

# What U of O has learned about sexual violence

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Reckless Facebook fans and camera-equipped cell phones make documenting the presence of sexual violence almost a walk in the park. Especially, it must be admitted, if the park borders a neighbourhood pub, sports centre or frat house.

If only fixing it were as simple.

Serving on the University of Ottawa's Task Force on Respect and Equality was a reminder of just how complex and pervasive the issues are. A tangled web of sexist assumptions and power-fed entitlements underlie the continuum of egregious behaviour that's been everywhere in evidence over the past nine months. A string of stories unrelated to our mission reinforced its relevancy beyond the campus community, as star athletes and celebrity entertainers forced their own institutions to do damage control in the media, and play catch-up on the policy front.

And then last fall, just to make sure we were all paying appropriate attention, thousands of victims testified to their own #BeenRapedNeverReported trials on Twitter. The sad truth is unavoidable: sexual violence continues to destroy the lives of its (mostly female) victims pretty much all over.

But the focus of the Task Force was the university population, which we consulted widely, beginning with an online survey to gauge student attitudes to sexualized violence. A majority of the more than one thousand who responded disagreed with statements reflecting common rape myths. But a significant minority demonstrated troubling support for notions such as a woman's choice of clothing being relevant to her victimization.

Task Force members also met with most senior administrators, as well as representatives of faculty, staff and student unions. We sought input from health,

housing, and sports services, and held public meetings with the faculties of education, law and medicine. We solicited advice from colleagues at UBC, Lakehead and St. Mary's tasked with similar work, conducted a review of relevant research, and commissioned a study of best practices.

Along the way we heard a lot about some of those devastated lives. And not just from students, but from other members of the campus community, including a victim's mother, whose heart-wrenching account of her own daughter's destruction we'll never forget. Because although media reports invariably focus on the acts of violence themselves, the consequences play out over a much longer and often even more torturous time frame. Some victims fail programs, lose jobs, and slip into depression, terrorized by flashback nightmares or the simple prospect of spotting their unpunished perpetrator across a room.

Mere policies or protocols, as important as they are, remain woefully inadequate. What's needed is a multi-pronged approach that includes broad awareness of expressed values and expectations, comprehensive and widely delivered sexual harassment and violence training, the provision of services involving community workers expert in the area, and easy access to information about how to get help.

That's why our first recommendation is that the university create an action team including senior administrators, students, and faculty, staff and community members to work on implementing the rest of the recommendations.

At a news conference, University of Ottawa President Allan Rock committed the university to doing exactly that, vowing to make the campus environment "safe, respectful and free of sexualized violence" in pursuit of creating "an example for others to follow."

This is an encouraging follow-up to his striking the Task Force in the first place, populating it with knowledgeable and responsible students, faculty, staff and community members, and allowing it to operate at arm's length.

But if you're clucking your tongue while you read this, thinking that the university really must clean up its act (along with Parliament, our public broadcaster, the NFL and all of the other organizations that just haven't made the news yet) my biggest take-away is for you: because what became eminently clear in our investigation was that eradicating sexual violence – from subtle sexism to gang rape – requires engagement from the entire community.

Bystanders who intervene – to escort a vulnerable woman home, stop a sexual assault in the making, or advocate for broader social equality that changes power dynamics – make a difference.

***Shari Graydon***, an award-winning women's advocate and the founder of *Informed Opinions*, was a member of the Task Force on Respect and Equality.