INSIGHTS

Bring Me Courage: Empowering Student Voices to Reduce Sexual Assault and Harassment Reporting Barriers and Influence Culture

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ABSTRACT

Sexual assault and harassment on college campus, particularly military service academies, is a complex problem requiring student-led culture change. Efforts of the top-down campus administrator to change culture will be ineffective without student buy-in and input. Listening to student voices is necessary to identify barriers and paths to enable behaviors on the peripherals that reinforce desired culture traits. This article highlights a student-led effort at the U.S. Air Force Academy to reduce reporting barriers by disincentivizing peer pressure to remain silent in the face of harassment, bullying, hazing, or assault.

Keywords: Culture, Sexual Assault, Harassment, Barrier, Reporting

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Cultural problems deserve the participation and input of those most affected by cultural solutions. Without ownership, involvement, and agency of the beneficiaries of change, ingrained norms may become more calcified by rejecting the influence of the "outsider." This article proposes that efforts to make cultural shifts, particularly with the goal of reducing sexual assault and harassment, must be perceived to be led by the people who live in and own the culture. Otherwise, toxic cultural norms may backlash and become even more calcified and entrenched.

Since the integration of women at U.S. military service academies in the mid-1970s, every one of the academies have experienced a persistent overall rise in unwanted sexual contact, harassment, and discrimination, despite comparatively stable rates of incident reporting (DoD Report, 2022; Davis & Klahr, 2023).[1] While external oversight-induced changes at the service academies during their 47-year history with women should have improved overall gender equality, the data related to unwanted sexual contact and harassment indicates stagnation or even perhaps the opposite effect.

Military service academies today have an urgent interest in identifying ways to turn the tide. The urgency is driven by recent DoD reports showing a significant and sustained increase in unwanted sexual contact and harassment, and a renewed external pressure in light of decades of work devoted to reducing prevalence (DoD Annual Report, 2022; Lawrence, 2023; Davis & Klahr, 2023). As an alum and professor at a military service academy, and former prosecutor and defense counsel for military sexual assault cases, I could not help but be profoundly affected by the data and interested in finding solutions for a problem that had not seemed to appreciably improve since my time as a cadet (2002–2006).

The pace at which women have been structurally and symbolically welcomed at the service academies is indicative of a deeper issue of cultural norms that may be affecting rates of sexual harm. Five decades ago, it was radical to open the opportunity for women to benefit from the quality education and preeminent leadership development that service academies provide (Stiehm, 1981). Since 1976, it has taken intense external (non-cadet) pressure and publicity to remove persistent symbols of inequality. For example, at the U.S. Air Force Academy it was not until 1997 that the use of simulated sexual assault against female cadets by fellow cadets during a mock prisoner of war training was stopped (Bayard de Volo & Hall, 2015). It was not until 2003 that exclusion-reinforcing language of "Bring Me Men" at the entrance gateway was replaced and women were permitted to keep their long hair, one of the few remaining symbols of femininity, upon indoctrination (Bayard de Volo & Hall, 2015; Callahan, 2009). It was not until 2023 that remaining urinals were physically removed from all women's restrooms in the dormitories at the Air Force Academy. These examples illustrate the depth of ingrained masculine norms and devalued femininity at service academies as a backdrop for evaluating the sexual harassment and violence problem.

Each of the changes were perceived to be instigated by authoritative leadership in response to intense external (non-cadet) pressure. But, almost like a living organism, culture resists forced change from outside actors because it is precisely the bonds of social structure that define the culture. Symbolic inequality is even more insidious than legally actionable violence and harassment because it often evades detection, becomes ingrained in social structures and tradition, and is normalized as a part of

1 In academic year 2021–2022, an estimated 21.4% of service academy women and 4.4% of men experienced unwanted sexual contact, with a reporting rate of 12.0% (Davis & Klahr, 2023). Nearly 20 years earlier, in academic year 2005-2006, 9.3% of academy women and 1.2% of men experienced unwanted sexual contact (Davis & Klahr, 2023), with a reporting rate of 15.0% at West Point and unreportable rates at the other service academies (DoD Report, 2006, p. 9, 38). The rate of reporting at the military service academies has ranged from approximately 10.0% in 2008 to 16.0% in 2014, with a steady rate of 12.0% from 2015-2022 (DoD Report, 2009, 2022).

culture (Bayard de Volo & Hall, 2015). In other words, it rejects or evades what is perceived as superficial forced change, even if the reality is that the change came from a combination of internal and external factors. The seemingly slow pace, spanned across multiple decades, in which symbolic inequality is addressed at service academies is unfortunately a symptom of the underlying causes. These causes include pervasive valuing of aggressive normative masculinity and devaluing of normative femininity ingrained in military – and service academy – culture (Callahan, 2009). Military service academy hegemonic normative masculinity include valuing discipline, dominance, power, strength, courage, toughness, competitiveness, heroism, emotional control, protection, winning, and risk-taking (Callahan, 2009; Hinojosa, 2010; Morgan & Gruber, 2011).

