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Confronting Sexual Conduct: Student-Led Colby Program Demands Honesty and Accountability

Stephen Collins
Colby College

Gerry Boyle
Colby College

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Then I said...

helped when.

Confronting Sexual Conduct

Student-led Colby program demands
honesty and accountability

By Stephen Collins '74

I'm feeling...

With awareness about sexual assault on America's campuses increasing, and with new federal requirements aimed at addressing the problem, colleges and universities are expanding their efforts to prevent sexual violence and to change campus cultures so coercion isn't tolerated.

It's a conversation that's hard to start and even more difficult to keep percolating as students go about their lives in academic, social, and residential spaces on campus. After all, it isn't easy to discuss sex with intimate friends, much less with random classmates.

But that's what Colby first- and second-year students are doing as they participate in an intensive, peer-led program developed at Colby and implemented last fall. The mandatory program holds promise, organizers say, for student safety, for Colby's campus community, and potentially as a model for other institutions serious about curbing sexual violence.

The key? Passionate, committed students taking ownership of the discussion. "If I stood up in front of first-year students and tried to say, 'This is what we value at Colby in terms of consent; this is what we won't tolerate in terms of coercion'—I'm really an outsider,"

said Emily Schusterbauer, director of Colby's Gender and Sexual Diversity Program. "But the peer educators are able to say that kind of stuff to first-year students and really be more impactful.

"For the peer educators ... it's about trying to set different cultural norms," she said, "and that can only happen from someone who's really inside the culture."

Last year Schusterbauer outlined a curriculum for teaching students about sexual violence. She wanted to debunk the myth that rape usually involves a stranger in a dark alley, to show a range of behaviors that constitute coercion to have sex, and to have students brainstorm ways they can ensure mutual and enthusiastic consent at each escalating step of a sexual encounter. She wanted to teach students how to look out for friends and classmates and to provide techniques to intervene if red flags appear.

But the key to turning it into a community discussion was assembling a corps of students, women and men, to customize her curriculum for their peers and then lead the orientation sessions. After taking an independent study course with Schusterbauer to train as peer educators, these students led their first training sessions—more than 60 in all—for 900 first-years

Do you want to...?

Nothing happened...

Can I Should I...?



From the very beginning I was seeing my friends really looking out for each other and communicating and checking in.”

—Adrienne Carmack '18

and sophomores this fall. “We helped her think about different ways to present things for students—scenarios maybe we’d seen or we’d heard about at Colby,” said Michelle Boucher ’17, a peer educator who helped develop the program.

Added Chris Millman ’16, a peer educator and president of Mules Against Violence, a campus organization that works to prevent sexual violence, “Obviously this information is important for the rest of our lives, but we really wanted to cater to the Colby experience.”

The University of Illinois has run a mandatory program for first-year students for more than two decades and is recognized as a pioneer in peer-to-peer sexual violence prevention efforts. Molly M. McLay, assistant director of the Women’s Resources Center there, said Colby’s strategy can turn students into change agents. “Programs that focus more on risk reduction and escape strategies solely don’t get at the root of primary prevention,” she said. She favors multiple sessions that are peer facilitated

and dialogue based rather than using a one-shot online model. “Hearing this information from peers lets them know that these are real issues they’re going to encounter; it’s not just adults telling them what to do.”

Colby Education Professor Mark Tappan, a national expert in boys’ development and education who studies gender-based violence education and prevention, said he’s been cheering on Schusterbauer’s initiatives. In response to this year’s new Title IX rules requiring sexual violence prevention training, Tappan said, many colleges and universities “took the path of least resistance, which was to require all first-years to do a sexual violence thing online or one big speech to all the new students. That would effectively meet the requirements.”

Colby’s program is exceptional, he said. “To commit to engaging in a peer-led conversation with all first-years and all second-years is way, way, way above the bar. ... This is a place for Colby to be proud. Colby is taking the lead on this.”



Party With Consent founder Jonathan Kalin '14 leads a discussion about sexual assault on college and university campuses. Kalin is sought after as a facilitator for conversations about the issue.

PARTY WITH CONSENT FOUNDER NO LONGER “SWIMMING UPSTREAM”

Jonathan Kalin '14 had just finished a phone call with students at Vanderbilt, Dennison, and Princeton universities. That came on the heels of an inquiry from a group in Kampala, Uganda. They were all looking for advice from the founder of Party With Consent.

Kalin, who started the organization in 2012 to counter sexual violence culture on college campuses, is glad to help, but he doesn't pretend to have all the answers. Progress on the issue, he says, begins with honest and open dialogue. “Our goal is to ... have it be the stories from the students that make change,” Kalin said from New York City, where he oversees the nonprofit. “There's no better space than the peer-to-peer conversations for this to happen.”

