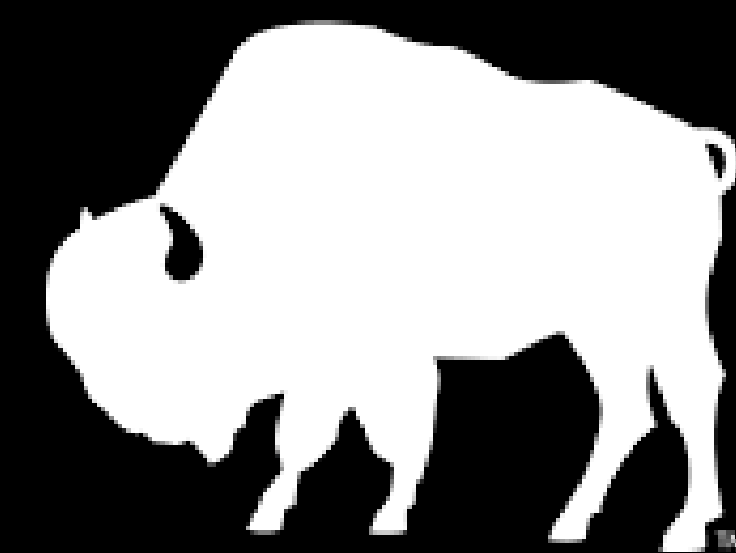# Graduate Student Perceptions of Barriers to Bystander Engagement in Settings Where College Students are at Risk of Sexual Assault

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## Statement of the Problem (Haasl, 2019)

### ❑ Legislation and Policies

The Federal Government has enacted numerous legislative policies over the past 50 years in an attempt to help institutions address and prevent sexual assault (Alegría-Flores et al., 2017; Griffin et al., 2017).

**1972** — Title IX of the 1972 Education Amendments (Title IX)

**1990** — The Jeanne Clery Disclosure of Campus Security and Crime Statistics Act of 1990 (Clery Act)

**1994** — The Violence Against Women Act of 1994 (VAWA 1994)

**2013** — The Violence Against Women Reauthorization Act of 2013 (VAWA 2013)

## Purpose of the Study (Haasl, 2019)

- The purpose of the study was to explore graduate student perceptions of bystander engagement in settings where college students are at risk of sexual assault.

- Of specific interest was the perceived relationship between bystander behaviors in settings where college students are at risk of sexual assault and the major barriers to bystander engagement caused by these behaviors.

- To examine and gain a better understanding of graduate student perceptions concerning the major barriers to bystander engagement in settings where college students are at risk of sexual assault.

## Context and Design of the Study (Haasl, 2019)

### ❑ Study Setting / Participants / Context of Researcher

- A public, medium-size four-year regional university located in the Southwestern region of the U.S.
- Graduate students employed by the study institution.
- Researcher experience includes 35 years in Higher Education as a Faculty Member, Football Coach, and Administrator.

### ❑ Mixed-Methods Explanatory Sequential Design

- Criterion and random sampling were utilized for collection of quantitative data.
- Purposeful and random sampling were utilized for collection of qualitative data.

## Research Questions (Haasl, 2019)

❶ How do graduate students perceive bystander engagement as a method of preventing sexual assault in settings where college students are at risk of sexual assault?

❷ What do graduate students perceive as barriers to bystander engagement in settings where college students are at risk of sexual assault?

❸ What do graduate students recommend as best practices for increasing bystander engagement in settings where college students are at risk of sexual assault?

## Quantitative Findings (RQ1)

❶ How do graduate students perceive bystander engagement a method of preventing sexual assault in settings where college students are at risk of sexual assault?

- Over 50% of the participants perceived bystander engagement as ineffective in preventing sexual assault (Haasl, 2019).

- These findings align with results of other studies (Franklin et al., 2017; Hahn et al., 2018; Labhardt, et al., 2017).

- In spite of the widespread increase in bystander education programs, the rate of sexual assaults on college campuses has remained virtually the same (Conley et al., 2016; Brady et al., 2017; USDOE; 2017).

## Quantitative Data Collection (RQ2)

❑ The online survey was established by integrating Latané and Darley's (1970) Situational Model of Bystander Intervention and Burn's (2009) Bystander Behavior Scale.

| Stage of Latané and Darley's SMBI | Burn's Bystander Behavior Scale |
|---|---|
| Noticing the Event | Failure to Notice Situation |
| Interpreting the Event as an Emergency | Failure to Identify the Situation as High Risk |
| Assuming Responsibility | Failure to take Engagement Responsibility |
| Knowing Appropriate Form of Assistance | Failure to Engage Due to Skills Deficit |
| Deciding to Implement Help | Failure to Engage Due to Audience Inhibition |

*Figure 1. Integration of Burn's Bystander Behavior Scale with Latané and Darley's SMBI*

## Quantitative Findings (RQ2)

❷ What do graduate students perceive as barriers to bystander engagement in settings where college students are at risk of sexual assault?

