

Campus Climate and Campus Rape, Part 1

By Katie Rose Guest Pryal

In October 2019, the Association of American Universities (AAU) released its 2019 Campus Climate Survey on Sexual Assault and Sexual Misconduct. The 2019 survey followed up on a similar survey conducted by the organization in 2015. With these two sets of data in hand, a lot of what we already know about campus sexual assault has been confirmed—but new things were revealed, too.

Although the AAU Campus Climate Survey, which is the first of its kind to provide data sets from the same institutions over time, is valuable in many ways, it is not without its limitations—and its critics. Despite its limitations, the data provides valuable insight into campus sexual violence and the ways we can make college campuses safer, and more worthwhile, places of learning.

But first: Who exactly is the AAU? And why did they conduct this survey in the first place?

Survey Background

Despite its name, the AAU is not representative of all U.S. colleges and universities. Quite the contrary: “Founded in 1900, the Association of American Universities is composed of America’s leading research universities. AAU’s 65 research universities transform lives through education, research, and innovation.” The AAU is largely composed of the Ivy League schools, state flagship universities and other top public and private research universities.

The student populations of these schools are not representative of most students at most universities across the United States. In fact, the company that conducted the survey acknowledged that this fact is a limitation of the survey data.

The history of the Campus Climate Survey is fraught. In their own memo to member schools announcing the 2015 survey, the AAU stated that the purpose for conducting their survey was to fend off any federally mandated survey that might materialize at a time when combating campus sexual assault was a topic that interested lawmakers: “It is crucial that we move forward together on this effort at an aggressive pace. In part, we want to be able to develop solid data and information before Congress and the White House mandate, as we expect, that every campus conduct a government-developed survey in the near future, which will likely be a one-size-fits-all survey that does not reliably assess the campus culture on this issue.” Thus, it seems like the AAU wanted to avoid a survey that the government, in its push for campus sexual violence accountability, might require.

In a 2014 open letter to AAU member schools, researchers in psychology, public health and more urged them not to participate in the survey, concerned, among other things, about the survey’s methodology. They were also concerned that the data would only be released publicly in the aggregate—and that results about individual schools’ climates would be kept secret, only accessible by

individual schools.

In 2015, it seemed that the AAU member schools were only conducting the survey to fend off government oversight and keep individual results a secret. Those were not promising signs about the survey’s usefulness for improving campus life and safety.

This time around, however, the AAU and its member schools appear to have taken some of the earlier criticism seriously. In response to criticisms, they modified questions to add trigger warnings, for example, and to make the survey more sound in other ways.

Then, in October, when the AAU released data in the aggregate, the participating schools also released their individual data. This greater transparency has led to some negative press for schools, but it will also build greater trust between students and the schools they rely on.

What did the 2019 survey show?

Rates of Sexual Violence Are High and Getting Higher

The 2019 survey shows that sexual violence is still prevalent on the campuses that participated—in fact, that it is growing.

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According to the results of the 2019 survey, rates of sexual violence, on the whole, are high (but no higher than those of us who work in the area of sexual violence expected). In the 2019 survey, in which 33 schools participated, for women undergraduates the rate of nonconsensual sexual contact by physical force or inability to consent was 25.9%. Among TGQN (trans*, queer, and gender-nonconforming) undergraduates, the rate was 22.8%.

Twenty-one schools participated in both the 2015 and 2019 surveys, which provides data about the rise and fall of rate of assault. The data shows that “the rate of nonconsensual sexual contact by physical force or inability to consent increased from 2015 to 2019 by 3.0 percentage points (to 26.4 percent) for undergraduate women.” However, the survey aggregate has a flaw in its reporting, in that it “masks variation across the 21 schools. Many of the 21 schools did not experience a statistically significant change between 2015 and 2019. However, there were several schools that changed very dramatically (e.g., by 50.0% to 75.0% of the 2015 rate).” This flaw is yet another reason why the individual reports from schools were so critical to release.

Trust and Use of Campus Resources

Also concerning is the fact that students as a whole do not trust their schools to take care of them if they report assault. The survey results state, “While 65.6 percent of students reported it was ‘very’ or ‘extremely’ likely that school officials would take a report of a sexual assault seriously, significantly fewer of those reporting an experience with nonconsensual sexual contact by physical force or inability to consent had this same opinion (45.0%).”