The media began noticing Kalin when he was still a student and was featured in *Time*. In recent months he has been tapped by *Atlantic Monthly*, the UK's *Guardian* newspaper, and others. He was to be interviewed on NBC's *Dateline* program in March, the same month he had planned to join Mules Against Violence cofounder Eric Barthold '12 (creator of the organization Man Up and Open Up) and Professor of Education Mark Tappan to present at the International Conference on Masculinities in New York.

Kalin sees himself as a facilitator, sharing his own experience and encouraging students to confront the issue of sexual assault. “What we're trying to do is design something for students who want to be authentic and talk truthfully about sexuality and sexual assault and how it is manifested on college campuses,” he said.

When he and Barthold, both Colby athletes, began talking about these issues three years ago, Kalin said, he sometimes felt like he was “swimming upstream.” But even then he sensed that there were others who felt as he did—that “authenticity and honesty and truth connected to sex and sexual relations was so much more enjoyable and fun than acts of coercion and manipulation.”

The new openness surrounding the issue is connecting people, especially men, who were once silenced. “You have to get students to disregard that mask that they put on when a dean or an outsider comes to campus,” Kalin said. “You have to remove that mask and talk.”

—Gerry Boyle '78

AT COLBY, THIS IS THE CONVERSATION ON SEXUAL MISCONDUCT

In group sessions with first- and second-year students, peer leaders:

Debunked myths: Student leaders explained that sexual assault is rarely stranger rape, that sexual misconduct doesn't always involve alcohol, that wearing revealing clothing does not invite sexual predation, that false reports of sexual assault are far less common than many students fear.

Helped define the problem: Sexual misconduct is nonconsensual sexual contact, harassment, coercion, exploitation, stalking, dating and domestic violence, as well as intercourse. It can be any nonaccidental, nonconsensual sexual touch, however slight.

Talked about consent: Students are encouraged to set their own boundaries about whether to engage in sex or not. Consensual sex, the counselors stressed, requires affirmative, positive, enthusiastic consent every step of the way; the lack of a “no” is not a “yes,” according to Colby's standard. The “no means no” framework is discouraged, because it allows people to think they can continue making advances, Schusterbauer said.

Discussed bystander responsibilities and intervention techniques: Students watched a video dramatizing the buildup to a sexual assault incident—and where bystanders could have stepped in. “Wow, there were so many opportunities,” Michelle Boucher '17 said, adding that it forces students to ask, “Where would I be in that video?” They could have been direct and said, “Are you okay?” or “Hey, I don't think they're interested.” Or indirect: “Let's go order a pizza,” or “Let's go to the bathroom.”

Considered how best to be supportive: How should you respond when students disclose they feel victimized? It's not the listener's job to investigate. “It's about helping your friend know what resources are available on campus” and referring victims to the professionals, Schusterbauer said.

Talked about resources: On campuses across the country victims don't know where to turn until something happens, because they assume it will never happen to them, so making students aware of resources is vital.

Nothing happened...
Should I...?
I didn't realize...
I decided to...
Are you OK?
When I said...
Something happened...



To commit to engaging in a peer-led conversation with all first-years and all second-years is way, way, way above the bar. ... This is a place for Colby to be proud.”

—Professor of Education Mark Tappan

Real conversations generate a lot more discomfort than the passive listening that would fulfill the requirement. But anecdotal evidence says uncomfortable doesn't mean ineffective. “It definitely was awkward at first,” said Adrienne Carmack '18, who attended two required sessions for first-years. “I don't want to go and leave my friends and have these discussions with people I don't know. But I do think having it peer led was really good, because at least you're not being forced into having a conversation with an adult who you feel no connection with.”

And the impact? Carmack said that although some students said the sessions were boring, she saw immediate results. “If people think something is boring, that isn't a sign it was a failure,” she said. “Because, no matter what, that conversation is happening now, and people are thinking about it. I know friends who thought a lot harder before going out on the weekend. A lot more communication is happening. From the very beginning I was seeing my friends really looking out for each other and communicating and checking in.”

Boucher, who led discussions, echoed that. “We got feedback like ‘I really learned a lot,’ or ‘I've already used the skills, so thank you for teaching them to other people,’” she said. “I was amazed at how much more people were talking about it afterward.”

At Colby, confrontation of sexual violence begins right away. A didactic theatrical performance, “Speak About It,” during orientation week introduced the topic prior to the discussion groups. “The impression I got right from the very beginning was,” Carmack said, “This is a conversation we're going to be having. You can't really skirt around this.”

Millman, a cross-country and track athlete, said the Colby format adds a sense of accountability. “We are members of the community, we are the same as you. We live in these dorms, we go to these parties, we eat in your dining hall, and this is the kind of community we want to have.”

Another measure of the program's success? People who couldn't attend—juniors and seniors not required to engage in the discussion that Carmack labeled awkward—expressed disappointment. “Some upperclassmen were bummed and even asked if they could come to one of our sessions,” Boucher said. “People really wanted to be a part of this.”

“It is surprising,” Millman said, recognizing how unexpected the desire to join an difficult conversation might seem. “But I think that also says a lot about Colby as a place. Students just want to become more aware.” ©