While normative masculinity is ingrained in service academies (and the military more generally), the impermeable social problem of sexual assault and harassment is not limited to service academies. College campus leaders have wrestled for decades with how to reduce sexual assault and harassment (Kirkpatrick & Kanin, 1957; Warshaw, 1994; White House, 2014). Despite the universality of the problem (AAU, 2019), and the breadth of solutions thrown at it, very few interventions have been identified as effective (Basile et al., 2016)[2]. One theme that has emerged in research is that the issue is inextricably tied to campus culture (Cook et al., 2023; Coulter & Rankin, 2020; Chamberlain et al., 2008; Moylan & Javorka, 2020). Prevalence of sexual harassment and violence is a function of individual and campus-level factors, and these factors are related and interconnected (Moylan et al., 2019). But what appears to be a solution – prompting culture change – is a problem with its own seeming intractability.

Culture Change

This article shares how a small number of students at the U.S. Air Force Academy, each wrestling with the same moral and social challenge but from very different perspectives, and each coincidentally approaching the same faculty member, led to two revelations regarding sexual assault and harassment at a military service academy, and a modest but novel way to address it.

The first revelation was that the people closest to the problem (students) may have a better understanding of the problem than those studying it, and in ways the data may obscure understanding. For example, the information shared anecdotally with this author by multiple students was the perceived social and structural consequences of being the initiator of an investigation. For example, if a sexual harassment occurs but the context in which it occurred involves many students aware of or engaging in underage drinking, the initial reporter of the harassment is socially outcast for causing others to be exposed for their misconduct because the investigation would inevitably reveal the other non-harassment offenses. In turn, the would-be reporter perceives that they would face reprisal by unit or team members, name-calling, shunning, non-selection for leadership roles, and loss of friendships or off-installation social opportunities.

Unfortunately, perceived peer ostracization was not offered as a reason for not reporting unwanted sexual conduct for U.S. Air Force Academy men or women in the 2018 or 2022 Service Academy Gender Relations Survey (Davis & Klahr, 2023, Tables 31, 32). That means that survey data does not even consider this as a major barrier to reporting, let alone measure it. The closest similar options on the survey for not reporting were "did not want more people to know," "did not want people talking or gossiping about you," and "felt

2 The Center for Disease Control cautions that not every program is equally effective across all contexts, but an intervention that comprehensively promotes social norms protective against violence, teaches skills to prevent sexual violence (including social-emotional learning, healthy intimate relationships, and empowerment-based training), provides opportunities to empower and support girls and women, creates protective environments, and supports victims to lessen harms are promising approaches supported by evidence (Basile et al., 2016).

uncomfortable making a report." None of these options get to the heart of the matter of perceived ostracization. To be clear, the survey does measure peer ostracization and retaliation, but only for instances actually experienced for reporting an offense,[3] not the perceived consequence that prevented reporting (Davis & Klahr, 2023).

Second, students are the most effective change agents of their own cultural shifts because they are the ones comprising the culture and most directly influencing it. Organizational change scholars offer that transformative change requires a shift in socially constructed dominant paradigms (Kezar & Eckels, 2002; Simsek & Seashore Louis, 1994). "A paradigmatic culture shift occurs only when all members of the community develop and implement new understandings of campus processes and structures" and "ignoring or violating campus cultural norms is the death nail to most change initiatives" (Rankin & Reason, 2008, p. 265). Transformative change theory makes sense in light of empowerment-based training programs having evidentiary support in reducing sexual harassment and violence because they equip students with skills and confidence to counteract perceived norms (Basile et al., 2016). Students' interactions with each other both create and reinforce social structures (Giddens, 1979). If the premise is true that students are the most effective change agents, then the question becomes how to motivate and influence students to affect their own campus cultures in a productive way.

