Developing agency over and responsibility for sexual interactions: Creating an education and prevention curriculum

Over the last several years, colleges of every size and type have been prompted to pay closer attention to the effect that sexual misconduct and assault has on their students. This prompting has come at the hand of at least two contextual influences: 1) The popular press and higher education media are awash with criticism, much of it legitimate, from students whose reports of harassment or assault are mishandled; and 2) Citing its commitment to the goals of Title IX, the U.S. Department of Education and its Office for Civil Rights (OCR) have increased their attention to the harmful effects of sexual harassment and sexual violence on gender equity in educational environments, particularly at colleges.

The Department of Education has advised all colleges receiving federal funds – that includes Beloit – to have policies about sexual harassment and violence and a grievance process that is responsive to reports of violations. This was particularly explicated in a guidance document issued by OCR. Beloit College has had these policies and processes in place for years, but the OCR’s actions prompted us to re-examine them. In consultation with the college’s attorneys, we re-worked our sexual assault / misconduct and personal harassment policies; sharpened how we equitably investigate reported violations of these policies and support victims in the process; and evaluated the consequences assigned to students found responsible.

With these policy revisions complete, it is time to engage in a sustained and holistic effort to educate members of our campus community about sexual assault and misconduct and their prevention. A provocative report, issued in Spring 2014 by a White House Task Force to Protect Students from Sexual Assault, emphasized the use of evidence-based prevention strategies and bystander intervention efforts. This report offers us a useful springboard from which to improve our prevention work at Beloit.

As our on-campus group begins its work, it will be useful to consider Beloit College’s current context. It’s a fact - Beloit students are experiencing sexual assault and misconduct. Students here are victims of it, are found responsible for it, and lives are impacted as a result, including lives of students beyond those directly involved. Looking at our published statistics about reported sexual assault is one way to understand this. Yet, one only has to read recent Round Table articles (e.g., a May 2014 opinion piece by Sarah Miller and Janelle Perez or a February 2014 opinion piece by Sarah Miller), or talk to students about the way they experience the Beloit College party scene, to learn that an even more significant problem may be the many low level, yet significant harms, experienced in social settings where personal space and intimate boundaries are violated. The purpose of this effort is to understand all of these behaviors better, their motivation and their impact, and pursue alignment between students’ lived experiences and our aspirations for being a community in which students have agency over and accountability for their intimate, sexual interactions.

What am I asking you to do?

*Ignite a campus conversation which generates ideas, clarifies expectations, and, ultimately, builds a plan for realizing our aspiration of being a community characterized by agency over and responsibility for sexual interactions.*

Specifically, offer a developmentally-based curriculum whose aim is to

- Foster students’ sense of agency over their sexual interactions, including attention to forming and maintaining healthy, intimate relationships;
Interrogate the ways that students’ use of alcohol and drugs interacts with agency over and responsibility for sexual interactions and offer strategies for advancing students’ engagement with the complex relationship between sex and substance use; 

Afford ‘bystanders’ actionable pathways for reducing sexual assault and misconduct at Beloit; 

Deepen the community’s (faculty, staff, and student) sophistication for responding to acts of sexual assault and misconduct.

Please include a pathway for defining and evaluating what kind of impact the proposed curriculum has made on our community.

I urge you to think of the term ‘curriculum’ broadly and loosely. I hope you will think about all the places and spaces in which students could engage these issues, from entry to exit, from living space to classroom space, and from intentional, expensive programming to impromptu, informal conversation.

There are host of ways in which to cast your inquiry, but I offer a few possibilities here:

1. What do we know about Beloit’s campus climate as it pertains to sexual assault and misconduct? What efforts are currently underway at Beloit to reduce risk of sexual violence? How are those efforts working and how do we know? What are students’ understandings of our environment and our policies?

2. In what ways do normative campus identities shape students’ understandings of the environment and, ultimately, the curriculum that you propose?

3. What can we learn from peer institutions as it pertains to prevention and education? How might the national focus on evidence-based efforts influence your thinking?

4. How might we think about promoting healthy sexual exploration differently? What would it look like if Beloit were exceptional or distinctive in its approach to reducing risks for sexual violence?

Membership
Given his role as Title IX Coordinator, Cecil Youngblood will lead this initiative, joined by:

Suzanne Cox, Professor of Psychology
Bob Dignazio, Men’s Lacrosse Coach
Ted Gries, Assistant Prof. Chemistry
Anna Grzelak, Sexual Assault Recovery Program Director
Miranda James, class of 2015
Alex Leroy, class of 2016

Kate Linnenberg, Associate Prof. Sociology
Will McShane, class of 2015
Eleanor Waddle, class o2017
Lori Rhead, ex officio
Christina Klawitter, ex officio
Linda Lauterbach, committee support

I ask that you provide me a written summary of your findings and recommendations on December 15, 2014, with an eye toward spring 2015 implementation.

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Drafted September 2014 by Christina Klawitter, Ph.D.
Dean of Students