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Sexual Misconduct Discourses within a Gendered Campus Environment

Final Report – November 29, 2016

Kathryn Enke, Ph.D.

Executive Summary

Using data from focus groups, class papers and institutional documents, this project for the HLC Quality Initiative examined discourses around sexual misconduct at the College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University and considered how these discourses reflect a gendered campus environment. The research aimed to inform the national conversation on sexual misconduct on college campuses and to suggest specific recommendations for implementation at the College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University.

Student participants understood sexual assault through three interrelated discourses: 1) discourses of heteronormativity, 2) discourses of uncertainty, and 3) discourses of community. Each of these discourses suggest specific opportunities for campus interventions to eliminate sexual assault. Recommendations for practice surfacing through this study include:

- Mandatory and ongoing training for students, faculty and staff, designed to counter heteronormativity and uncertainty;
- Inclusion of sexual misconduct education within the general education curriculum, so that no students can opt out;
- Wider engagement with concepts from gender studies within trainings and educational sessions on campus;
- Basic sexual health education at the college level that does not assume previous knowledge;

- Open communication about the prevalence of sexual misconduct, to balance perceptions of a safe community;
- A visible security presence on campus, particularly in perceived masculine spaces; and
- Systems of support for reporters of sexual misconduct that ensure confidentiality.

Overall, participants stressed that differing interventions are needed for women and men students, targeted to their level of understanding and preconceptions. Further research could illuminate the key messages that best reach the majority of women and men students, as well as those who do not easily identify within a gender binary.

Research Report

Using data from focus groups, class papers and institutional documents, this project for the HLC Quality Initiative examined discourses around sexual misconduct at the College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University and considered how these discourses reflect a gendered campus environment. The research aimed to inform the national conversation on sexual misconduct on college campus and to suggest specific recommendations for implementation at the College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University.

Theoretical Framework

Sexual misconduct on college campuses has recently garnered media, governmental, and research attention (e.g., www.notalone.gov; Reed, 2015; Rosman, 2015; Wooten & Mitchell, 2015). Sexual misconduct, within this report, is defined broadly to include sexual harassment, relationship violence, stalking, and sexual assault, a definition in line with guidance issued by the U.S. Department of Education (2011).

This study is informed by national literature about sexual misconduct on college campuses that focuses on the relationship between sexual violence and sexism, hegemonic

masculinity, and patriarchy (e.g., Angelone, Mitchell, & Grossi, 2015; Armstrong, Hamilton, & Sweeney, 2006; Kilmartin & Berkowitz, 2005; Jozkowski, 2015; Rhode, 1999). It acknowledges that women are more likely to experience and report sexual misconduct than men in college (Krebs, Lindquist, Warner, Fisher, & Martin, 2007) and that popular understandings of gender violence are often heterosexist (Wooten, 2015).

Methods, Data Sources and Data Analysis

I employed critical discourse analysis as a framework for understanding the relationships between language in use on campus, and the social structures, power relationships, and identity work represented within that language. The study drew on a Foucauldian perspective that discourse is a system of representation that creates and regulates meaning (Hall, 2001), and Gee's (2005) assertion that discourse is a tool for making certain things significant or not.

The study was conducted at the College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University. Data were collected through three methods, in order to gain a robust understanding of the ways that students talk about sexual misconduct on campus and ensure construct validity (Yin, 2003). First, I conducted three focus groups with a total of 12 men and women students who participated in a sexual misconduct event or bystander training session on campus. These group interviews were conducted in fall 2015 using a protocol focused on students' perceptions about sexual misconduct issues on campus. Second, I analyzed students' papers voluntarily submitted as part of an introduction to gender studies class in fall 2015. Within these papers, students reflected on the ways that understandings of and discussions about sexual misconduct on campus are gendered. Third, I reviewed institutional documents and observed institutional trainings and events designed to raise campus awareness of these issues.

Data were analyzed using constant comparison (Glaser & Strauss, 1998; Merriam, 1998), with attention to the ways that language used to talk about sexual misconduct reflected the identity of the participant and a gendered campus environment. An iterative analysis led me to group data into three discourses that characterize the predominant ways students framed their understandings of sexual misconduct on campus.