One approach for this problem might be to begin by ruling out what we know does not, at least in isolation, appreciably affect student motivation and culture unless used as part of a comprehensive strategy: pronouncements of zero tolerance toward sexual assault and harassment, authoritatively prescribing what the culture should be,[4] and mandatory large-group sexual assault and harassment training[5] (Callahan, 2009; Kettrey et al., 2023; Rowley et al., 2002; Wolfendale, 2021). The lack of effectiveness of these strategies has led to significant frustration among students, military and congressional leaders. In addition to the failing methods in current use when not used as part of a comprehensive strategy, some theoretical approaches might be ruled out. Harsher criminal and administrative punishment for offenders might be ineffective or even counterproductive (Gneezy et al., 2011). Criminalization communicates a strong stance against sexual violence and harassment, and can lead to accountability or retribution for offenders and link victims to services. However, the deterrent effects of criminalization for intimate partner violence is inconclusive (Goodmark, 2021). Therefore, what measures are left for administrators and campus leaders to engage?

Reframe Leadership

The worthy goal of campus leaders might be to eradicate sexual misconduct, but this outcome is not even remotely within their span of control. Faculty and administrators are often called upon or tempted to intervene to control the cultural outcome. But, my students' experiences demonstrated that they each wanted to do the right thing in spite of significant barriers and

3 The SAGR measures perceived retaliation that a person experienced after reporting one incident of unwanted sexual contact (USC). Perceived retaliation consists of professional reprisal, ostracism, or maltreatment. United States Military Academy (USMA) women who reported USC experienced retaliation at a rate of 31% and men at a rate of 25%. Women at USAFA and the United States Naval Academy (USNA) who reported perceived retaliation at a rate of 25% while the results for men were not reportable (Davis & Klahr, 2023).

4 Institutional statements are important as part of a comprehensive strategy but the impact of such statements has mixed results (Rowley et al., 2002).

5 Programs that formed education groups that consisted of a single gender had significantly greater favorable effects on sexual assault victimization rates than those that mixed genders. Programs that were implemented with small groups (less than 10) had significantly greater favorable effects on sexual assault victimization rates than those that focused on individualized education (Kettrey et al., 2023). Unfortunately, these single-gendered, small-scale training characteristics are uncommon in military training settings. Additionally, risk reduction programs that focused on personal safety had significant negative effects on bystander intervention compared to those that did not (Kettrey et al., 2023).

processes preventing it or making it that much more difficult. So, what if rather than trying to dictate end results, administrators approach the problem instead as better enabling our students' paths toward shifting their own culture toward the right choices? In other words, in addition to providing a vision of a healthy and respectful environment free of sexual harm, administrators can focus on refining structures and processes to clear the paths for students to find their own unique ways to disincentivize harmful behaviors and incentivize healthier and safer choices. In terms of transformative organizational change, "transformation starts with the systems that maintain the power imbalance" (Rankin & Reason, 2008, p. 265).

High incidence rates and prevalence of harmful behaviors at military service academies[6] is an outcome of culture but not the cause. Culture is the aggregation of students' interactions and their risk and protective factors, and of course influenced by the external factors such as the cultural influences of society (Rankin & Reason, 2008; Wilkins et al., 2014). Because culture is a complex system, its levers are likely best understood and influenced by those inside the complexity. Thus, effective transformative change efforts involve consistent empowerment-based strategies (Basile et al., 2016) and involvement of the constituents, from assessment development to process engagement and ownership (Rankin & Reason, 2008).

Rather than focusing on controlling the outcome, such as prevalence rates, the complexity should drive leaders to examine ways they can encourage the change agents to influence behaviors that contribute to the seemingly intractable problem. For example, leaders can reframe their goals from attempting to control outcomes (e.g. reducing incidence rates) to enabling a direction (e.g. empowering reporting). In complex environments, we can experiment with and influence the peripherals but cannot control the center of the problem, which is most resistant to change (Berger, 2019, pp. 95–99). This starts with asking how we can "support the emergence of the things we want" rather than how we achieve a particular target (Berger, 2019, p. 95). We can start to think about enablers in addition to, or even more than, direct causes that tend to be elusive in complex systems (Berger, 2019, p. 96). What kinds of things are within our control that might enable students to influence each other toward reporting harmful behaviors?

As Peter Coleman (2011) advocates in *The Five Percent: Finding Solutions to Seemingly Impossible Conflicts*, when we encounter complex and seemingly intractable problems, we should resist the urge to simplify them because they are often non-linear and non-reducible. We should instead strive to identify what Coleman calls "local actionables" and seek to "alter patterns, not outcomes" (Berger, 2019, p. 95). The key then becomes selecting the right patterns ready for change and connecting those patterns together to maximize the spillover effects (Docherty & Lira, 2013).

