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WHAT WOMEN REALLY THINK

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To Prevent Rape on College Campuses, Focus on the Rapists, Not the Victims

By Amanda Hess



We can prevent the most rapes on campus by putting our efforts toward finding and punishing perpetrators, not by warning their huge number of potential victims to skip out on parties.

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My colleague Emily Yoffe wrote in *Slate* on Tuesday about the alarming frequency of a certain sad news story: “a young woman, sometimes only a girl, who goes to a party and ends up being raped.” Yoffe goes on to argue that parents, schools, and sexual assault prevention experts can help bring down the number of those incidents by telling young women to stop drinking so much. As a woman who once went to a party and ended up being raped—though that’s not my preferred grammatical structure I’d use to describe what happened—I’m also invested in preventing these types of assaults. But Yoffe’s approach strikes me as myopic.

Rape is a societal problem, not a self-help issue. Parents can tell their own daughters not to get drunk, but even if those women follow instructions, it won't keep other people's daughters safe. It will just force campus rapists who rely on alcohol to execute their crimes to find other targets. As Yoffe notes, the research of David Lisak suggests that most rapes are committed by a small group of predators who claim a large number of victims. We can prevent the most rapes on campus by putting our efforts toward finding and punishing those perpetrators, not by warning their huge number of potential victims to skip out on parties.

Peter Lake, the director of the Center for Excellence in Higher Education Law and Policy at Stetson University College of Law, told Yoffe that, in her words, "it is unrealistic to expect colleges will ever be great at catching and punishing sexual predators; that's simply not their core mission. Colleges are supposed to be places where young people learn to be responsible for themselves." Punishing rapists is not the "core mission" of any society, but it's an important piece of the puzzle. That's especially true for colleges, which are legally required under Title IX to not just catch and punish predators who operate in their institutions but to also take serious action to prevent students from victimizing each other in the first place. Failing to do so directly affects the schools' ability to focus on academics. To cite just one **relevant case**: In 2007, the University of Colorado at Boulder was compelled to pay out nearly \$3 million to two women raped on its campus after a court ruled that the university "had an official policy of showing high-school football recruits a 'good time' on their visits to the CU campus," and failed to supervise the "players who served as hosts" despite having knowledge of at least one previous case of a high school student who was assaulted by the school's recruits. Failing to address the culture that contributed to those assaults constituted "deliberate indifference."

Furthermore, while a striking number of college assaults occur while both victims and perpetrators are intoxicated, rape has been a popular tool for subjugating women long before they joined in the "butt-chugging" craze. According to the Department of Justice's National Crime Victimization Survey—which surveys Americans ages 12 and older about crime they've experienced, whether or not they reported it to the authorities—rape has **declined** markedly in the United States since 1979, even as female binge drinking has risen. That suggests that something other than a youthful appetite for Jäger bombs has shifted in this country—mainly, that women have made significant gains in educational attainment, economic independence, and sexual agency since the '70s. As public policy researchers Amy Farmer and Jill Tiefenthaler **note**, intimate partner violence declines "as women's alternatives outside their relationships improve" and they're "able to achieve self-sufficiency in the long-run."* Interpreting Title IX to **include** sexual violence on campus as a form of discrimination against women didn't hurt.

When it comes to equalizing the playing field, we still have a long way to go. The huge gains women have made in higher education over the past few decades—they now **constitute** 57 percent of undergraduate students—has not translated to them having dominance over the campus social scene. In 2012, Carolyn L. Hsu, an associate professor of sociology at Colgate University, conducted a **study** on campus binge drinking and found that heavy alcohol consumption "is a symbolic proxy for high status in college," because it's "what the most powerful, wealthy and happy students on campus do." Hsu identifies "higher-status" groups on campus as "wealthy, male, white, heterosexual, and Greek affiliated undergraduates." Yoffe writes that if "female college students start moderating their drinking as a way of looking out for their own self-interest—and looking out for your own self-interest should be a primary feminist principle—I hope their restraint trickles down to the men." But a "feminist" impulse for women to protect themselves by staying sober will not "trickle down" to boys, because they're situated at the top of the social ladder. Booze may be a common accessory of powerful men on campus, but banning it won't rob them of their influence. We'll see real change on

college campuses when we focus on dismantling the social structures that prioritize white, straight men and marginalize everyone else.

Colleges can start changing those structures by refusing to put the onus on victims to prevent their own assaults and instead holding perpetrators accountable for the crimes they commit—often, while drunk. Wayne State University psychologist Antonia Abbey **notes** that one study of college date rapists found that 62 percent “felt they had committed rape because of their alcohol consumption.” They “believed that their intoxicated condition caused them to initially misperceive their partner’s degree of sexual interest and later allowed them to feel comfortable using force when the women’s lack of consent finally became clear to them.” Importantly, the rapists “did not see themselves as ‘real’ criminals because real criminals used weapons to assault strangers.”

This belief isn’t just shared among perpetrators; when you **tweet** that you are “warning young women that there are rapists who use alcohol, not violence,” you reinforce the idea that rape does not constitute a violent crime if alcohol is involved. Banishing that idea is central to preventing these crimes. Abbey suggests that in rape cases where the perpetrator has been drinking, alcohol can encourage him to prioritize his “immediate sexual arousal and anger” over the “potential risk of being accused of sexual assault.” Colleges could instruct men to not drink so much, but again, most keg-loving frat boys are not rapists. Colleges can help crack down on sexual assault, Abbey writes, by increasing the “risks” inherent in raping other people. “If the costs of sexual assault are obvious, undesirable and immediate, then intoxication-driven sexual assaults are less likely to occur because the potential perpetrator cannot forget about the likely, undesirable consequences. This suggests that colleges need strong, consistent, well-publicized policies that no one can ignore.”

I agree with Yoffe that excessive alcohol consumption is a problem on college campuses (as it is elsewhere) that can contribute to a variety of social ills: disease, addiction, accidents, crime, even death. Singling out one gender of drinkers for alcohol education is counter-productive. It’s important to remember that our approach to sexual assault on college campuses won’t just influence the number of women who are victimized, and the percentage of perpetrators who are punished. Our approach will also affect the health and happiness of victims after the fact. Rape is damaging not just in a physical sense but also in a psychological one. It’s common among victims to internalize the crime and blame ourselves. As Gina Tron **put it** in her powerful *Vice* essay this year, “I got raped, then my problems started.” Telling women that they can evade rape by not drinking will only exacerbate that problem when it does happen, through no fault of their own. One victim of alcohol-assisted rape Yoffe spoke with said that she was overwhelmed with “shame and guilt” following the assault, and only began to come to terms with the crime when “I realized it wasn’t my fault.” That realization felt like climbing out of a “deep, dark hole.” Victims should never be put in that hole in the first place—no matter how many drinks they’ve consumed.

Correction, Oct. 17, 2013: This post originally misspelled researcher Jill Tiefenthaler's last name.

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