Research Findings

Student participants engaged three discourses to articulate their understandings of sexual misconduct: 1) discourses of heteronormativity, 2) discourses of uncertainty, and 3) discourses of community.

Discourses of heteronormativity. Heteronormativity is the normalization of heterosexuality, maintained by individuals, institutions, and social pressure (Habarth, 2008; Kitzinger, 2005). Heteronormativity “leads individuals to conceive of themselves and their social worlds in particular ways (e.g., people are either male or female, should partner with others of the opposite sex, and should act and feel in accordance with social expectations of males or females)” (Habarth, p. 2).

Discourses of heteronormativity were prevalent within students’ understandings of sexual misconduct, as they cast women as victims and men as perpetrators. Additionally, men participants felt targeted by institutional policies and procedures related to sexual assault. For example, students reported that men felt victimized or like “jerks” after a widely attended training on sexual assault that exclusively used examples with male perpetrators.

Heteronormative understandings of assault make invisible the experiences of GLBT and gender non-conforming students, and the reality of same-sex assault. This is particularly

problematic as gay, lesbian, and bisexual individuals experience sexual misconduct at higher rates than heterosexual individuals (Walters, Chen, & Breiding, 2013).

Discourses of heteronormativity deny women's agency to be perpetrators, to intervene when they are bystanders to potential sexual assault, and to act to protect themselves. Women are cast only as victims who have sexual encounters happen to them, rather than as active participants in sex with choices about their sexual activity. As one man articulated in a focus group, "Most people who come from sex education...are taught that it is something that a man does to a woman. So it's very degrading towards women in that sense and...it already sets us up for this flawed understanding."

Discourses of heteronormativity make it difficult for men who have been assaulted to seek help, and for men to enter conversations about sexual misconduct. They hamper understandings of men as bystanders who can intervene to stop potential sexual misconduct, and inhibit education for men to help protect themselves from victimization. As one man expressed in a focus group conversation, "It's hard for men to really take initiative and take a stance on this issue because of our culture and how we are brought up as 'men.'...It feels like it's more a women's issue."

The Catholic identity of the colleges furthered complicated discourses of heteronormativity. An unrelated study conducted on campus posited that Catholic students were less accepting than other students of behaviors outside gender norms, characterizing the campuses as "tolerant but unaccepting" (Mack, LaLuzerne, & Windsperger, 2016).

Discourses of uncertainty. Students' understandings of sexual misconduct were also characterized by discourses of uncertainty. Participants reported limited sex education and revealed uncertainty about sex, consent, and sexual misconduct. Students linked the lack of sex

education at their high schools and in college to the Catholic background of the institutions, and the Catholic beliefs of many students. Others pointed to celibate monks and sisters as complicated sources of information about sex and sexual misconduct. One man said that, “Other than a couple classes, there’s no real way of knowing about the responsibilities of sex and what it means for a healthy relationship.”

Students with limited or heteronormative understandings of sex engaged discourses of uncertainty when reflecting on who can perpetrate sexual misconduct and who can be victims. If men always initiate and enjoy sex, how can they be victims? If women are passive participants in sex, how can they be perpetrators? If individuals have limited understandings of consent, how can they recognize when consent has been given?

Discourses of uncertainty were evident in students’ discussions of the differences between sexual assault and regretted sex. The implication, especially among men participants, was that some allegations are brought by women who enthusiastically participated in a sexual encounter but regretted it later. The myth of false reports also persists, despite national research that finds false reports account for less than ten percent of all reports of sexual misconduct (Heenan & Murray, 2006; Lisak, Gardinier, Nicksa, & Cote, 2010; Lonsway, Archambault, & Lisak, 2009). This uncertainty about “real” sexual assault contributes to victim-blaming, which students reported was common on campus among women and men.

Students asserted that women are more likely than men to see sexual assault as a pressing issue on both campuses, and noted that many males underestimate the incidence of sexual misconduct. One man who had studied national and local statistics of sexual assault as part of a class assignment concluded that “females tend to have more awareness and understanding of the sexual misconduct.” My observations affirmed that women seemed more comfortable than men

talking about sexual misconduct and used language that was typically more precise, focusing on lack of consent as a key aspect of sexual misconduct. Men participants, in contrast, generally emphasized force in their definitions of sexual misconduct.

