

THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Students

September 4, 2014

Why Campuses Can't Talk About Alcohol When It Comes to Sexual Assault

By Robin Wilson

At the beginning of every academic year, college freshmen are quickly introduced to two hallmarks of campus social life, drinking and hooking up.

But while statistics show that alcohol and sex can be a dangerous combination—at least half of students involved in alleged sexual assaults were drinking—campus officials are reluctant to put the two in the same sentence.

"The discussion of alcohol and sexual violence is the third rail of discourse," says Christopher P. Krebs, a senior social-science researcher for the company RTI International who has studied the effects of alcohol on sexual assault. "It's something no one wants to go near."

Preventing sexual assault is at the top of the agenda on many campuses, but the people in charge of keeping students safe feel they can't say much about alcohol, even though it is a common element in many incidents. In discussing the dangers of sexual assault, administrators fear that if they counsel students to drink less, young women who get drunk and are assaulted will be blamed—and blame themselves. They may then not report the attacks to their colleges, and not get the help they need.

"The first things we hear are 'What was she wearing?' and 'How much alcohol did she drink?'" says Darcie Folsom, director of sexual-violence prevention and advocacy at Connecticut College. "But those are not causing a sexual assault to happen. The perpetrator is the problem here." As part of a separate effort, Ms. Folsom says, the director of wellness at the college already talks to students—most of whom are underage—about high-risk drinking.

A former college president discovered last month just how volatile it can be to relate alcohol and sexual assault. Stephen Joel Trachtenberg, president emeritus of George Washington University, suggested as a guest on a [National Public Radio show](#) that college women could protect themselves by drinking less. The remarks caused an [immediate uproar](#) on GW's campus and beyond.

"While we understand the desire to help women stay safe, this perspective puts the onus of stopping sexual assault on women," students in the Trachtenberg School of Public Policy and Public Administration wrote in a letter to the former president. "It also does not work."

Mr. Trachtenberg says he was chastened by the negative reaction but surprised that counseling sobriety could be so controversial. "Someone who is drunk," he wrote in response to the students, "is more vulnerable to attack."

Enforcing the Taboo

In the past year, colleges have come under increasing pressure to properly deal with reports of sexual assault. They have a legal obligation to resolve such reports promptly and fairly, penalizing those found responsible. If the institutions mishandle the reports, they may be found in violation of the gender-equity law known as Title IX, according to the U.S. Department of Education.

As a result, many campuses are going on the offensive—offering educational programs, often [online courses](#), that warn about the dangers of sexual assault and tell students how to prevent it. Soon, under new [federal regulations](#), such training will be mandatory.

But most programs don't focus on students' decisions, including how much to drink. One reason is that, for 15 years, the Department of Justice has run a grant program that serves as a major source of funds to colleges developing resources for sexual-assault prevention. Campus efforts considered "out of scope" for the grants include programs that "focus primarily on alcohol and substance abuse," the grant program [says online](#). It points administrators away from an emphasis on "changing victim behavior."

Kathleen A. Bogle learned that alcohol could be off limits when she tried to deliver a talk several years ago called "Hooking Up, Alcohol, and Sexual Assault: Understanding the Connections and Reducing the Problem." It was for a meeting sponsored by the Justice Department's Office on Violence Against Women, and federal officials asked Ms. Bogle, an associate professor of sociology and criminal justice at La Salle University, to remove the word "alcohol" from the title. Focusing on how much students drink, they said, leads to blaming victims.

"This starts to censor how we can talk about the issue," says Ms. Bogle. "I don't think you are doing young women any favors by saying, We're not going to tell you that this happens—and be careful about it."

Most sexual assaults happen after women voluntarily consume alcohol; relatively few occur after they have been given alcohol or drugs without their knowledge, according to an [article](#) in the *Journal of American College Health* in 2009 by Mr. Krebs and other researchers. Yet sexual-assault-prevention programs, it says, "seldom emphasize the important link between women's use of substances ... and becoming a victim of sexual assault."