Only 65% of students, in the aggregate, believe their schools are going to take a report seriously. That number

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and “to have our voices heard.” Women need to be able to choose from a variety of majors and not just the traditional ones, as well as have “greater access to the top posts in higher education.”

In her off hours, Brown-Nagin and her family enjoy sports, both amateur and professional. One son is a soccer player; the other plays basketball. She and her family also enjoy listening to jazz. But her biggest relaxation activity is simply hanging out with her family. 

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- defaming students in front of peers and other faculty.

The department chair's behavior matters. Junior faculty will not trust a chair who bullies colleagues and students. Department chairs also should avoid workplace bullying behaviors.

Collective Follow-Through

When climate surveys are conducted, academic administration should avoid falling into the common trap of not following through. Too often, such surveys have the data to solve contentious organizational problems, but then those with the power to affect change get distracted by competing tasks or personal problems. Not addressing the survey findings can be just as disconcerting as not addressing the problem at all.

Leading educated, independent-minded faculty to change behaviors, without clear federal laws prohibiting bullying, can be particularly slippery, like chasing a dot of mercury on a hot day. In the absence of clear and actionable regulations, the administration has minimal scaffolding on which to build expectations for civility. Therefore, the scaffolding for managing bullying behaviors is often homegrown and includes self-policing expectations from the community.

Collectively addressing workplace bullying on campus involves less stress and less time than public lawsuits, intrusive depositions and the arduous discovery process if a bullied colleague sues for emotional and psychological damage. Further, such legal action destroys department morale and can precipitate turnover from other colleagues escaping a toxic environment.

Academic administrators might find these recommendations time-consuming and potentially outside the scope of their duties. Even more confounding is the possibility that the human resources department simply is not trained to deal with academic bullying. However, if academic leadership stands mute and apathetic when workplace abuse and psychological violence are reported, they can be held accountable when someone has the savvy insight to seek legal retribution when the organization does nothing to prevent debilitating workplace bullying. 

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means that, right now, over a third of the students at the universities surveyed do not have faith the schools will believe them if they report—hypothetically.

And that number drops to below half if a student has already been assaulted.

These numbers worry me deeply—and they should worry you, too. Students who are assaulted seek campus resources—and should seek campus resources—as a way to keep themselves safe. Victims need counseling, assistance with courses and scheduling, disability services, medical services, any number of services that your institutions are equipped to provide—services that have nothing to do with adjudication by the way. But victims do not seek them because they do not believe they will be taken seriously.

And this mistrust is a serious problem: for schools who seek to retain students, and for students whose only desire is an education. 

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This blame gets internalized. I've blamed myself for the threats that happened to me. I've kicked myself for my lack of preparation and planning. The burden fell on me. I also took care of myself because I was told I was supposed to. And yet, no amount of doing my nails helped me cope with death threats. How could it?

Take a Risk

Trying to cope while the world blames me for my choices made me afraid to act. Isn't it easier to just avoid risks?

And yet, curtailing our risks isn't inherently caring for ourselves. Not taking risks limits us. It constrains our careers—our lives. It limits our opportunities and possibilities. It's not a balm or a safeguard; it's a trap.

Self-care can also be about taking risks. Yes, it's risky to speak up, to be visible and to live our truths. And yet, not taking a risk doesn't let us avoid pain or suffering. We can plan and prepare. Planning doesn't necessarily keep us safe. Sometimes, taking a risk can be self-care. It can be revolutionary to assert ourselves and show up. It can be a protest about a world that tries to grind us up. It can be a commitment to not be constrained by those who want to limit us. We care for ourselves when we don't let the world cow us. Taking a risk can be care. It can save us. 

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behave. And while I didn't create the tiny people in my head, no one else is going to deal with them. They're all too busy managing their own inner critics. Nope, these tiny people are mine and mine alone.

By bringing them into the light, writing about them and talking about them with others, my hunch is that they'll get smaller and smaller. Until maybe, one day, they finally float out to sea for good, leaving me to sail this ship, my ship, wherever the risky winds of life will take it. 