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When Your Student Has Been Sexually Assaulted

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January 14, 2015

[Image](#): placards at NOW-NYC's Take Rape Seriously Rally (Creative Commons Licensed image by flickr user [Women's eNews](#))

This is the second of a three-part [series on sexual assault on campus](#) by Vitae columnists Annie E. Clark and Katie Rose Guest Pryal.

Every time you teach a course, odds are you have one or more rape survivors in your classroom. Think about how many of them you would find in a large intro course in calculus or

chemistry. The prevalence of campus rape is a harrowing reality. What we aim to do here is help you figure out how to respond when a student in one of your classes has been sexually assaulted, a situation that *will* happen to you.

Be Humane and Caring

While institutions have their own nuanced procedures about what exactly you are required to do when a student confides in you about sexual assault, it's important to recognize that even if you have such procedural obligations, you also have obligations as a human being and a trusted professional to respond to your student in a caring manner. That might seem obvious, but sometimes responding in a caring way can be hard.

Many people find themselves shocked into silence or into other unexpected reactions when they hear from a student (or friend or family member) that she (or he) is a rape survivor. You have a better chance of reacting appropriately if you educate yourself about helping survivors ([via web resources](#), for example). Rape crisis counselors are trained in [active listening skills](#) that you can learn as well. Not only will those skills make you a better listener in a crisis situation, they will also make you a better teacher.

Remember, if a rape victim comes to you, she or he is likely terrified yet chooses to trust you. As the trusted person, it's helpful for you to know that survivors respond to trauma in different ways. Some students may skip class, while others will participate less. Others still will see coursework as something they can control (rape is about power and control, and they've just had all of that taken away), so they will study all the time and overreact if they make a lower grade than they'd hoped for. While there isn't a right or wrong way to respond to being raped, there are [helpful](#) and [unhelpful](#) things you can say to students who tell you that they are survivors.

The most important two things you can tell a student—or anyone for that matter—who confides in you, are these: “It’s not your fault” and “I believe you.” As you may be the first person that the student has ever told, your reaction to the story is crucial.

While your institution’s policy and procedures are also important, responding in a compassionate way is paramount.

Be Mindful of Your Institution’s Legal Obligations

It’s good to know what, if anything, your university expects of you in handling this sort of situation. Here’s what we mean: Most institutions require most of their employees to report to

campus administration any assault that a student reports to them.

At most institutions, faculty are [“responsible employees,”](#) even if they are untrained and unaware of this obligation. A responsible employee, as determined by the U.S. Education Department’s Office for Civil Rights, is someone who: (1) has authority to take action to redress harassment, (2) has the duty to officially report the harassment to the school’s Title IX coordinator, and (3) is a person whom a student could reasonably believe has this authority. ([See our first column in this series](#) for more about what a Title IX coordinator does.)

Your institution might use terms like “mandatory reporter” or “confidential advocate,” and those terms are tossed around at different institutions with different implications. Therefore, it is important that you educate yourself about what your particular institution’s rules are regarding mandatory reporting. We suggest that you find out as soon as you finish reading this column.

While some institutions have gone overboard with strict policies (“All personnel must report everything forever and ever and always because we are terrified of getting sued”), others haven’t even talked to their faculty at all about the issue (“We are willfully ignorant”).

If you are designated a “responsible employee” or “mandatory reporter” by your institution, and that idea doesn’t appeal to you (it’s not our favorite thing, either), there are several things you can do to make the a conversation more comfortable for both you and a student survivor.

- Most people don’t blurt out uncomfortable things with no warning; they often dance around the subject. So before a student reveals something sensitive, you can inform her or him that you are a responsible employee, and explain exactly what that means: namely, that you are required to report what the student is about to say.
- If a student is no longer comfortable speaking to you, it’s a good idea to know where the student can get confidential support on or near campus. For example, there is likely a rape crisis center near your campus. Many towns have them, and they are unaffiliated with the police and universities.
- Additionally, a Title IX Coordinator has the ability to grant certain institutional employees some degree of confidentiality. If you are a responsible employee, yet you get many disclosures and you feel you would be better able to counsel students if you weren’t required to report what they told you, you can talk with your Title IX coordinator about what your options are at your college.

Be Mindful of the Classroom

Katie: *Seven years ago, I was in my first year of teaching at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill after graduating from my Ph.D. program. During the spring semester, I had a memorable young woman in my section of freshman interdisciplinary legal writing. She was such a fabulous member of the class that when she contacted me in the fall of 2014 after I published a [piece on campus rape](#) I remembered her—Annie—instantly, despite the hundreds of students I'd taught since. Annie told me that, just before she enrolled in my class in the spring of her freshman year, she'd been raped, too. I'm kicking myself now, wishing I could have helped Annie then. What could I have done differently? After giving the question some thought, these are the ideas Annie and I came up with together.*

Think about your classroom. There are so many ways that you can indicate that you, and your classroom, are safe for survivors. Considering how many places on campus might feel dangerous to a survivor of rape, merely making it to class could be considered a miracle. Knowing that *your* class is a place where she won't have to deal with rape jokes by her classmates makes it far more likely that she'll attend.

Think about your teaching material. If you are teaching a subject that includes sexual assault content, keep in mind that there are—for certain—people in your classroom who have been assaulted. Allow that knowledge, that reality, to affect your teaching. The context of our students' experiences is important to how we, as students and professors, learn about literature, film, art, and other material that represents assault.

Think about your syllabus. [On your syllabus](#), include a short paragraph about survivor safety, with web addresses and phone numbers for the campus Title IX coordinator, the local rape crisis center, the counseling center on campus, and the sex crimes division of the local police.

Speak up. Put a statement that says, “I support sexual assault survivors on this campus.” What a radical thing to say.

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[Annie E. Clark](#) is a co-founder at End Rape On Campus.

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