PRISM: Promoting Restorative Initiatives for Sexual Misconduct on College Campuses

Sexual violence has been a topic of considerable community and legislative focus for several decades now; however, only recently has its existence on college campuses elicited such attention. Indeed, in 2015 the Obama administration’s Education Department took aggressive steps to address concerns about sexual violence and harassment on campuses, spurring the enactment of “Yes Means Yes” laws in such states as New York, California, and Michigan (with many post-secondary institutions adopting similar standards without legislative mandate).

Title IX of the United States Education Amendments of 1972 states:

No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving federal financial assistance.

The original intent of this legislation was to ensure that girls and women in educational arenas would be protected from discrimination and other differential treatment based on gender. An early focus of Title IX was discrimination in athletics, in which female students rarely received the same opportunities to participate and benefit; however, the recent focus of Title IX has been incidents of sexual violence on campus.

As someone who has worked in sexual violence prevention for nearly 32 years, I have been privy to the case descriptions of thousands of incidents of abuse, harassment, and other forms of sexual misconduct; however, almost all within the traditional criminal justice domain. When stories of sexual violence on college and university campuses started to become the subject of high profile media focus, I had to admit that I had never considered those environments as in need of specific attention. It’s not that I somehow didn’t think it was happening on campuses (I had known women who had been sexually assaulted when I was in school), I just assumed that it was being managed like sexual violence in any other environment. Turns out I was wrong, and I needed to do something about that.

Through my work with Circles of Support and Accountability, I’ve attended a variety of restorative justice (RJ) conferences and workshops and met many RJ theorists and practitioners, including David Karp of the Project on Restorative Justice at Skidmore College in Saratoga Springs, NY. Together with Co-Chair Kaaren Williamsen of Swarthmore College in Pennsylvania, David has pulled together a large group concerned academics and practitioners from around the US and Canada – all of whom are concerned about how academic institutions are responding to sexual violence. This month, that group – known as Campus PRISM – released a comprehensive report promoting restorative initiatives for sexual misconduct (PRISM) on college campuses (authored principally by Karp, Julie Shackford-Bra...
It is our belief that restorative interventions can be used for community building to establish appropriate standards of sexual conduct on campus, in addition to reducing fear and countering the hostile climate sometimes characterized as “rape culture.” While we do not believe that restorative approaches are appropriate for all instances, we are deeply invested in reducing sexual and gender-based violence by exploring how such approaches could foster healing and provide for greater accountability. To that end:

Campus PRISM promotes restorative justice processes that…
- Encourage true accountability through a collaborative rather than adversarial process;
- Reduce risk of reoffending and provide greater reassurance of safety to survivors/harmed parties and the community;
- Meet survivors/harmed parties’ needs for safety, support, and justice; and
- Create meaningful forums for the examination of hostile campus climates and the development of community-building interventions.

Goals of the Campus PRISM Project:
- Create space for scholars and practitioners to explore the use of RJ for campus sexual and gender-based misconduct (which includes sexual harassment, sexual assault, and other forms of gender-based misconduct) as an alternative or complement to current practices.
- Consider the potential and challenges of RJ in light of the national concern about campus sexual assault.
- Apply lessons learned from the use of RJ in criminal justice sex offenses, e.g. Circles of Support and Accountability, restorative conferencing, and other trauma-informed practices.
- Gather and disseminate knowledge about RJ practice and research.
- Explore the potential for multi-campus RJ pilots.

A fundamental aspect of Campus PRISM is the belief that restorative justice – including various circle practices – can further a prevention agenda through the intersection of information sharing, education, reflection, and community building. Specific to the issue at hand, circle practices encourage people with various perspectives to sit together in a circle and explore issues related to sexuality. One such circle practice suggested in the PRISM report is the aforementioned Circles of Support and Accountability (CoSA), an RJ-informed initiative in the greater sexual offender risk management domain in which perpetrators have been paired with 4-6 community volunteers who support them in their efforts to remain offense-free and accountable to the community. According to the PRISM report, CoSA could provide opportunities for reintegration following an event of sexual violence on campus:

After an incident has been officially resolved, even when a student has been found in violation and suspended, a restorative approach takes into account the long-lasting impact on the individuals involved and the wider community. Although some students who violate campus sexual and gender-based misconduct policies will require criminal prosecution and/or expulsion from the institution, others will remain enrolled or be allowed to reenter after some period of suspension. Implementation of a restorative approach would provide opportunities for student offenders who return to address their issues in a meaningful and socially accountable manner while providing for enhanced monitoring and service provision.

At present, many colleges and universities are grappling with new mandates and responsibilities handed down by the Office for Civil Rights (OCR), the Department of Education’s division responsible for Title IX enforcement. The consideration of RJ options may not have been a particular area of focus as yet; nonetheless, the report suggests that the following list of next steps could be considered by campuses interested in pursuing a restorative approach:
In conclusion, the members of Campus PRISM firmly believe that a restorative justice approach to sexual and gender-based violence offers hopeful opportunities to address the concerns of victims, offenders, and the broader educational community. We believe that simple adherence to compliance standards will not be enough to address issues related to healing, student development, and community growth; nor will simple compliance sufficiently promote new perspectives such as those resultant from a comprehensive implementation of restorative principles with attention to prevention, response, and reintegration. Understandably, broad application of RJ principles and practices will take time; however, as capacity grows, campuses can aspire to and reach a goal of true community transformation.

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