Listening to Students' Experiences

One particularly stark and persistent pattern ripe for change is underreporting. Prevalence is the core of the problem, but creating an environment that encourages rather than discourages reporting and accountability is a powerful influence on the peripherals of the problem. To the extent current educational and administrative systems communicate and exact consequences for ancillary, non-sexual assault and harassment, violations, and do nothing to offer mitigation of consequences for those same violations when sexual harm is involved, the system is discouraging reporting in a utilitarian way (less people are in trouble and "harmed" if I ignore the sexual harm against one person). Thus, administrators imploring students to report is unlikely to make a difference when the core peer loyalty calculation is unaddressed. The effects may be particularly problematic in light of

6 The incidence of unwanted sexual contact at college campuses nationwide is 13.0%, compared to 21.4% among women at military service academies (AAU, 2019; DoD Report, 2022).

the ingrained social and structural norms of loyalty to teammates at military service academies.

Sometimes this influence on the peripherals happens at a micro or individual level. A student seeks advice from a professor about the harassment they or others suffered. In doing so, the student is simultaneously probing how to navigate complex formal processes as well as informal social networks and consequences from someone who may be able to offer the perspective of experience. Faculty and staff can contribute to culture on a small scale by suggesting ways the student may approach the problem in a constructive way, imploring the best choices, and hoping they share with peers. While these individual influences are helpful, they are limited in scale and require the student to seek out the conversation or for a very attuned staff member to notice something is wrong and the student being open to sharing.

When multiple individuals present issues surrounding the same problem, it should capture our attention about the macro or institutional factors at work, despite the misdirecting data. A student may be wrestling with the aftermath of supplying alcohol to an environment in which hazing and harassment occurred. The student may struggle knowing the near guarantee of consequences for others and social fallout by a powerful group of peers. Administrators are often quick to respond to misconduct such as alcohol offenses in the interests of meting appropriate and speedy consequences and consistency. Harassment by others is a more difficult issue requiring further investigation. The students' perception is simple: I will get in trouble, and cause others to get in trouble, for doing the right thing and formally reporting. The perception gets ingrained into the culture: formal reporting is bad because it "hurts" others.

This scenario illuminated the inadequacy of existing law and policy (e.g. the concept of reprisal or recent "safe to report" policy applicable to sexual assault) to support the decision of a witness to report harmful behavior, or even a victim to be protected from backlash by triggering consequences for others. At the military service academies, prior to the "encouraged to report" policy at the Air Force Academy in April 2023, there were no policies in place that prevented or mitigated consequences for ancillary misconduct when a student brought forward witnessing harassment or sexual assault beyond the 15 non-binding disposition considerations for all commanders under the Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ) including one's "willingness to cooperate in the investigation or prosecution of others" (Manual for Courts-Martial [MCM], 2024, Appx 2.1). For a student to come forward despite a lack of structural support for the decision (in the form of grace or mitigation for their comparatively lesser wrongs) would require immense strength of conviction in light of all the formal and informal consequences that would follow for them and others. It is difficult to imagine that other students, less equipped with mentorship and facing similar fallout, would make the same decision to report despite the consequences.

This scenario triggered a lightbulb moment revealing a structural barrier and misaligned incentives. At a military service academy, and likely many other college campuses, administrators communicate zero tolerance for sexual misconduct and harmful behaviors. Yet, we simultaneously fail to communicate that reporting is valued more than punishing associated non-sexual misconduct. We communicate through words and actions that accountability and discipline for comparatively minor offenses is more important than the zero tolerance for sexual misconduct that we espouse. The military has only recently communicated the message of better aligned priorities to victims of sexual assault (Undersecretary of Defense Memorandum, 2021) but not for witnesses of sexual assault or victims and witnesses of other harmful behaviors such as unlawful harassment, bullying, hazing, or discrimination.

The following example conveys the consequences of this messaging. A student becomes a victim of sexual

assault at a party in which underage drinking is prevalent. The victim communicates they were victimized to their friend who was at the party in which she and other friends were involved in underage drinking, making that friend an important outcry witness. The witness and other friends are certain to receive consequences for drinking if the victim reports their assault. So, in exchange for securing the chance that the single assailant will be held accountable, the victim must trade in the assurance that her friends will receive severe consequences. Amazingly, this dilemma is not accurately captured as a barrier to reporting at military service academies (DoD Report, 2022).

The gap in policy revealed an anecdotally powerful yet underappreciated barrier to reporting sexual assault and harassment: perceived social fallout. In deciding whether to illuminate sexual assault, harassment, or discrimination, witnesses and victims are likely and understandably very concerned with what they perceive to be the associated social ramifications. These ramifications could be more powerful regarding the decision to report than any structural or institutional consequence that may result from the report. This makes sense when we consider the source of students' power, credibility, and capital in their various campus networks and social circles.