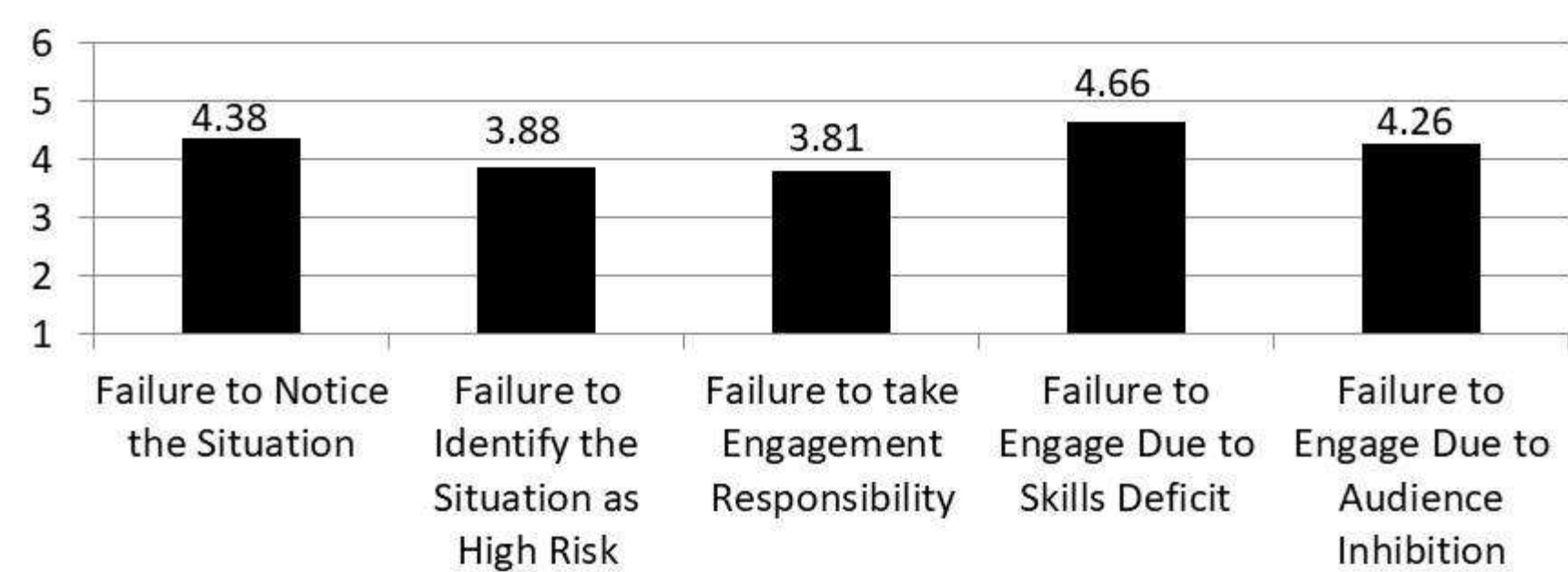- Sample Means Across the Barriers to Bystander Engagement

| Failure to Notice the Situation | Failure to Identify the Situation as High Risk | Failure to take Engagement Responsibility | Failure to Engage Due to Skills Deficit | Failure to Engage Due to Audience Inhibition |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 4.38 | 3.88 | 3.81 | 4.66 | 4.26 |

*Figure 2. Participants' perceived significance of barriers to bystander engagement (Quantitative Data)*

## Qualitative Data Collection / Analysis

### ❑ Data Collection

- 12 Face-to-Face Semi-Structured Interviews
- Non-Participant Observation - Sexual Assault Prevention Training
- Field Notes During all Data Collection Phases of the Study

### ❑ Data Analysis

- Constant comparative analysis of journal notations of participant responses, researcher observations, and document information.
- Open coding to highlight and bracket themes that emerged during data analysis followed by axial coding to winnow these themes into subthemes.

## Qualitative Data Analysis (RQ2)

### ❑ Traits of College Students – Self-Centeredness

- Daniel: "I think because they're kind of self-centered...they're drinking and having fun. They're focused on what's going on with them and what they're doing, and they're not going into it [house party or club] with that mindset of being focused on other people."

- Darla: "People don't want to get involved...I don't want to get involved. I'm just minding my own business. I'm talking to my group of friends and having a great time; I don't want to stop having a great time to deal with whatever" [is happening between other people].

- Jessica: "... people just don't want to get involved in other people's business. I think it's...human nature, just avoiding in general."

