

Professor and Her Students Pioneer Sexual Assault Prevention and Awareness Program on Campus

By Tom McLaughlin

The #MeToo movement, agrees Courtenay Cavanaugh, has brought much-needed attention to the prevalence of sexual abuse in our communities, particularly the workplace.

However, says the Rutgers University–Camden researcher, most people aren't aware just how dire the issue is on college campuses, where – according to a 2016 U.S. Bureau of Statistics report – one in five female undergraduates are sexually assaulted.

“We want our students to be aware of this issue and, most importantly, we want to prevent them from becoming a statistic because they've experienced this type of adversity,” says the associate professor of psychology.

To that end, Cavanaugh and students in her Violence Against Women and Women's Health course have pioneered the novel, peer-facilitated delivery of a sexual assault prevention and awareness program at Rutgers–Camden.

“This initiative aims to, first and foremost, assist the survivors who have been sexually assaulted and help them to access beneficial services,” says Cavanaugh, a Philadelphia resident. “Secondly, we want to prevent it from happening to any other students.”

During the fall 2017 semester, Cavanaugh delivered TakeCare – an evidence-based bystander-intervention program aiming to reduce sexual violence among the student population – to the 16 students in her engaged civic learning course. She then trained the students to facilitate these intervention strategies with their peers outside the class.

“Students are taught to be aware of and assist in dangerous situations in whatever capacity they can while also not endangering themselves, even if that means distracting the situation or getting someone else to assist,” says Cavanaugh.



The 16 students in Cavanaugh's engaged civic learning course were trained to facilitate bystander-intervention strategies with their peers outside their class



Cavanaugh hails the program as an innovative, cross-campus collaboration

Darris Drennon, a double major in psychology and childhood studies at Rutgers–Camden, says that the program greatly heightened his awareness of the prevalence of sexual assault on college campuses, even shedding light on situations that he didn't stop to think were actual problems.

“In the same respect, I was also surprised by the multiple sources or tactics that I could use in preventative efforts,” says Drennon, a Clementon resident.

With support from the Division of Student Affairs at Rutgers–Camden, the students then recruited their peers – creating and distributing flyers, and working with student leaders across campus to reach out to their respective members. Student Affairs also helped to schedule sessions, provided informational materials on available campus resources, and offered support services in the event that participants expressed adverse reactions to the presentations.

“This was an innovative, cross-campus collaboration. The novel model for integrating this bystander program into my course advanced both student learning and sexual assault prevention on campus,” says Cavanaugh, who adds that it is also an excellent example of academic and student civic engagement.

Cavanaugh's students held a total of six peer-facilitated group sessions to deliver the TakeCare program to a total of 156 students during free periods in the Campus Center.

“At first, it was a little scary being in a position to deliver the session, but once we got people to engage and talk about their personal experiences, we realized that we were making some sort of impact,” says Drennon, who notes that the program also taught him leadership and organizational skills.

To cap off the experience, Allison Wisniewski, associate dean of students at Rutgers–Camden, presented Cavanaugh’s students with certificates of recognition as peer leaders in the prevention and awareness of sexual assault.

The sessions were such a success, in fact, that Student Affairs offered the students jobs to continue offering the program this semester.

Over the course of the project, Cavanaugh notes, the students had been asked periodically to reflect on how their actions and outlook have been impacted by the program, and later to describe their experience facilitating the program for their peers. Across the board, she says, the students who had received this training have been “transformed and can never go back.”

“Once you have been made aware and conscious of these problems, you will never be the same as when you didn’t know,” she says.

The Rutgers–Camden researcher is now submitting a paper for peer review that cites her students’ reflection papers to explain how the project advanced their learning and progress. Moreover, she hopes to continue to collaborate with the Division of Student Affairs in delivering bystander-intervention strategies on campus.

“This is just a seed,” she says. “Two years from now, how many more students – in addition to the first 16 students in my class and the 156 others who received the program – might do something differently when they witness a dangerous situation in order to prevent someone from being assaulted or help someone who has been assaulted?”

She adds that, by addressing this issue, the project is not only reducing sexual assaults on campus, but encouraging a new generation of more attentive citizens who can help address this problem on a wider scale once they graduate.

“Since we know that sexual assault is still a problem in the workplace, might our students be more civically engaged in these other environments?” asks Cavanaugh. “I think they will be.”