

It Might Be a Mickey But Let's Stop Goofing Around and Get Down to the Real Problem

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I have to confess that when I first sat down and began drafting this essay for NASPA NetResults, I was unsure how to begin tackling the topic that I had been asked to write about: alcohol and its relationship to sexual assault. My first instinct was to begin where any dutiful and well-meaning scholar ought to begin: with a review of the literature, hopefully leading to some meaningful conclusions. My resistance to doing so was informed by both a personal intuition as a campus rape survivor and a professional instinct as a student affairs professional of 11 years. The observation that alcohol consumption on the part of both perpetrators and victims increases their likelihood of becoming involved in a sexual assault has led - understandably so - to a renewed commitment by many higher education institutions to reducing highrisk alcohol consumption as a strategy to prevent campus rape . This focus on alcohol as a correlate - let me emphasize correlate, not causal factor - in sexual assault has obscured what I perceive to be the real problem in sexual assault: the agency of the perpetrator, and concurrently the dominant US gender role expectations which normalize violence against women in our country.

The correlation between alcohol and campus rape has long been intuitively understood by student affairs professionals and recently more well-documented by scholars. The recent focus on such 'date rape drugs' as GHB and rohypnol has captured public awareness, but obscured the fact that alcohol is the oldest 'mickey' around ; alcohol has long been served to unsuspecting women by their dates or fellowparty- goers in the hopes of rendering them more vulnerable or amenable to sexual advances . According to a study conducted by Fisher, Cullen & Turner (2000) for the US Department of Justice, colleges and universities can expect to have an estimated 35 rapes occur on and around their campus each year for every 1,000 female students enrolled at their institution . The authors of this study also found that frequently drinking enough to get drunk on the part of the victim was one of the four main factors which consistently increased the risk of sexual victimization (see <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov>). Similarly, the 2000 administration of the Core Survey to 55,026 students attending 132 two- and four-year colleges found that 11 .7% of the sample reported having been 'taken advantage of sexually' as a consequence of their alcohol consumption during the prior year, while 4 .6% reported having 'taken advantage of another sexually' as a behavioral result of drinking during the same reporting period (see <http://www.siu.edu/-coreinst>).

However, by focusing on alcohol as the culprit in campus sexual assault, we fail to acknowledge that (a) many college students consume alcohol yet never become involved as either perpetrators or victims of sexual assault, and (b) not all victims and/or perpetrators of sexual assault were consuming alcohol prior to the incident. There is no doubt: alcohol is a problem on our campuses, and sexual assault occurs at epidemic levels at our colleges and universities, but let me be clear: one does not cause the other. Rather, alcohol is simply one of the many facilitating tools by which perpetrators achieve their aim. In the embodiment of the ultimate 'rape myth,' alcohol has historically been used to blame the victim and absolve the accused perpetrator of responsibility. Do we truly believe that if alcohol were to disappear from college campuses, rapes would cease to occur? The value system which is used to reinforce, justify and

sometimes excuse sexual assault on the part of perpetrators - much of it ensconced in our limiting conceptions of masculinity and female sexuality - would still be unchanged.

In a truthful assessment of our efforts, higher education institutions have largely been ineffectual in reducing the incidence of sexual assault among their student populations since the release of the landmark National Institutes of Mental Health study authored by Mary Koss in 1986 which brought the issue of 'date rape' to the media forefront. As with alcohol abuse prevention efforts, because we care so much, we hope fervently that our efforts will make a difference. So, we oftentimes grasp desperately at any feasible answer which appears to be neatly packaged and therefore easier to wrap our brains around. Yet simple answers can only lead to simple solutions, and acquaintance rape is a multifaceted, complex cultural phenomenon of US campuses. Addressing the alcohol problem is not the solution to the campus sexual assault problem, and I would propose that both are symptoms of the same underlying dilemma.

I have never been ashamed to admit that I am a practicing feminist (in the pure tradition of bell hooks), and feminist methodology demands a way of examining problems which makes explicit that which we have always understood implicitly or made invisible. In a feminist analysis of sexual assault, we would acknowledge that well over 95% of campus sexual assaults are perpetrated by men; this does not suggest that all men are potential or actual rapists, but it does emphasize that regardless of the gender of the victim an overwhelming disproportionate number of sexual assault perpetrators are men. Some readers may quickly respond by pointing out that college men, too, can and are the victims of sexual coercion, or that college women can also be perpetrators of sexual abuse. I do not deny the truth of either and both are also problematic and need to be of concern to student affairs professionals. Yet, why do so many of us have a knee-jerk reaction when confronted with the fact that most rapists are men?

Feminist scholars such as Alan Berkowitz, Will Courtenay, Sut Jhally, Jackson Katz, and Bill O'Connell remind us that traditional sex-role expectations for young adult males in the US emphasize toughness, aggression, and risk-taking, as well as sexual prowess and sexual conquest as the trademarks of masculinity. These pressures to be 'real men' - actual and perceived - place men at higher risk of becoming perpetrators of sexual assault. And in that 'real man' fantasy world, women who drink are seen as more sexually available, and many men who drink expect to be sexual. In essence, one could argue that sexual assault becomes a behavioral affirmation of traditional masculinity, in much the same way that excessive or rapid alcohol consumption is a boy's rite of passage into manhood - let's remember that college men are far more likely to drink heavily and to experience severe negative consequences as a result of their drinking than their female counterparts on campus.

It seems to me that the focus on alcohol as a correlate of sexual assault has diverted us from having the truthful and honest conversations that need to take place about the root causes of sexual violence; it has also kept us dancing on the rooftops of status quo rather than razing the bedrock foundations on which our assumptions and beliefs about sexual violence are built. In my mind, measurable success in reducing sexual assault on our college and university campuses cannot begin to take place until we can stop hiding behind the curtain of high-risk drinking. It is imperative that we instead take on the courageous and difficult work of examining and reconceptualizing the culture we have created for boys and men. In that culture, alcohol and sex are irrevocably linked. Rescripting codes of masculinity so that men can embrace strength without aggression and temper their risk-taking with an ethic of care (for self and other) will enhance our campus communities and create safer places for both men and women.

to learn and develop to their full potential. In the words of Albert Einstein, 'The world we have created is a product of our thinking. It cannot be changed without changing our thinking.' This work is hard, this work is time-consuming, and this work can feel overwhelming at times. But as a humanist and an educator, I believe this work can be done effectively and that social justice will prevail.

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