

**Perceptions of Sexual Violence:**  
Views of Sexual Assault on College Campuses

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## PERCEPTIONS OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE

### **Perceptions of Sexual Violence: Views of Sexual Assault on College Campuses**

#### *Abstract*

*100 respondents currently attending Saint Mary's College, Holy Cross College, or Western Michigan University were surveyed regarding their attitudes towards sexual violence on their campuses in order to determine whether these views varied based on institution. Participating students indicated the extent to which they believed various rape myths and how likely they were to intervene to stop situations from developing into sexual violence. Their views towards the role of alcohol and the value of programs were also incorporated. The findings indicate that an individual's belief in certain rape myths was associated with gender, however, institution had a more significant impact on a student's likelihood of actively preventing sexual assault from occurring, and of recognizing the effect that alcohol had on sexual assault occurring. Respondents also had contradictory views towards the value of programs on a social and personal level.*

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In the past few decades, the dialogue surrounding sexual violence on college campuses has received an increasing amount of attention. Given the alarming rate of incidents among college students – an estimated one quarter of college women being victimized during their college career – efforts have been made to educate students in hope that it will reduce sexual violence (National Institute of Justice 2000). For example, since the Office of Violence Against Women (OVW) established the Campus Program in 1998, adding additional funding in 2010, a number of college institutions have received government grants, “to create and revise policies and protocols regarding violence against women” (US Department of Justice 2011). However, unless an institution identifies the unique ways in which its students’ perceive sexual violence, it will be unable to create influential programs or provide effective education for its student body.

Despite these relatively recent initiatives, there remains limited evidence of how successful these education and prevention programs have actually been at improving students’ understanding of and attitudes towards sexual violence. By utilizing the findings of this study, institutions will be able to construct programs that adequately address the needs and concerns of each student population. If colleges and universities do not understand the relationship between campus attitudes and issues such as victim reporting, these misconceptions and negative connotations of sexual assault will ensure that sexual violence remains prevalent on college campuses.

This study investigates the relationship between institutional characteristics and students’ views of sexual assault and its victims. Through the use of a survey, this study determines whether institutional qualities have a more significant impact on these attitudes than personal characteristics such as gender. Furthermore, a purpose of this study is to distinguish the myths

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and stereotypes that have been successfully overturned from those that continue to impact students' perceptions. Findings indicate that men are more likely than women to believe several of the common rape myths, while a student's institution more significantly impacted his or her understanding of the role of alcohol and willingness to intervene in sexual assaults. Furthermore, the data reveals that although a large majority of respondents value the use of education to reduce sexual violence, almost half of those surveyed would be unwilling to attend even one voluntary program each semester. Because many students view sexual assault as a personal problem, they fail to understand the role they play in either perpetuating or eliminating sexual violence on college campuses.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Barriers*

Despite increasing awareness of sexual violence on college campuses and broadening support resources for victims, sexual assault continues to go underreported (US Department of Justice 2010). The fact that victims have the opportunity to report these offenses, yet often do not, suggests that other factors influence their reporting decisions. One study of these potential barriers found that, "respondents rated 'shame, guilt, and embarrassment,' 'confidentiality concerns,' and 'fear of not being believed' as the leading perceived barriers to reporting" (Sable et al. 2006:159). Another study identified several rape myths, which also acted as barriers (Burnett et al. 2009). These myths include "the idea that 'no' really means 'yes'; that women can resist rape if they wish; ...the victim is promiscuous; and that women falsely report rape to protect their reputations" (Burnett 2009:466). These findings indicate that social perceptions of

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and responses to a woman reporting a case of sexual violence have a significant impact on her willingness to do so.

These findings relate to another study conducted by Lyons et al. (2011) regarding the double standard views of sexual activity between adolescent boys and girls. One respondent, “noted that if girls engage in the same behavior and with the same motives as young men, they are judged more harshly” (Lyons et al. 2011:444). These contradictory responses towards men and women preserve gender inequality, in turn stigmatizing young women who tread outside of the “normative” sexual boundaries. This notion is further supported by Sable et al.’s (2006) assertion that “society has stereotypes about seductive...women which may continue to interfere with women’s reporting” (160). If this precept remains present on college campuses as well, any attempt to overturn misconceptions about sexual violence victims will be significantly undermined.

Along those same lines, the idea that a woman’s past sexual encounters are relevant in her identity as a victim continues to prevent sexual assault from being properly addressed (Levanon 2012:610). This provides further explanation for the ‘fear of not being believed’ barrier identified in the Sable et al. study because if a woman knows that her sexual history will impact whether or not society believes that she is a victim, she is less likely to publically accuse her attacker. Undoubtedly, these traditional views of female sexuality continue to deter victims from reporting, and reinforce cultural attitudes that condone sexual violence.

Some research suggests that overturning these rape myths and misconceptions of sexual violence victims is the key to adjusting campus views of sexual violence. By comparing student responses before and after exposure to a prevention program, Kress et al. (2006) was able to determine the effect that this type of program had on respondents’ perceptions of sexual assault.

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These findings indicate that among both men and women, attending the program “led to a significant decrease in rape myth acceptance” (Kress et al. 2006:154). These results illustrate how intervention and prevention programs reform college students’ attitudes towards sexual violence on campuses.

