

University Wire

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Confronting Sexual Assault

By Elliot Haspel, Cavalier Daily

[University of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA] – You know someone who has been raped. Statistically, it's true: one in four college women have been subject to completed or attempted rape. The actual number of sexual assaults is orders of magnitude higher than the reported number – you know a survivor. The University must act swiftly and purposefully to confront this monster. Just as the administration brought about a President's Commission on Diversity and Equity, they must now initiate a President's Commission on Sexual Assault and Domestic Violence.

Beginning with last semester's discussions over the procedures of the Sexual Assault Board (SAB), the issue has slowly but steadily wormed its way above the surface. Recently, a debate over the appropriateness of the SAB's confidentiality rules and a damning article in *The Hook* entitled "How UVA Turns Its Back on Rape" has given inertia to movements for change. A protest was held this morning to further obliterate the culture of silence. The time to act is now.

Circumstances today are akin to one year ago when the administration began the successful President's Commission on Diversity and Equity. A widespread, harrowing problem has been punctuated by several high-profile events. Grumbling abounds in a student body dissatisfied with the steps the administration is taking. Everyone has some solution, but no one has the solution. What better way to tackle the issue than bringing together intelligent, invested individuals to create tangible options?

It was apparent listening to the planning meeting for today's protest that ideas exist which are not being implemented. Thoughts included appointing one administrator to handle all things sexual assault-related, establishing a single-sanction for rape conviction, dismantling the SAB (with its zero expulsions over five years) and boosting publicity for third-party reporting. Claire Kaplan, the University's sexual assault education officer, said in an e-mail interview that she would like to see increased funding for her office and unified coordination through it of the various peer education groups.

Surprisingly, few student leaders blame the administration. Rachel Vogus, co-chair of Student Council's safety and wellness committee and the vice president of NOW, expressed that the administration mostly needed education. "They are aware of the issues, but left in the same blaming-the-victims culture," Vogus said. "Their awareness needs to be heightened."

NOW President Lauren Russo agreed. “Everybody has different ideas [of how to handle sexual assault] – the administration isn’t really horrible, and it isn’t really great.” Indeed, the University has taken many laudable actions over the years, including the establishment of the sexual assault education office, the recent consent campaign and continued effort to improve lighting around Grounds. Still, Kaplan acknowledged that “sexual assault and domestic/dating violence are less ‘present’ in the administration’s list of priorities – particularly financial ones – in that other issues are more pressing right now.”

Others in the administration disagreed. In an interview, Dean of Students Penny Rue and Senior Associate Dean of Students Shamim Sisson, who oversees the SAB proceedings, maintained that the University is doing as much as any institution when it comes to sexual assault. However, they acknowledged that there was always more to accomplish; Sisson likened it to Sisyphus pushing the boulder up his hill.

A commission would provide a forum for these varying points of view to be heard and synthesized toward a common goal, a la the Commission on Diversity and Equity. Both Rue and Sisson said that they were open to the idea of a presidential commission, while Kaplan, Vogus and Russo expressed enthusiasm for the idea. University President John T. Casteen III said in an e-mail that the administration was looking at several options for addressing sexual assault, but “it is too soon for anyone to say just how we will proceed on this issue.”

The University has a chance to become a leader in the fight against sexual assault. By establishing a Commission on Sexual Assault and Domestic Violence, the administration will take a bold first step in acknowledging the depth of the problem and working toward real solutions. By lending sustainability and authority to the sentiment expressed in today’s protest, the administration will be honoring the courage displayed by survivors who have spoken up about the need for change.

There are no easy answers to sexual assault. As with race relations, there is no panacea, no silver bullet, which will make one in four disappear. Yet there is every opportunity to improve the climate, improve the response and improve the sanction. No one has the solution, which is precisely why a group of students, faculty and experts should be assembled to come up with a multitude of proposals.

Sexual assault is an issue which bridges every divide. It touches women and men, students and staff, conservatives, liberals and everyone in between. Silence is no longer an option. Silence can no longer be allowed to remain an option. As students, as community members and as human beings, we must come together and shout down the demons of ignorance. Remember – you know someone who has been raped.

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