Discourses of community. Community living is a guiding value of the colleges under study. While this sense of community is an overwhelmingly positive influence, discourses of community also characterized students' understandings of sexual assault in negative ways.

Students expressed that the tight-knit community often breaches the anonymity of victims and perpetrators. Reports of sexual misconduct on campus are often widely known. Many participants shared that they knew someone who had been involved in a sexual misconduct case. While I was conducting my research, two safety notices were sent to the entire community regarding incidents of sexual assault. Still, some students, mostly men, reported that sexual assault is not a big issue on these two campuses. One man wrote that "The school already does enough to inform us about sexual assault. They seem to make it a much bigger deal than what it truly is."

Both men and women students interpreted the community as a safe place where sexual assault does not (and could not) happen. This illusion of safety keeps students from taking precautions to protect themselves from becoming victims and perpetrators of sexual misconduct, feeding the myth of false reports and the incidence of victim blaming: this community is so safe that reports could not be true. As one woman said, "It's almost more comfortable to say 'you did something wrong' [to a victim of sexual misconduct] because then it doesn't feel like it could happen to anybody....It almost makes us feel more comfortable to point out that particular female that we're friends with and say 'it's your fault' because it makes us feel more secure."

CSB and SJU provide geographically separate living spaces for men and women. While the general feeling is that the community is safe, three women participating in this study voiced that some men's living spaces, particularly those where upperclassmen live, are perceived as dangerous. Women wrote in class papers that sexual assault makes them feel "less safe and less able to trust others" on campus. Men responded to such comments with surprise; one reflected that he had "never conceived of that idea being a possibility."

Ultimately, the entire community is disrupted by sexual misconduct. As one senior reflected: "I feel like we can't uphold our status as a 'community' until our sexual assaults are down to zero." Another student expressed similar sentiments: "During my four years here, one of my close friends was a victim of sexual assault, by a current [student]....After that experience, I would say I have never felt the sense of community again."

Recommendations for CSB and SJU

Each of these discourses suggests opportunities for campus interventions to eliminate sexual assault. Recommendations for practice surfacing through this study include the following.

Mandatory and ongoing Title IX training for students, faculty and staff, designed to counter heteronormativity and uncertainty. CSB and SJU have a robust education program around policy, expectations, and personal choices. Education for students begins with fall orientation and reaches across all four class cohorts, including an online course, bystander training, residential curricula that include conversations around risk management and boundaries, peer education programs, and passive training items like posters and pamphlets. Training continues to be a focus for the Title IX team, which of necessity balances attention to prevention of sexual misconduct with attention to responding to reports of sexual misconduct. Training has recently been bolstered (and made mandatory for all new students) in order to comply with new

Minnesota regulations regarding sexual harassment and sexual violence. In addition, in fall 2016 the Title IX team called attention to new online resources available to guide faculty and staff in responding to reports of sexual misconduct. We continue to discuss and identify opportunities for ongoing training, and opportunities for training to transform the discourses identified through this research.

Inclusion of sexual misconduct education within the general education curriculum, so that no students can opt out. Citing this research, in fall 2015 I recommended that the Common Curriculum Visioning Committee consider how the new general education curriculum currently in development could include topics like sexual misconduct education. In fall 2016, I also shared a report of this research with the team working on the First Year Experience. The First Year Experience will reach students during the critical first weeks of their college career and could provide curricular and co-curricular opportunities for sexual misconduct education.

Wider engagement with concepts from gender studies within Title IX trainings and educational sessions on campus. Participants indicated that concepts learned in gender studies courses had informed their understanding of sexual misconduct. In fall 2016, CSB/SJU hired the first full-time gender studies faculty member, to add to the gender studies faculty who also teach in other disciplines. In fall 2016, I shared the results of this research with the chair of the gender studies department so that he could play an active role in determining modes of wider engagement.

Basic sexual health education at the college level that does not assume previous knowledge. As noted above, participants reported limited sex education and revealed uncertainty about sex, consent, and sexual misconduct. Participants indicated that basic sexual health education is needed to inform healthy relationships and reduce the incidence of sexual

misconduct. In fall 2016, I shared the results of this research with the CSB/SJU assistant director of health promotion so that the findings can inform her continued work.