### *Stranger Myth*

Another cause for the continued presence of sexual violence on college campuses is the lack of clear understanding of what constitutes a sexual violence incident. One of the first misconceptions involves identifying who a perpetrator is likely to be. One study found that, “college women... fear sexual assault by a stranger more than any other offense” (Wilcox et al. 2006:369). Although these women had greater fear of being sexually assaulted by someone they did not know, empirical evidence indicates that these fears are wrongly directed; in reality, “nine out of ten college women who were victims of rape have known their offenders” (Sable 2006:160). This misconception leads to even more danger because, as a result, women are hyper-aware of potentially dangerous strangers, overlooking threats from acquaintances. Furthermore, this delusion regarding potential perpetrators leaves college women unable to identify dangerous or uncomfortable situations until they feel like they are already too engaged to back out.

### *Campus Culture*

In order to understand the detached attitude with which many students regard sexual violence, it is important to identify the social dynamics within campus culture. Although colleges have made increasing attempts to educate students and prevent sexual assault, sexual violence continues to run rampant among undergraduates. One explanation is that “college campuses

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foster date rape cultures...environments that support beliefs conducive to rape and increase risk factors related to sexual violence” (Burnett et al. 2009:466). The barriers that were previously identified further reinforce these cultures.

Another aspect of campus culture is the high presence of alcohol consumption and partying. In the context of alcohol consumption, hyper-sexualized behavior, and peer pressure, it is no surprise that date rape is a common occurrence. The influence of alcohol becomes especially apparent considering that “research on sexual assault indicates that in up to 50% of the cases, the victim, the perpetrator, or both were drinking” (Bell et al. 2010:393). Despite the risk, undergraduates feel a great deal of pressure to participate in behavior considered “normative among college students” (Luke 2009:100). This culture has an even greater impact on “women new to the college experience such as freshmen and sophomores [who] appeared to be at particularly high risk for sexual assault” (Krebs et al. 2009:643). Because party culture remains closely intertwined with broader campus culture, it inevitably influences students’ views of sexual violence in this context.

Even if students understand the dynamics of alcohol and date rape, campus culture perpetuates sexual violence in other ways. Despite the large number of undergraduate women victimized by date rape, many students continue to feel that “the message from the dominant culture is that stranger rape is wrong, but date rape is a situation that should and can be avoided” (Burnett 2009:481). Because students are taught that date rape is avoidable, victims are likely to blame themselves when such an incident occurs, believing that allowing themselves to be in a high-risk situation makes them accountable for anything that happens to them. One study explains that, “women report viewing prevention of sexual violence in the context of partying as their own responsibility” (Luke 2009:100). Another study by Lawyer et al. (2010) demonstrates

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this as well, indicating that “women who are intoxicated during a sexual assault are more likely to blame themselves than are nonintoxicated” (459). Campus culture not only affects the likelihood of sexual violence occurring, but also dictates how it will be perceived when it does occur. Burnett et al (2009) argues that “it influences post-rape behaviors, so as to conceal and perpetuate rape and the culture of rape” (467). When students alienate and scorn victims who have stepped forward, the cycle of sexual violence on campuses continues.

### *Bystander Role*

Although prevention programs have been a central aspect of educational programs about sexual assault, “reports of bystander intervention among males and females on college campuses are limited” (Exner et al 2011:655). Evidently, even when institutions attempt to educate their student bodies on the issue of sexual assault, most students are hesitant to intervene in social situations in which sexual violence is either occurring or may occur. One explanation is that the vague language with which sexual violence is discussed inhibits students from confidently evaluating these situations. In other words, “when talking about date rape, students had difficulty defining it, feeling that situational factors may affect interpretation of the event” (Burnett 2009:472). These “situational factors” often reflect the barriers and party culture previously discussed.

Although this pattern can be seen in both male and female students, some studies have focused on how gender influences an individual’s perceptions of sexual violence. In one study that focused on the attitudes and behaviors of men in terms of intervention and prevention, “it appear[ed] that many of the respondents rhetorically construct[ed] rape as a women’s issue for which they do not have the time or energy to engage” (Rich et al. 2010:273). Of the students



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surveyed by Rich et al. (2010), “51% explained that they would not want to attend a program, and argued that prevention education had no relevance on their lives” (272). In this case, academic institutions have very little control; even if they require attendance to one program each year, the extent to which students will absorb or use the information varies greatly. Even among the respondents who did demonstrate willingness to participate in programs, only “eight men [out of one hundred and fifty-seven] believed their role was to intervene if they saw a sexual assault occurring” (Rich 2010:274). Male apathy towards the issue of sexual violence and unwillingness to actively prevent incidents from occurring foster the presence of sexual assault on campuses. Furthermore, this broad gap between awareness and action suggests that prevention education must be improved in order to incorporate more effective intervention methods.

## THEORY

First constructed by Erving Goffman in 1959, dramaturgy theory illustrates how social interaction between an “actor” and the “audience” affects the ways in which the actor presents him or herself. Based on this theory, an individual plays out his or her role with regard to the audience in each particular situation. In other words, the reactions and attitudes of the audience have a powerful affect on how an actor presents him or herself. In the context of sexual violence on college campuses, the attitudes of students towards sexual violence and its victims have a profound impact on whether or not students are willing to act on behalf of victims and prevent these incidents from occurring at such high rates. When the actor and/or the audience believe myths and stereotypes about sexual assault, the cycle of violence on college campuses continues.

