexual assault cases that inevitably negatively impacts the colligate community which creates a cultural feedback loop at colleges and universities on sexual assault (Jones, 2014).

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this integrative literature review is to examine the literature on sexual assault in higher education and the effects on the victim. The following research questions will be discussed:

1. What influences a victim’s decision to report the incident of sexual assault?
2. What are the consequences on the students’ wellbeing after disclosure of sexual assault?

### **Method**

An integrative method was used to identify and synthesize numerous streams of literature on the topic of sexual assault in higher education. An integrative literature review is a “form of research that reviews, critiques, and synthesizes representative literature on a topic in an integrated way such that new frameworks and perspectives on the topic are generated” (Torraco, 2005, p. 356; see also Callahan, 2010). This approach included assessment of the literature using specific keywords within three databases, review of the abstracts generated to select relevant articles, and finally, analysis of articles generated to identify major themes within the literature.

### ***Selection of Articles***

This literature review started with an assessment of literature across two disciplines: education and psychology. Articles for analysis were collected across two different databases: PsychInfo, and ERIC (Proquest). The selected databases were searched using the following keywords: *sexual assault* and *higher education*. The keyword *sexual assault* was paired with the keyword *higher education* to narrow the scope. To avoid irrelevant articles, quotations were used around

the keywords when searching for relevant articles to eliminate those outside the research scope. The search was conducted in October 2017.

Table 1

*Literature Review: Number of Articles Selected by Database Source*

<u>Database</u>	<u>Keywords</u>	<u>Results</u>	<u>Selected</u>
PsychInfo	“sexual assault” AND “higher education”	20	9
ERIC (Proquest)	“sexual assault” AND “higher education”	162	24
Total		182	33

### ***Content Analysis***

After the search was conducted, article abstracts were screened to identify relevance. Relevance was determined by analyzing each abstract to verify that each publication was about some aspect of disclosure of sexual assault in higher education. For example, an abstract that read “the purpose of this study was to assess predictors of college students' perceptions of the importance of sexual assault prevention education for themselves and for college students in general” (Jozkowski, Henry, & Sturm, 2015, p. 46) would not be relevant. This article revolves around student perceptions of sexual assault and measures for prevention. However, an abstract that read “experiencing sexual assault can have devastating consequences on survivors’ psychological and educational well-being, which may intensify if survivors do not receive adequate care” (Holland & Cortina, 2017, p. 50) clearly resonates with victims of sexual assault in higher education and would be considered relevant.

## **Methods and Results**

After reviewing all abstracts, a final set of literature was produced (N= 33). The two authors then analyzed the articles for emerging themes. Thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998) was used to understand the similarities across the literature collected. Based on the analysis, several themes emerged, and the research questions were answered. After the review, two themes emerged from the literature: (a) advantages and disadvantages of Title IX, and (b) sexual assault effects on the victim before and after disclosure.

### ***Advantages and Disadvantages of Title IX***

Many colleges have revisited administrative policies and codes of conduct concerning sexual assault victims in an effort to comply with federal legislation (Richards, Branch, Fleury-Steiner, & Kafonek, 2017). Even though colleges and universities have “adopted policies and procedure related to campus sexual assault, results also show that the focus often remains on official reporting and bureaucratic structures” (Richards et al., 2017, p. 112), shifting focus away from the victim and his or her healing process.

**Advantages.** Title IX serves the purpose of “prohibiting sex discrimination in higher education, requiring institutions of higher education to take prompt and effective steps to eliminate the hostile environment sexual assault creates” (Harper et al., 2017, p. 302). The policy has several categories. The policy guarantees parents and students the right to maintain privacy in educational records and documents (Harper et al., 2017). The policy also recommends all

institutions of higher education investigate all allegations of sexual assault, and take appropriate action (Harper et al., 2017).

**Disadvantages.** While Title IX and other policies were created to prevent sex discrimination on college campuses, the process is usually harmful to its victims, leaving them to feel shamed most often and feeling as though their experiences are false and their safety is unimportant (Harper et al., 2017; Sulkowicz, 2014). Title IX allows certain practices regarding evidence and questioning victims that may damage the victim's mental health and well-being (Harper et al., 2017). Many victims feel degraded, and others feel as though the outcomes of the process are harmful (Harper et al., 2017). The policies also discourage the reporting for reasons such as extent of confidentiality and victim's fear of retaliation from the perpetrator (McMahon, 2008).

