

THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

By Jackson Katz

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It Takes a Campus to Stop Assaults

Sen. Claire McCaskill's investigations into the state of sexual-assault policies on the nation's college campuses have revealed a system badly in need of reform. Many of us who work in this area have been arguing as much for decades—and we welcome the increased political attention to this topic that has been catalyzed, in part, by the courageous activism of sexual-assault survivors.

While reform is needed at multiple levels, I would like to provide some recent historical perspective and context for what has been happening in prevention. When my colleagues and I created a violence-prevention program in the early 1990s at Northeastern University's Center for the Study of Sport in Society, the central challenge in sexual-assault and relationship-abuse prevention was about how best to engage men. Previously, most "prevention" education took the form of teaching girls and women risk-reduction strategies. When men were the focus, it was almost always as perpetrators or potential perpetrators, which understandably caused defensive reactions among men who resented the cynical prejudgment.

We wanted, in the words of Esta Soler, the founder of Futures Without Violence, to invite men into the process, not indict them as potential rapists and batterers. We experimented with an exciting new strategy that had recently been developed by middle-school anti-bullying researchers. Known as the "bystander" approach, the central idea behind this paradigm-shifting strategy was that everyone in a given peer culture—boys and girls, men and women—had a role in supporting victims, confronting abusers, and thus creating a climate in which abusive behavior of any type would not be tolerated.

This approach offered a way to respond to men who claimed that gender violence was not their problem because they themselves did not harass or abuse women. The counterargument was simple, and drawn from the basic social-justice idea that all members of dominant groups—men, whites, heterosexuals—have an important role in challenging systems of unfair and unearned power and privilege. If abusive behaviors by individual men are often rooted in social norms whose origins lie in deeper misogynist beliefs, then everyone is responsible for changing those norms to make sexist abuse socially unacceptable.

The bystander approach provided a strategy for encouraging men to interrupt their peers' abusive behaviors and make it clear that treating women disrespectfully was a problem not only because it was against the rules and possibly illegal but because it would not be tolerated in the peer culture itself. In other words, if you behave in sexist and abusive ways toward women (or other men), you will lose status and standing among your teammates, classmates, fraternity brothers, and friends, who will not accept or condone that sort of behavior—and who will let you know it.

The focus on bystanders also provided a positive role for women. They were positioned not as victims or potential targets of abuse—or as perpetrators—but as empowered bystanders who could support victims and challenge and interrupt abusive behaviors. In the process they would not only help to

prevent sexual assaults and other abuses but also provide powerful examples of women's strength to younger girls (and boys).

The rationale for beginning our work in athletics did not have to do with specific problems in that subculture—although of course there are some. Rather, the idea was to utilize the popularity, high visibility, and leadership platform of college athletes to help shift social norms in male culture far beyond the locker room. The plan was to start in athletics and then move out into general populations of college students and others.

As the philosophy and methods of bystander work grew in popularity, variations on the central theme arose. For example, in recent years, “bystander intervention” programs that de-emphasize discussions of gender norms and instead focus on the development of personal skills have proliferated. To be sure, helping people develop skills for intervention is essential, but at its essence, bystander training is about more than skill building. People—especially men—need permission from each other to act, and reassurance that those who do intervene and interrupt abusive behavior will be respected, not rejected.

Men, as well as women, need the opportunity to talk and ask questions about the dynamics of their relationships with their peers, and the opportunity to explore the ethical implications of various courses of action: If my friend is constantly making degrading comments about women, should I say something? If another friend is circulating a sext message with nude photos of his former girlfriend, how should I respond? If I'm at a party and see a guy I know who's trying to get a stumbling and obviously inebriated woman to leave with him, what should I do? Do I have a responsibility to her? To him? To myself? To whom can I turn for ideas or support? What have others done in similar circumstances?

Bystander education at its best does more than teach skills for intervention. Its short-term goal is to prevent assaults. But its long-term goal is to change the underlying belief systems and social norms that tolerate or encourage sexist and abusive behaviors. This is sometimes an uphill fight, especially in a media culture where the sexual objectification of women is pervasive, and men's callous cruelty toward women is sexualized in pornography, music lyrics, and elsewhere.

But those who do bystander work on gender-violence issues with college students have reason to be optimistic. We know from more than two decades of experience that when given the opportunity to debate and discuss these matters, by and large the students—women and men—jump in and grow in the process.

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