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Dramaturgy suggests that an individual moves between three realms, which Goffman calls stages. The first, labeled offstage, is where the actor coexists with the audience (Goffman 1959). There, he must adhere to the norms and expectations of the rest of the group, strengthening his sense of belonging. Although the actor is presenting a role to the audience while offstage, this is often a role that he shares with everyone or that does not necessarily distinguish him from the others. In the case of sexual violence on college campuses, a woman may interact with the rest of the student body by simply playing the role of a student. Although she is acting, this form of role-play is done in order to reinforce her assimilation into the group. In other words, her peers expect her to behave as they do if she is to be accepted.

In the second realm, which Goffman calls backstage, an actor reflects on his various roles away from the audience's judgment. Similarly, he uses this realm to construct his future performances and reflect on past interactions. At times, he will allow close friends or other trusted individuals to join him during these reflections. In terms of sexual violence on college campuses, institutions often provided resources to help individuals understand their new role when they are victimized. Counselors are sometimes one of the few individuals a victim will allow backstage. The third realm is known as front stage, referring to the interactions between the actor and the audience during which the actor takes on a new or controversial role. The actor must be conscious of a variety of factors during his presentation; as in any performance, the way he speaks, looks, and behaves are all taken into account by the audience as they evaluate the performance. Sexual violence is played out on the front stage when a woman claims she is a victim, and her peers either accept or reject her claim.

The outcome of this front stage interaction is significantly influenced by both the setting in which the performance takes place and the actor's personal presentation (Goffman 1959). As

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previously noted, setting determines the social norms and perceptions that are in place during each interaction. College campuses, for example, are structured around unique expectations, such as the party culture. In terms of personal presentation, Goffman (1959) points out that, “when an actor takes on an established social role, usually he finds that a particular front has already been established for it” (137). In other words, to be truly convincing, the actor must identify what the audience expects from him based on previous performances or current stereotypes.

Dramaturgy is also valuable for understanding how and why misconceptions and stereotypes perpetuate sexual violence on college campuses. For example, presume that, in the college setting, what a girl is wearing during the time of her attack is widely regarded as relevant in the discussion of sexual violence incidents. As a result, many students believe that a promiscuously dressed girl was virtually asking to be sexually assaulted; therefore, the only “real” victims are those who did not invite such a situation but were still victimized. Similarly, the victim herself would be acutely aware of this distinction, taking into account how the audience will perceive her in this regard. Goffman (1959) notes that, “[the actor] may not completely believe that he deserves the valuation of self which he asks for” (133). If his performance is unconvincing even to himself, there is little chance that the audience will think differently. Because campus culture socializes students to believe that factors such as this make a woman culpable for her sexual assault, a woman who has a risqué appearance, is sexually active, or behaves in a “suggestive” way will either choose not to act out her victimhood on the front stage, or is scorned when she does so. In turn, sexual violence is condoned and its presence is reaffirmed.

Overall, Goffman’s dramaturgical perspective offers tremendous insight into why sexual violence remains so abundant on college campuses, and how the attitudes and perspectives of

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student bodies can act as barriers to properly addressing this issue and holding the offenders accountable. Overall, this approach, “connects the individual as a dynamic agent in a social interaction with social scripts and norms” (Vosu 2010:150). In other words, dramaturgy is a valuable lens with which to view this issue because it seamlessly integrates the roles of victims and peer groups with the influence of campus culture. Furthermore, this approach emphasizes that one cannot fully understand the role of an individual without connecting him to the larger framework of social interaction. Because sexual violence incidents continue to go underreported, one can presume that there are factors in place that convince victims to keep their victimization backstage. By understanding what these factors are and how they influence the audience’s perceptions of the victim, institutions can develop policies and programs that have a greater impact on how campus culture portrays sexual violence victims.

## METHODOLOGY

### *Participants*

This study focused on the perceptions and attitudes of undergraduate students. Students from Saint Mary’s College (SMC), Holy Cross College (HCC), and Western Michigan University (WMU) were surveyed regarding their belief in various rape myths and their willingness to intervene in situations potentially leading to sexual assault. These institutions were selected based on their willingness to participate and the type of institution that they represent. Saint Mary’s College is a small, private single-sex institution, Holy Cross College is a small, private co-ed institution, and Western Michigan University is a large, public co-ed institution.

From each of these three institutions, classes were chosen non-randomly based on the instructor’s willingness to participate, and the extent to which students of various majors and

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class years were represented. A total of one hundred students were surveyed: fifty-one from WMU, thirty-seven from SMC, and twelve from HCC. Of these, eighteen were male, eighty-one were female, and one respondent preferred not to say. Because lower-level classes were chosen to prevent an overrepresentation of one or two majors, class years were not equally represented in this study. A majority of respondents were freshmen (a total of forty-eight), while twenty-one were sophomores, seventeen were juniors, thirteen were seniors, and one was a fifth year senior.

### *Measures*

The respondent's gender and the institution that he or she attended were used as independent variables in this study. These factors were chosen in order to evaluate the impact of personal characteristics, such as gender, on an individual's response, as compared to the impact of institution type. Although the survey contained thirty-two questions, this study focused primarily on the questions related to rape myths, intervention, alcohol, and sexual assault prevention and education programs. These questions served as the dependent variables in this study.

