

## Regional

# Sexual assaults too frequent during college years

In 2007, the National Institute of Justice released a report including data demonstrating that one in five women are targets of attempted or completed sexual assault during their college years. That number—20 percent—is an absolutely devastating one, and as the report became more widely available, campus sexual assault shifted from a largely invisible issue to a topic of national consternation and conversation.

Prompted by a new awareness of the issue, as well as a set of federal mandates, universities across the country are working to create policies and programming to reduce incidents of campus sexual assault and to care for survivors. At SIUE, most of this work is being done at the administrative level, with support provided by counseling services, housing staff, university police, faculty, student organizations, and other groups from across the campus community. SIUE women's studies program faculty have identified campus sexual assault as an issue of critical importance, and in addition to contributing to various campus efforts, we regularly work to raise awareness among students and the larger community.

SIUE sociology and women's studies assistant professor Alyson Spurgas suggests that one of the primary causes of sexual assault is found in gendered dating norms. Within this "heterosexual script," consent is not clearly defined and male violence is normalized. "Good" women are expected to first say "no" to sex, but be coaxed into a "yes," while men are taught that successful masculinity involves pushing women, who are positioned as "sexual gatekeepers," to engage in sexual acts. She adds that popular culture reinforces these roles regularly, a fact that is evidenced in songs like Robin Thicke's "Blurred Lines" and in the way many sexual assaults are reported in the news and other media venues.

Dayna Henry, an assistant professor of community health and women's studies, notes that while the attitude that consent can be coerced is a distressing reality, in fact a much greater risk is posed by men who display predatory behaviors. It should be noted that while men may also be also victims, the overwhelming majority of campus sexual assaults are committed by men and the majority of survivors are women.

"Anywhere from 60 to 85 percent of rapists are repeat offenders," Henry said. "So on any campus, there are a small



**SIUE photo**

Standing are professors Dayna Henry, Catherine Seltzer, and Alyson Spurgas. Seated is Professor Trish Oberweis.

number of men who are perpetrating the vast majority of rapes." Many of these men have adopted tactics "that are clearly predatory in nature," she explained. "They look for women who seem weak or like easy victims." Alcohol often becomes a tool. Perpetrators may look for women who have had too much to drink or to actively ply them with drinks. Freshmen, particularly around Halloween and Spring Break, face significant risk.

To combat campus sexual assault, Henry suggests we need to dismantle what is referred to as "rape culture," in which sexual assault is condoned and victims are casually blamed. "Instead of talking about what women should be doing to avoid getting raped, like not going out at night or not wearing certain clothes—which are rape myths, incidentally—we need to actually focus on how we might identify the predatory behavior of the few men who are committing

## Catherine Seltzer College Talk

these assaults," she said. Prevention efforts also focus on education—making sure both men and women understand definitions of consent and assault—and, most recently, bystander intervention programs, in which students pay attention to the behavior of those around them and step in when they see a potential assault about to happen.

Effective prosecution of campus sexual assault is also crucial. Criminal justice studies and women's studies professor Trish Oberweis pointed to the role of the 2011 "Dear Colleague Letter" sent to universities by the Department of Education. Oberweis explained that the letter "reminded universities of the severity of campus sexual assault and asked them to rethink how they responded to it." Along with Title IX legislation, which prohibits sexual harassment and discrimination, the letter spelled out serious penalties for universities that do not take immediate and effective action in addressing sexual assault.

The result is a set of parallel systems to address sexual assault, one that involves local police and the other that is rooted in the university's justice structure. As Oberweis noted, these systems can be activated independently or simultaneously, at a survivor's discretion, giving her more control over how her case will be heard and how her concerns will be addressed.

Historically, universities have not publicized full sexual assault statistics, but recent regulations have demanded more transparency. As a result, many have predicted that we will soon see a surge in reported sexual assaults on campuses across the country. According to Oberweis, these numbers don't reflect a change in behaviors. Rather, they reflect a new attitude toward response.

"We're going to have to stay brave," she argued, as these numbers emerge. They may seem overwhelming, but in fact are emblematic of the cultural and legal changes for which advocates and activists have been fighting.

*Catherine Seltzer is the Director of the SIUE Women's Studies Program*