But some form of that message could help, Antonia Abbey, a professor of social psychology at Wayne State University who studies violence against women, has argued. "The fact that women's alcohol consumption may increase their likelihood of experiencing sexual assault does not make them responsible for the man's behavior," she wrote in an [article](#) in 2002 in the *Journal of Studies on Alcohol*. "Being intoxicated allows women to let down their guard and focus on their desire to have fun and be liked rather than on their personal safety," she wrote. "Such information may empower women when used in prevention programs."

On most campuses, however, education about sexual violence does not center on how students can lower their risk of assault by changing their own behavior. "What we steer our campuses away from is anything that says someone experienced gender violence because they had been drinking," says Joan Masters, coordinator of a statewide coalition of colleges in Missouri called Partners in

Prevention. "Even if a student is sitting in a residence-hall room, gender violence can happen to them."

Instead, many campus programs focus on "bystander intervention," or teaching students how they can help their friends stay safe at parties and in other situations. It's an easier message for students to hear, say campus administrators, and doesn't result in blaming those who get drunk and are assaulted.

"They are taught to notice when something might be harmful to their friends and distract someone and get them away," says Ms. Masters. "Part of the conversation is 'We need to keep our friends safe,' and by doing that, we also learn how to keep ourselves safe."

The importance of gaining consent in sexual encounters is another point campus programs stress. "As far as assault prevention, we want to think about understanding what consent is, and that a person has the right to deny consent in a situation," says Connie J. Kirkland, manager of the sexual-assault services program at Northern Virginia Community College. "If somebody pushes the limits, that is the time to get out of Dodge or ask for help."

When campus officials do warn students about the role of alcohol in sexual assault, they frequently describe how a perpetrator may use it to wheedle consent out of a victim, or to get her too drunk to defend herself.

"Sexual predators weaponize alcohol," explains Peter F. Lake, director of the Center for Excellence in Higher Education Law and Policy at Stetson University. "Your typical sexual predator will stage an attack and place alcohol where it's heavily camouflaged, in sweet drinks."

'Self-Inflicted' Fear

While administrators see it as their job to help shape students' social behavior, undergraduates are hardly a blank slate when they come to college. Most have already absorbed messages about alcohol and sex—from parents, high-school health teachers, friends, and the media.

Ayushi Roy, who graduated in May from Columbia University, says her parents warned her before her freshman year to be careful

about drinking—and she was. "I was a very square, obedient child," she says. "I went from a California suburb to the middle of New York City. I was hyper-aware of my environment and very cautious."

But she grew to resent feeling as if she had to monitor her behavior because of what others might do to her, says Ms. Roy, a volunteer for [Know Your IX](#), a network of self-identified survivors and allies. "The cost of any form of self-policing—not walking alone in the dark, watching what you drink and what you wear—is that you live under a self-inflicted form of fear," she says. "You are living in this fear that drinking or letting yourself go is a bad thing."

Her friend and classmate Marybeth Seitz-Brown agrees. "All of this sends the message that it's the responsibility of women not to get raped," she says, "rather than the responsibility of everyone not to hurt other people."


But some students are willingly vigilant. Angela Acosta, who graduated in May from George Mason University, says she was careful "never to go to the extreme that I couldn't talk, walk, or do anything" when it came to drinking. "My parents made sure I knew my limits," she says, "and how important that was. They said, 'You will lose control over yourself, and you need to keep yourself safe, especially if you are in an environment you aren't familiar with.'"

That's just good advice, says Caroline Kitchens, a 2012 graduate of Duke University who now writes about sexual assault as a senior research associate at the American Enterprise Institute. "In a perfect world, women would be able to do whatever they want," she says. But the world isn't perfect. "There are always evil people out there, people who want to take advantage of women," she says. "If they exist, we have to practice some common-sense risk reduction."

It's too bad, she says, campuses aren't delivering that message.

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