Rape myths were divided into four statements and respondents were instructed to rank the extent to which they believed them to be true on a scale from one to ten (with one being not true at all and ten being completely true). The first misconception, which states that, "what a girl is wearing has a significant influence on whether or not she will be the victim of sexual violence," is termed *wearing*. The second, "actions speak louder than words: if a girl says 'no' but is acting in a way that suggests 'yes,' she's just playing hard to get," is labeled *playinghard*. The myth that, "a girl who is sexually active is more likely to become the victim of sexual assault than a girl who is a virgin" is referred to as *active*, and *regretting* refers to the notion that,

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“most cases of sexual violence are actually a girl regretting or having second thoughts about a consensual sexual encounter.”

Similarly, there were three questions pertaining to intervention. Respondents were asked to indicate how likely they were to stop a man from making unwanted advancements on a woman if the respondent did not know either of them (*strangers*), if the man was a friend (*male*) and if the woman was a friend (*female*). Responses of “extremely likely” were coded as a 1, “unsure/don’t know” indications were coded as a 3, and “extremely unlikely” was coded as a 5. In others words, those who were most likely to intervene were those who responded with a 1, while those who were coded as a 5 were the least likely. Other relevant questions asked respondents the extent to which they believed that alcohol was the single most influential factor (1-10), how likely they were to attend a voluntary prevention program (1-5), and what they believed would be the most successful in reducing the number of sexual assaults on campus.

### *Procedures*

#### Rape Myths & Alcohol

In order to determine the findings, the data was organized and analyzed using SPSS. Participants had ranked the extent to which they believed the four rape myths and a statement regarding the role of alcohol (1 being did not agree at all, 10 being completely agreed). A t-test was used to compare the two gender groups’ belief in rape myths and understanding of the role of alcohol to determine whether there was a significant difference in their responses. The means of male and female responses (1-10) to these five questions were also calculated. To compare the effect that each of the institutions had on responses to the rape myth and alcohol questions, ANOVA’s were used to identify any significant differences in how students of each institution

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responded. The means of each institution's responses (1-10) were included as well. These responses were then recoded, dividing respondents into two groups: those who at least somewhat disagreed (responses of 1 to 5) and those who at least somewhat agreed (responses of 6 to 10). These questions were recoded so that the resulting tables would be more manageable and comprehensive.

### Intervention & Attendance

Rather than asking respondents to rank how much they agreed on a scale from 1 to 10, the intervention and program attendance questions directed respondents to choose either "extremely likely," "somewhat likely," "unsure/don't know," "somewhat unlikely," and "extremely unlikely." A t-test was again used to determine whether there were significant differences between the responses of males and females. The means of male and female responses were also calculated using a scale from 1 to 5, in which a lower number indicated a greater likelihood. ANOVA's were then used to compare responses from the three institutions. The means (1-5) of each schools' responses were included.

Because there was a significant difference in the ways that males and females responded to the intervention question about a female friend, as well as in the ways that WMU students responded as compared to SMC and HCC students, an ANOVA had to be used for gender as well. By doing so, a strength test could be used to determine whether responses to this question were more significantly influenced by gender or institution. In addition, the intervention and program questions were recoded so that responses of "extremely likely" and "somewhat likely" were combined into "at least somewhat likely", and responses of "extremely unlikely" and "somewhat unlikely" were combined into "at least somewhat unlikely," while "unsure/don't know" remained the same. Similarly to the rape myth and alcohol questions, the intervention and

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program attendance questions were recoded so that the resulting tables would be easier to interpret.

### Reduction Methods

In order to simplify the question that asked respondents to choose three responses that they believed would be “most likely to reduce the presence of sexual violence on college campuses,” the response which stated “more awareness of the issue (through events, speakers, clubs, etc.)” was recoded into a separate “yes/no” question. Doing so illustrated what percentage of students believed that this solution was one of the top three most effective. Recoding also allowed the results of this question to be compared to the results of the question regarding program attendance.

## FINDINGS

### *Rape Myths*

The effect of institution on responses to rape myths is illustrated in Table 1. The results indicate that the only significant difference in responses were from Holy Cross students in regard to the *regretting* myth. Although the findings suggest that Holy Cross students are more likely than Saint Mary’s students and Western students to believe that most cases involve a girl regretting a consensual encounter, the sample size from Holy Cross is too small to draw any real conclusions. Therefore, there appeared to be no significant difference in how likely students from each institution were to believe rape myths.



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TABLE 1: RAPE MYTHS & INSTITUTION

VARIABLE	WMU		SMC		HCC		TOTAL	
	Mean (1-10)	Agree	Mean (1-10)	Agree	Mean (1-10)	Agree	Mean (1-10)	Agree
<b>wearing</b>	3.68	36% (18/50)	3.19	37.8% (14/37)	3.83	41.7% (5/12)	3.52	37.4% (37/99)
<b>playinghard</b>	2.63	32% (16/50)	2.31	17.1% (6/35)	3.67	41.7% (5/12)	2.64	27.8% (27/97)
<b>active</b>	2.38	24% (12/50)	1.32	5.4% (2/37)	2.4	10% (1/10)	1.98	15.5% (15/97)
<b>regretting</b>	1.73	7.8% (4/51)	2.22	13.8% (5/36)	4.00	45.5%** (5/11)	2.16	14.3% (14/98)

\* mean calculated on scale from 1 to 10; 1=do not agree at all, 10=completely agree

The relationship between gender and belief in rape myths is illustrated in Table 2. In regard to the myths of *active* and *regretting*, males were significantly more likely than females to believe that they were true. Table 2 demonstrates that 31.1% of males at least somewhat believed *active* as compared to only 12.7% of females. Similarly, while only 8.8% of females even somewhat believed *regretting*, 47.1% of males did. On the other hand, males and females were equally likely to believe the *wearing* and *playinghard* myths. These findings suggest that gender had a more significant impact on an individual's belief in rape myths than did institution.