The story travels faster and is far less controlled, or even accurate, with informal social channels; meanwhile, the counternarrative – the formal investigation – proceeds slowly and carefully, and cannot be widely shared. Informally, a student who does the right thing to hold others accountable for serious sexual misconduct can very quickly become a social pariah or ineffective in social circles important to their lives on a college campus.

Reporting sexual assault and harassment therefore is perceived to have an unavoidable tail, depending of course on one's role as a victim, witness, and the egregiousness of the harm. The reporter risks being known as the person who triggered accountability for all involved, especially those on the peripherals of involvement who may have no knowledge of the underlying harm that occurred. Students fear being perceived as the person who was "selfish" and caused their peers to get in trouble, directly impacting their peer credibility and social capital. This dynamic – the risk of consequences for those barely involved – is perhaps even more pronounced at military service academies where the consequences for ancillary misconduct such as underage drinking are severe. Add to this severity that cadets and midshipmen may be held accountable for simply being aware of the misconduct of others and not intervening; it is no wonder that such a barrier weighs heavily on students and impacts their decision to report.

Leveraging Student Ownership and Agency to Impact Reporting

Rather than going directly to administrators to dismantle the barrier once identified, we opted to provide it back to students to develop a solution. This allowed the effort to be attributable to peers, not administrators who are further removed from the problem. In other words, students could be the change agents and other students could trust they were not being tricked or cajoled by administrators to gain more reporting. This mechanism was intended to counteract potential cultural backlash or calcification.

We hand-picked a diverse team of four students in the Legal Studies major to develop a mechanism to reduce the barrier as part of their culminating undergraduate coursework. The team was diverse in terms of gender, race/ethnicity, hierarchal position within the cadet wing, and experience as judged by interests and significant involvement in various efforts while cadets. We also supplied mentorship and guidance from three diversly positioned staff members, including a faculty member, legal advisor, commander, and sexual assault response coordinator. If the team of students delivered on a workable policy, they would be rewarded with a seat at the

table to pitch the idea to decisionmakers. And a seat at the table they received; the students secured meetings with every major decisionmaker at the institution and built broad consensus paving the way toward implementation. Empowering these four students led to a compelling experiment on the peripherals of culture change. The policy has been coined "encouraged to report."

The goal of the work is to reduce the barrier of triggering consequences for others in deciding whether to report harmful behaviors. This is accomplished by incentivizing the reporting of collateral misconduct (ancillary, often minor violations of law or policy connected to sexual violence or harassment by proximity). The incentive is making the formal reporting by witnesses and victims of harmful behaviors as the buy-in to be treated with leniency by administrators. The "encouraged to report" policy does not guarantee a lack of consequences like "safe to report" does for sexual assault victims. Rather, it provides grace and discretion to administrators to intentionally minimize consequences for collateral misconduct when the greater harm of sexual assault, harassment, bullying, or hazing is reported. In turn, it also incentivizes bystanders to own their collateral misconduct in order to benefit from the policy and receive likely, but unguaranteed, leniency.

If this policy is effectively communicated, it may contribute to positive peer influence and culture shift. Rather than unifying around the certainty that collateral misconduct will be punished, students can unite around the idea that those who are forthright and own their collateral misconduct can be provided grace, and thus what might have previously been viewed as peer betrayal can be viewed instead as peer preservation and loyalty consistent with institutional values. The "encouraged to report" policy was only recently implemented at the U.S. Air Force Academy, so we cannot possibly know at this stage the effectiveness of such a policy without tracking and measuring it post-implementation, which the policy requires administrators to do.

As a result, the policy includes an important provision that any instance in which harmful behaviors are reported and collateral misconduct is involved (any minor offense related to but not consisting of sexual assault, harassment, bullying or hazing) must be administratively up-channeled and documented. When a good faith report of sexual assault, harassment, bullying, or hazing is made to an administrator (in this case a commander, sexual assault prevention and response coordinator, equal opportunity, or the inspector general's office), by a witness or victim, the commander is notified and within seven days must inform their supervising commander who mentors the subordinate commander about potential outcomes and sends the information to a central tracking entity. This upward reporting is designed not only to gain insight into effectiveness but also to encourage consistency in leniency and prioritization across the institution.

The effects on peer interactions, and thus campus culture, will be difficult to accurately measure. However, the next annual DoD report on sexual violence and harassment and service academy gender relations surveys should modify the survey questions related to reasons for not reporting to discern the policy's effectiveness in reducing the reporting barriers of guaranteed formal peer consequences and informal social fallout. If successful, this student-led policy writing experiment makes a powerful case for involving and empowering student voices to own and solve intractable and complex problems within their own cultures.

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