*Figure 3. Selected responses, qualitative interviews, RQ2 (Haasl, 2019)*

## Qualitative Data Analysis (RQ2)

### ❑ Traits of College Students – Rape Myth Acceptance

- Jacob: "Primarily, I think it has to do with the potential victim...they made a choice to be here...look at what they're wearing; look at what they're doing. At some level, people are hesitating due to that fact."

### ❑ Traits of College Students – Immaturity

- Kelsey: "I think maybe...the immaturity [of college students]...just not knowing the seriousness of the situation."

- Benjamin: "If we're looking at a bunch of freshmen at a party with juniors...like I know happened a lot during my freshman year. The perpetrator...may be one of the older, cooler, more established people. You were trying to fit in with those people."

*Figure 4. Selected responses, qualitative interviews, RQ2 (Haasl, 2019)*

## Barrier Mapping (RQ2)

| Modified SMBI Barriers | Theme Barriers | Subtheme Barriers |
|---|---|---|
| Failure to Take Responsibility | Traits of College Students | Self-Centeredness / Immaturity / Rape Myth Acceptance |
| Failure to Engage Due to Skills Deficit | Lack of Knowledge | Not Knowing What to Do / Not Knowing What Constitutes Sexual Assault |
| Failure to Engage Due to Audience Inhibition | Fear of Confrontation or Judgment | Confrontation with Perpetrator / Judgment From Peers |
| Failure to Notice Situation | Environmental Factors | Alcohol / Party Atmosphere / Large Crowd |
| Failure to Interpret the Situation as High Risk | Not Understanding Seriousness of the Situation | Status of Victim/Perpetrator / Consequences of Sexual Assault |

*Figure 5. Mapping of participants' perceived significance of barriers to bystander engagement (Qualitative Data)*

## Qualitative Findings (RQ3)

❸ What do graduate students recommend as best practices for increasing bystander engagement in settings where college students are at risk of sexual assault?

| Best Practices - Major Themes | Related Barrier from Qualitative Data |
|---|---|
| Motivating Bystander Education Programs | Failure to Take Responsibility |
| Teach Engagement Strategies | Failure to Engage Due to Skills Deficit |
| Teach Signs Associated With Sexual Assault | Failure to Notice Situation / Failure to Interpret the Situation as High Risk |
| Peer Facilitated Programs | Failure to Engage Due to Audience Inhibition |
| Emphasize Importance of Bystander Engagement | Failure to Take Responsibility |

*Figure 6. Participants' recommended best practices for increasing bystander engagement (Haasl, 2019).*

## Discussion – Implications for Higher Education

### ❑ Current bystander education programs are largely ineffective in preventing sexual assault on college campuses.

- Findings from the current study (Haasl, 2019) and other studies that assert bystander education programs are ineffective in preventing sexual assault (Franklin et al., 2018; Labhardt, et al., 2017; Hahn et al., 2017).

- The rate of sexual assault on college campuses has remained virtually the same even after VAWA 2013 mandated that all institutions implement bystander education programs (Cantor et al., 2015; Conley et al., 2017; Fedina et al., 2016; USDOE; 2017).

## Discussion – Implications for Higher Education

### ❑ Current bystander education programs are largely ineffective in preventing sexual assault on college campuses.

- Why are current bystander education programs ineffective in empowering college students to overcome barriers to engagement?

- Why are college students not engaging in settings where other college students are at risk of sexual assault?

- What can higher education professionals change to make bystander education programs effective in empowering college students to overcome barriers to engagement?

## Recommendations for Higher Education

### ❑ Institutions should implement bystander education programs that instill students with a sense of responsibility to protect other students who are at risk of sexual assault.

- Instilling a sense of responsibility would be an effective strategy in addressing the barrier of self-centeredness.
  - Self-centeredness was identified by over 80% of the participants in the current study as a significant barrier to bystander engagement.

- Bystander education programs that instill college students with the responsibility to protect peers as much as they protect friends from sexual assault could greatly reduce sexual assault on college campuses.
  - Over 95% Participants in the current study indicated they would engage if they were friends with the potential victim.

## Recommendations for Higher Education

### ❑ Institutions should implement bystander education programs that instill students with the skills, strategies, and knowledge to protect other students who are at risk of sexual assault.

- The most recommended methodology to instill students with the skills to protect other students who are at risk of sexual assault is Peer-Facilitated Scenario-Based Learning.

- Bystander Education Programs should instill students with the knowledge of what constitutes a potential sexual assault situation to create proactive engagement.

- Ultimately, institutions must offer bystander education programs that instill students with the responsibility, skills, strategies, and knowledge to protect other students who are at risk of sexual assault.