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TABLE 2: RAPE MYTHS & GENDER

VARIABLE	MALES		FEMALES		TOTAL	
	Mean (1-10)	Agree	Mean (1-10)	Agree	Mean (1-10)	Agree
wearing	3.89	38.9% (7/18)	3.40	38.3% (31/81)	3.52	37.4% (37/99)
playinghard	3.67	38.9% (7/18)	2.38	26.3% (21/80)	2.64	27.8% (27/97)
active**	3.00	31.3% (5/16)	1.70	12.7% (10/79)	1.98	15.5% (15/97)
regretting**	3.24	47.1% (8/17)	1.91	8.8% (7/80)	2.16	14.3% (14/98)

\* mean calculated on scale from 1 to 10; 1=do not agree at all, 10=completely agree

*Intervention*

Based on the data illustrated in Table 3, students from Western Michigan University were significantly less likely than students from both Saint Mary’s College and Holy Cross College to intervene. Regardless of their association with the man or the woman involved, WMU students were less willing to step in; in situations involving two strangers, less than half were even somewhat likely to intervene. Furthermore, a strength test indicated that 8% of this variance is attributed to institution.

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TABLE 3: INTERVENTION & INSTITUTION

VARIABLE	WMU		SMC		HCC		TOTAL	
	Mean (1-5)	Likely	Mean (1-5)	Likely	Mean (1-5)	Likely	Mean (1-5)	Likely
<b>strangers</b>	2.76**	41.2% (21/51)	1.92	73% (27/37)	1.67	91.7% (11/12)	2.32	59% (59/100)
<b>male</b>	2.25**	62.7% (32/51)	1.62	83.8% (31/37)	1.42	91.7% (11/12)	1.92	74% (74/100)
<b>female</b>	1.88**	76.5% (39/51)	1.14	97.3% (36/37)	1.33	91.7% (11/12)	1.54	86% (86/100)

\* mean calculated on a scale from 1 to 5; 1=most likely, 5 = least likely

\* strength: 8%

Table 4 demonstrates the effect that gender has on responses to these intervention questions. The data shows that males and females were equally likely to intervene if either both parties involved were strangers, or if the situation involved a male friend and a female whom they did not know. In situations involving a female friend and a male stranger, however, females were significantly more likely to intervene than were males. The table shows that 90.1% of female respondents were at least somewhat likely to intervene, compared to only 61.1% of males. Interestingly, male respondents were most willing to become involved if a male friend was involved. Although there was a significant difference in responses to *female* as a result of both institution and gender, a strength test indicated that only 5% of this variance was a result of gender, showing that institution had more of an impact in terms of intervention.

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TABLE 4: INTERVENTION & GENDER

VARIABLE	MALES		FEMALES		TOTAL	
	Mean (1-5)	Likely	Mean (1-5)	Likely	Mean (1-5)	Likely
<b>strangers</b>	2.28	61.1% (11/18)	2.32	59% (59/100)	2.35	58% (47/81)
<b>male</b>	2.00	72.2% (13/18)	1.92	74% (74/100)	1.91	74.1% (60/81)
<b>female**</b>	2.17	61.1% (11/18)	1.54	86% (86/100)	1.41	90.1% (73/81)

\* mean calculated on scale from 1 to 5; 1=most likely 5=least likely

\* strength: 5%

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*Alcohol*

By comparing the responses to *alcohol* of students from each institution in Table 5, the study determined that respondents from WMU were significantly less likely to believe that alcohol was the most influential factor in regard to sexual violence on campuses. While 78.3% of SMC respondents and 75% of HCC respondents at least somewhat agreed that alcohol was the single most significant factor.

TABLE 5: ALCOHOL & INSTITUTION

	WMU		SMC		HCC		TOTAL	
VARIABLE	Mean (1-10)	Agree	Mean (1-10)	Agree	Mean (1-10)	Agree	Mean (1-10)	Agree
<b>alcohol</b>	4.94**	42% (21/50)	6.54	78.3% (29/37)	6.08	75% (9/12)	5.67	59.6% (59/99)

\* mean calculated on scale from 1 to 10; 1=do not agree at all, 10=completely agree

Table 6 illustrates the relationship between *alcohol* and gender. The findings indicate that there was no significant difference between the responses of males and females. In other words, gender had no impact on whether or not respondents believed alcohol was a significant factor.

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TABLE 6: ALCOHOL & GENDER

VARIABLE	MALES		FEMALES		TOTAL	
	Mean (1-10)	Agree	Mean (1-10)	Agree	Mean (1-10)	Agree
<b>alcohol</b>	6.39	83.3% (15/18)	5.53	60.5% (49/81)	5.67	59.6% (59/99)

\* mean calculated on scale from 1 to 10; 1=do not agree at all, 10=completely agree

*Programs*

Of the 100 respondents, Table 7 shows that 74% chose “more awareness” as one of the top three most effective ways of reducing sexual violence on college campuses. Participants who responded “yes” were those who chose *awareness* as one of the three approaches they believed were most influential.

