

Discussing High Profile Campus Cases of Sexual Violence

High profile cases of sexual violence engage the community in conversations that can lead to opportunities for education, and they can also result in conflict and polarization of opinions. Below are a few tips for assisting students and peers, when facilitating dialogue about high profile cases of campus violence:

Focus on the meaning. High profile cases often involve people that are publicly known. This means that the public may already believe, or wish to believe, something about the individuals involved. Whether persons have been identified as potential victims or potential perpetrators, it is most helpful to focus on the meanings people may attach to the event, rather than trying to “figure out” what happened or place blame on one party or the other.

Questions to help explore this might include:

- What would it mean to you if X assaulted Y?
- What do you think makes it feel so important to figure out what really happened in this situation?
- How does this situation confirm or challenge what you think about sexual violence already?
- How do you think this situation might be similar to or different from other cases that might not get so much attention?
- People often want to attribute responsibility to a victim of sexual assault. Why do you think that might happen in this case?
- With so much information being circulated from many different sources, it’s really difficult to determine anything with certainty. What important issues does this case bring up, since we have the opportunity to talk about them now?
- How does this relate to your role as an educator on campus? What can you draw upon from your training that can assist you through this process?

Discuss feelings. High profile cases may bring up heightened feelings depending on individuals’ relationships with the individuals or issues involved. It is worthwhile to discuss these feelings.

Examples include:

- Individuals who know the alleged perpetrator. No one wants to believe that someone they know could sexually assault another person. This may challenge their sense of self-trust and safety in the world. It is important to allow students a space to openly discuss these feelings. Just listening and being present with a student can be helpful.
- Individuals who work in violence prevention may feel that they “have to” take a stand for the victim, even absent of the facts. They may feel that not “taking a stand” is, in fact, taking a stand and contributing to the lack of accountability of a potential perpetrator. Reassure them that they do not need to take a stand on one side or another, but they can use the opportunity to talk about the issues they care and are knowledgeable about.

- Individuals who know the alleged victim may struggle to defend their loved one while not wanting to speak for, or disempower, that person.

Listen. If a colleague or peer wants to talk about what happened, you can listen. You don't have to say anything in particular to be a good listener. You don't have to tell them they're right or wrong.

Serve as a resource. You can educate yourself about sexual violence, or offer to get more information and pass that information on to the person you know if it's appropriate to do so.

Be aware that the things you say about sexual assault affect others. For instance, publicly declaring the situation a lie reinforces the myth that women lie about rape and might prevent someone from reporting in the future. It might be damaging to those who are survivors, confirming what they feared about not being believed.

So what do you say? Here are some ideas:

- I'm just sorry that there's even a possibility that something like this happened.
- This is upsetting for everybody, me included, and I guess it's an opportunity to think about sexual assault and why it happens.
- I don't know what happened in this case but I know that this kind of situation happens far too frequently. There is a lot we can learn from this and apply to preventing these types of things from happening in the future.
- Nobody but the two people involved know exactly what happened but it's very difficult for someone to report these types of crimes and I've learned that there are very few false reports of rape.
- I support my friend but I can't say that I know what happened.

What about false reports?

Although there are some false reports of rape, they are rare. The FBI estimates that there are no more false rape reports than there are false reports of any other crime. In the college population we know that fewer than 5 % of these assaults are reported. In fact, numerous surveys validate that sexual assaults are vastly underreported.

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