Open communication about the prevalence of sexual misconduct, to balance perceptions of a safe community. Sexual misconduct is a risk on all college campuses, small and large, urban and rural, public and private. The challenge is communicating the risk and encouraging safe behaviors without creating panic or putting the onus of action on potential victims of sexual misconduct. Given the prevalence of media coverage about sexual misconduct on college campus, and particularly the attention toward the summer 2016 case involving Stanford student Brock Turner, I provided particular resources informed by this research to campus tour guides, admissions ambassadors, and admissions staff to respond to questions about sexual assault and campus safety from prospective students and their families. Data about reports of sexual misconduct are publicly available within the Annual Crime Report. Reports of sexual misconduct have risen in recent years, reflecting a more robust reporting culture and a lower tolerance on campus for letting these sorts of crimes go unreported.

A visible security presence on campus, particularly in perceived masculine spaces. CSB Security and SJU Life Safety Services are good partners with the Title IX team in preventing and responding to incidents of sexual misconduct. Some participants within this research identified targeted locations on campus where they felt unsafe on particular days or at particular times of day. In fall 2016, I provided the findings of this research to the directors of both campus safety offices.

Systems of support for reporters of sexual misconduct that ensure confidentiality. Through this research and various experiences in responding to reports of sexual misconduct, the Title IX team at CSB and SJU is aware of the high social price that reporters of sexual

misconduct sometimes pay, regardless of our policies around confidentiality and our prohibition of retaliation. We continue to wrestle with the discourse of community and what it means for reporters of sexual misconduct. In the meantime, the findings of this research were shared with the Title IX team to inform ongoing conversations about systems of support for those affected by sexual misconduct.

Overall, students stressed that differing interventions are needed for women and men students, targeted to their level of understanding and preconceptions. Further research could illuminate the key messages that best reach the majority of women and men students, as well as those who do not easily identify within a gender binary. Staff, faculty, and students at the College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University should consider the ways that they can positively transform these discourses to reduce the occurrence of sexual misconduct.

Collaborating and Sharing the Results

Throughout the course of this project, I worked as Title IX Coordinator for the College of Saint Benedict, and I worked closely with the CSB and SJU Title IX team and the Title IX Coordinator for Saint John's University. My research findings impacted all aspects of my work as a member of that team, particularly as we revised the CSB and SJU Sexual Misconduct Policy and Complaint Procedures in summer 2016. Findings from this research also impacted my review of the Sexual Violence Campus Climate Survey, to be administered during the 2016-2017 academic year.

Findings and recommendations from this research were shared with the following internal groups on campus via email and in-person conversation:

CSB/SJU Common Curriculum Visioning Committee (fall 2015)

CSB/SJU Office of Admission (summer 2016)

CSB and SJU Title IX team (fall 2016)

First Year Experience team (fall 2016)

CSB/SJU chair of gender studies program (fall 2016)

CSB/SJU assistant director of health promotion (fall 2016)

CSB Office of Security and SJU Life Safety Services (fall 2016)

CSB and SJU Cabinets (fall 2016)

Externally, my proposal has been accepted to present my research findings in April 2017 at the American Educational Research Association Conference in San Antonio, TX. I will present this work as part of a session on “Higher Education Leadership Perspectives on Gender, Sexuality and Student Services.” In spring 2017, I also plan to submit my research for publication in the *Journal of College Student Development*.

Ongoing Work

As Title IX Coordinator for the College of Saint Benedict, I am designated to coordinate our campus’s efforts to comply with Title IX (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). In this role, I review policies and procedures around sexual misconduct, ensure compliance with relevant state and federal mandates, and coordinate prevention and response activities on campus. Because of the ever-changing mandates, a campus culture that has given more attention to sexual misconduct and encouraged reporting, and increased media attention to sexual misconduct on college campuses, my work in this area is necessarily reactive at times. This initiative encouraged proactivity: in engaging with students about the ways they understand and discuss sexual misconduct, in seeking opportunities for further institutional action to reduce incidence of sexual misconduct, in examining the ways our unique coordinate relationship affects our response to sexual misconduct, and in sharing research findings with groups across the institution

working to ensure a healthy and safe campus environment. I am pleased with the work accomplished.

Work remains in order to fully translate participants' recommendations into institutional improvement. I believe it is evident above that the Title IX team is already responding to students' suggestions. Our orientation is toward continuous improvement.

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