TABLE 7: AWARENESS

VARIABLE	YES	NO
<b>awareness</b>	74% (74/100)	26% (26/100)

Respondents were also asked how likely they were to attend at least one voluntary prevention program each semester. Table 8 illustrates that 49% of respondents were at least somewhat unlikely to attend. Additionally, 19% were unsure or did not know if they would be willing to attend. Of those who were at least somewhat likely to attend, only 5% of respondents indicated that they were “extremely likely.”

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TABLE 8: ATTEND

VARIABLE	UNLIKELY	UNSURE	LIKELY	MEAN (1-5)
<b>attend</b>	49% (49/100)	19% (19/100)	32% (32/100)	3.34

\* mean calculated on scale from 1 to 5; 1=most likely, 5=least likely

DISCUSSION

*Rape Myths*

Although the findings suggest that HCC participants responded significantly differently to *regretting* than did SMC and WMU students, the sample size (twelve respondents) was too small to draw any definite conclusions. Gender, on the other hand, had a significant impact on how likely respondents were to believe the rape myths *regretting* and *active*. These findings suggest that gender did have an impact on whether or not students believed some of the rape myths.

Interestingly, the two rape myths to which participants responded similarly regardless of institution or gender – *wearing* and *playinghard* – were believed most frequently among all of the respondents. Overall, 38% believed that the *wearing* myth was at least somewhat true and 28% believed that *playinghard* was at least somewhat true. Females were more likely to believe these two myths than *active* or *regretting*. The myth that males were most likely to believe was *regretting*. This finding supports previous research, which indicated that victims were hesitant to report because they were afraid of not being believed (Sable 2006:159). If students believe that factors such as *wearing* are relevant, victims will be unwilling to come forward if, for example, they know that they were wearing provocative clothing.

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Although most respondents knew that the rape myths were false, many students remain misinformed or unsure about the factors influencing sexual violence on college campuses. Additionally, the stereotypes of sexual violence victims that male students have are not the same as those most frequently held by female respondents. Therefore, institutions should approach the education of male and female students differently in order to be most effective.

### *Intervention*

Based on the findings presented in Tables 3 and 4, institution had a more significant impact on students' willingness to intervene than did gender. Although males were significantly less likely to intervene on behalf of a female friend than were females, only 5% of this variance can be attributed to gender. On the contrary, institution was responsible for 8% of the variance in responses to the *female* intervention question. Therefore, institution has a more significant impact.

Because SMC and HCC participants responded similarly to all three of the intervention questions, one can infer that the characteristics of WMU that are not shared by the other two institutions may be contributing to this difference. In other words, because WMU is publically funded and large, whereas both SMC and HCC are privately funded and small, it may be that students at public or large institutions are less willing to intervene to help one another. One possibility is that students at large schools may feel less connected to one another, and are therefore less willing to help one another. The solidarity of smaller institutions such as SMC and HCC, on the other hand, may be greater resulting in a stronger sense of responsibility to intervene. Past research indicated that students were unclear as to how to define and/or identify sexual violence, suggesting that perhaps WMU students are not educated enough on the issue



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and, therefore, lack the confidence to actually step in to prevent such incidents from occurring (Burnett 2009:472).

Past research suggested that males were less likely than females to intervene, however, this study found that this was only true when the situation involved a female friend, and, overall, institution was found to have a greater impact. It is interesting to note, however, that male respondents were most likely to intervene when the situation involved a male friend; one explanation is that male students are willing to step in order to prevent their friends from getting in trouble. Although gender was not as influential as institution, these findings provide valuable insight into the ways that males and females understand their roles as bystanders.

### *Alcohol*

The results indicated that institution had a significant impact on whether or not respondents believed alcohol was the single most influential factor in sexual assault incidents. WMU students were less likely to attribute sexual violence on campus to alcohol, suggesting that these respondents do not believe that the presence of alcohol makes sexual assault more likely. Similarly, it can be inferred from these findings that WMU students are less aware of how the dynamics of campus culture, including partying and alcohol consumption, affect the issue of sexual violence at colleges and universities.

These results are especially interesting when one considers that WMU students were also less likely to intervene to prevent sexual assault. Prior research indicated that many students believe they are personally responsible for preventing sexual assault in the context of partying (Luke 2009:100); another possible explanation for WMU respondents' unwillingness to

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intervene is that they do not “blame” alcohol, and therefore believe individuals should be responsible for themselves when they partake in drinking on campus.

### *Programs*

A vast majority of respondents believed that “more awareness” was one of the most effective methods for reducing sexual violence on college campuses, suggesting that most students believe programs are effective educational tools. Although 74% of participants wanted institutions to provide even more events and programs related to sexual violence, the findings in Table 8 indicate that most students do not believe that they would personally benefit from such efforts, or that their participation is necessary. When one compares the 49% of respondents who stated that they were at least somewhat unlikely to attend to the 74% of participants who advocated for more awareness, the discrepancy between understanding and action among college students is undeniable. Although students believe that the issue of sexual violence on college campuses is important, they fail to understand the part they play in reducing its presence. In other words, many students construct sexual violence as a personal trouble rather than as a larger social issue.