### ***Disclosure of Sexual Assault***

Even with all the support systems in place, many college students do not seek help and support after sexual assault (McMahon, 2008). Survivors who do not seek support show that they have greater psychological distress and symptoms of depression and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (Holland & Cortina, 2017; Stansell & Jennings, 2010). Some students who have received support and help from formal or informal sources report having better mental health (Holland & Cortina, 2017; Ullman, 1999).

**Why not disclose?** Seeking support after sexual assault is not always easy, feasible, available, or even beneficial to the victim (Holland & Cortina, 2017). Some women do not label their assault as rape because it involved a boyfriend, they were under the influence of alcohol or drugs, or the act was oral or digital (Kahn, Jackson, Kully, Badger, & Halvorsen, 2003). The following six categories were identified by Holland and Cortina (2017) as the reasons why college students who have experienced sexual assault do not seek support on campus after the incident.

**Availability.** A lack of resources on college campuses can be to blame for victims not finding appropriate sources of support after sexual assault.

**Affordability.** Affordability issues can stem from the costs of receiving care.

**Acceptability.** Acceptability stems from concerns from victims associating thoughts, beliefs, and affective responses related to the assault that deemed it unacceptable (Holland & Cortina, 2017). In other words, members of the community—or the victim themselves—would not accept the incident and find it unacceptable to disclose. There were five sub-categories that further explained the reasons behind lack of acceptance: negative emotions regarding the assault, consequences of what would happen after disclosure, contextual characteristics like who or what was involved, minimizing impact to the degree where the victim feels as though it did not impact their life, and minimizing behaviors, believing that this type of incident happens all the time.

**Accessibility.** Lacking the knowledge of available support systems in place on college campuses can cause victims to stay away from receiving help. Accessibility refers the awareness of these support systems by victims and whether the victim perceives constraints like work or school that do not allow them to seek support.

**Appropriateness.** Perceptions of whether support systems are useful or helpful may shift victims away from disclosing. Many of the procedures behind support systems make it uncomfortable for victims to disclose, for example, the requirement to report the incident to authorities.

**Alternative coping.** Some students chose to vent to their peers or coped in other ways, making it less intriguing to report the incident. This form of coping made it unnecessary to seek formal supports from the college or university.

**Consequences of disclosure.** Victims of sexual assault have reported receiving negative responses following disclosure (Best & Jun, 2017). The consequence followed by reporting a sexual assault can cause other victims to shy away from disclosing to formal supports.

**Victim blaming.** About 73-83% of victims of sexual assault have received negative reactions to disclosure of an assault (Ahrens, 2006; Best & Jun, 2017). Negative responses more often than not put blame on the victim instead of the perpetrator; these negative responses can come from all sources of support like family, friends, police officers, clergy, or even rape crisis centers (Best & Jun, 2017).

**Prioritizing process over student care.** There is tension over conducting a legally defensible process and keeping into account the care of the victim (Best & Jun, 2017). In spite of feelings of tension, many investigators spoke about the “need to set aside their feelings and move ahead with the process” (Best & Jun, 2017, p. 131). In other words, what the victim needs and what procedures must be followed may not be the same. One study conducted by Munro-Kramer, Dulin, and Gaither (2017) identified the needs of sexual assault survivors. Some needs included confidentiality and a commitment to handling the reporting of the investigation in a discrete manner, respectful of the survivor’s privacy (Munro-Kramer et al., 2017).

### **Implications for Higher Education Practice and Theory**

Despite policies and practices in place for sexual assault victims, more than 90% of sexual assault victims in college do not report the assault because of a number of factors (accessibility, acceptability, appropriateness, and alternative coping) (Holland & Cortina, 2017). For starters, all students should be made aware of resources for victims present on college campuses. Many times, a victim may not come forward because of the lack of awareness of these services or the level of confidentiality (Gialopsos, 2017). Other institutions struggle with a lack of these services on college campuses. Secondly, Title IX should be reexamined for its faults; it may not be working to protect victims after disclosure (Harper et al., 2017). For example, requirements made from Title IX to report may discourage victims of sexual assault to come forward. These requirements and procedures after disclosure usually do not meet the needs of the victim (Holland & Cortina, 2017).

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