## CONCLUSION

Although this study has provided valuable insight into the factors that impact attitudes towards sexual violence on college campuses, this research could be expanded in order to explore the influence that other factors such as religion, school athletics, and Greek culture have on students’ perceptions. Furthermore, including institutions that are geographically diverse and representative of other institutional characteristics could similarly demonstrate how and why

## PERCEPTIONS OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE

perspectives vary from institution to institution. One of the strengths of this study is that it demonstrates a clear relationship between sexual violence and social interactions on college campuses. In addition, by including respondents from several different institutions, this study shows that the social context in which this issue is discussed has a significant impact on how it will be perceived by students. Finally, these findings suggest that even when institutions provide educational resources, these programs may be ineffective because students are unwilling to attend or fail to understand the role they play in preventing sexual assault. Although gender influenced how likely an individual was to believe several common rape myths, students' willingness to intervene and their understanding of the role of alcohol were impacted more significantly by the institution that they attend. Furthermore, although most students valued education as a means of reducing sexual violence, a large number were unwilling to attend such events themselves, suggesting that sexual violence on college campuses is regarded as a personal trouble rather than as a social issue that impacts the larger student body.

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**Appendix A**

**Informed Consent Form**

You are invited to participate in a study regarding the perceptions that undergraduate students have of sexual violence on college campuses. It seeks to determine whether any patterns exist between type of college institution and the views that its students have of sexual violence there. You have been chosen based on your status as an undergraduate student at a participating college or university. Your participation may contribute to the development of better education regarding this issue. Furthermore, your willingness to provide information about your view as a student will give valuable insight into college culture and the impact that sexual violence has had on undergraduate experiences at your school. Please note, however, that a potential risk of participating in this study is that you may experience a degree of psychological distress as you respond to questions in this survey.

You will be asked to complete a survey to the best of your ability. It will take approximately ten to fifteen minutes to complete and consists of thirty-two questions. You will be asked to identify various characteristics of the college or university you attend, as well as your personal experience with sexual violence on your campus. Some of the questions are of a sensitive nature, and you may skip over any question(s) that you do not feel comfortable answering. In order to ensure that your responses remain anonymous, please do not put your name or any other identifying information on the survey. If you do not wish to participate in this study, please return your incomplete survey and unsigned informed consent form when completed forms and surveys are being collected in order to insure your privacy. Remember that this information is anonymous, and the data collected from it will be used for research purposes only. Please note that only the researcher and faculty supervisor will have access to completed surveys and informed consent forms, both of which will be stored in a secure location. An information form and a copy of this informed consent form will be provided for you to keep. If you wish to talk to a professional regarding sexual violence, please refer to the information form regarding your institution's specific resources. If you have questions regarding this survey and its results, feel free to contact the researcher or faculty supervisor (see information form).

By signing below, you are indicating that you are at least 18 years of age, and have read this consent form and are participating out of your own free will. You may withdraw from this study at any time and if you chose to do so your information will not be included and you will not be penalized in any way.

*By signing below, I am indicating that I am at least 18 years of age and that I am agreeing to participate in this study. The purpose of the study has been explained to me. I understand that the information obtained about me will be anonymous. I have been told the benefits and drawbacks of participating. I know whom to contact for further information. I understand it may take up to fifteen minutes to complete this survey. I know that my participation is voluntary, that refusal to participate will involve no penalty, and that I may withdraw at anytime.*

\_\_\_\_\_  
signature of participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
date

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**Appendix B**

INFORMATION FORM

If you wish to talk to a professional regarding sexual violence, please contact:

INSTITUTION RESOURCE

INSTITUTION NAME

RESOURCE #

If you have questions regarding this study or its result, feel free to contact the researcher or faculty supervisor:

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### Appendix C

This survey is designed to identify the perceptions that college undergraduates have of sexual violence against women on college campuses. These questions are constructed around the type of school that you attend, as well as the ideas that you have about sexual violence against women and the role that it plays on college campuses. Please circle your answer and respond as accurately and honestly as possible. Please note that some questions are of a sensitive nature and if you feel uncomfortable answering any of the questions, feel free to skip them or indicate that you do not wish to respond. If you wish to contact the researcher or faculty supervisor, please refer to the information sheet provided. Thank you for your time and patience.

- 1) How do you identify?
  - a) Male
  - b) Female
  - c) Other
  - d) I'd rather not say
  
- 2) What academic year are you?
  - a) Freshman
  - b) Sophomore
  - c) Junior
  - d) Senior
  - e) Other: \_\_\_\_\_
  
- 3) Is your college/university publicly or privately funded?
  - a) Publically
  - b) Privately
  - c) I'm not sure
  
- 4) Do you personally identify with a religious or spiritual group?
  - a) Yes
  - b) No
  - c) I'd rather not say

If you answered "a. yes" for question #4 proceed to question #5. If you did not answer "a. yes," skip to question #6.

- 5) On a scale from 1 to 10, how would you rate the importance of this group in your personal life? (10 being most important, 1 being least important)

\_\_\_\_\_

- 6) Does your college/university allow students ages 21 or older to possess and consume alcoholic beverages on campus?
  - a) Yes
  - b) No
  - c) I'm not sure

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- 7) How frequently do you see Security personnel around campus at your college/university?
- a) Constantly
  - b) Frequently
  - c) Occasionally
  - d) Rarely
  - e) Never
  - f) Other: \_\_\_\_\_

- 8) On a scale of 1 to 10, how safe would you feel walking around your campus at 9 PM? (1 being not safe at all, 10 being completely safe)

\_\_\_\_\_

- 9) On a scale of 1 to 10, how safe would you feel walking around your campus at 12 AM? (1 being not safe at all, 10 being completely safe)

\_\_\_\_\_

- 10) On a scale of 1 to 10, how safe would you feel walking around your campus at 3 AM? (1 being not safe at all, 10 being completely safe)

\_\_\_\_\_

- 11) On a scale of 1 to 10, how fearful are you of becoming the victim of sexual violence at the hands of a stranger? (1 being not at all fearful, 10 being extremely fearful)

\_\_\_\_\_

- 12) On a scale of 1 to 10, how fearful are you of becoming the victim of sexual violence at the hands of an acquaintance? (1 being not at all fearful, 10 being extremely fearful)

\_\_\_\_\_

- 13) On a scale of 1 to 10, how fearful are you of becoming the victim of sexual violence at the hands of an intimate partner? (1 being not at all fearful, 10 being extremely fearful)

\_\_\_\_\_

- 14) Does your college/university have an office or organization dedicated to the prevention of sexual violence?

- a) Yes
- b) No
- c) I'm not sure

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- 15) How often does your college/university host presentations, panels, events, etc. about ways to prevent and/or identify sexual violence?
- a) Weekly
  - b) Monthly
  - c) Once per semester
  - d) Once per year
  - e) Never
  - f) I'm not sure
  - g) Other: \_\_\_\_\_
- 16) How likely are you to voluntarily attend at least one prevention program per semester?
- a) Extremely likely
  - b) Somewhat likely
  - c) Unsure/Don't Know
  - d) Somewhat unlikely
  - e) Extremely unlikely
- 17) Have you ever been a victim of sexual violence while attending your current college?
- a) Yes
  - b) No
  - c) I'd rather not say

If you responded "no" to question #17, go on to question #19. If you responded "yes," proceed to question #18.

- 18) How many times have you been a victim of sexual violence while attending your current college?
- a) Once
  - b) 2-3 occasions
  - c) 4 or more occasions
  - d) Other: \_\_\_\_\_
  - e) I'd rather not say
- 19) How many individuals do you know who have been the victim of sexual violence while attending your current college?
- a) None
  - b) 1 to 3
  - c) 4 to 6
  - d) 7 or more
  - e) I'd rather not say
- 20) True or False. Most victims of sexual assault are attacked by a stranger.
- a) True
  - b) False

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21) On a scale from 1 to 10, how likely are you to agree with the following statement? (1 being don't agree at all, 10 being completely agree)

The presence of alcohol is the single most significant factor in cases of sexual violence on college campuses.

\_\_\_\_\_

22) On a scale from 1 to 10, how likely are you to agree with the following statement? (1 being don't agree at all, 10 being completely agree)

What a woman is wearing has a significant influence on whether or not she will be the victim of sexual violence.

\_\_\_\_\_

23) On a scale from 1 to 10, how likely are you to agree with the following statement? (1 being don't agree at all, 10 being completely agree)

Actions speak louder than words: if a girl says "no" but is acting in a way that suggests "yes", she's just playing hard to get.

\_\_\_\_\_

24) On a scale from 1 to 10, how likely are you to agree with the following statement? (1 being don't agree at all, 10 being completely agree)

A girl who is sexually active is more likely to become the victim of sexual violence than a girl who is a virgin.

\_\_\_\_\_

25) On a scale from 1 to 10, how likely are you to agree with the following statement? (1 being don't agree at all, 10 being completely agree)

Most cases of sexual violence are actually a result of a girl regretting/having second thoughts about a consensual sexual encounter.

\_\_\_\_\_

26) Which of the following are most likely to reduce the presence of sexual violence on college campuses? (Choose up to 3)

- a) Stricter disciplinary action by the college/university
- b) More awareness of the issue (through events, speakers, clubs, etc.)
- c) Adjustment of female behavior on campus (more modest dress, abstinence, etc.)
- d) Adjustment of male behavior on campus (less emphasis on sexual activity, more respectful language towards women, etc.)
- e) Reducing the presence and consumption of alcohol on campus
- f) More safety precautions (more security, surveillance, emergency call locations, etc.)
- g) Other: \_\_\_\_\_

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27) On a scale from 1 to 10, how fearful are you of becoming the victim of sexual violence while attending your college/university? (1 being not at all fearful, 10 being extremely fearful)

---

28) How likely are you to step in at a party if you see a man making unwanted advancements on a woman if you don't know either one of them?

- a) Extremely likely
- b) Somewhat likely
- c) Unsure/Don't know
- d) Somewhat unlikely
- e) Extremely unlikely

29) How likely are you to step in at a party if you see a male friend making unwanted advancements on a woman whom you do not know?

- a) Extremely likely
- b) Somewhat likely
- c) Unsure/Don't know
- d) Somewhat unlikely
- e) Extremely unlikely

30) How likely are you to step in at a party if you see a man making unwanted advancements on one of your female friends?

- a) Extremely likely
- b) Somewhat likely
- c) Unsure/Don't know
- d) Somewhat unlikely
- e) Extremely unlikely

31) Overall, how satisfied are you with your institution's handling of sexual violence cases?

- a) Extremely satisfied
- b) Somewhat satisfied
- c) Unsure/Don't know
- d) Somewhat unsatisfied
- e) Extremely unsatisfied

32) Overall, how satisfied are you with the sexual violence education and programs that your institution has provided?

- a) Extremely satisfied
- b) Somewhat satisfied
- c) Unsure/Don't know
- d) Somewhat unsatisfied
- e) Extremely unsatisfied