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*East Tennessee State University*

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Divergent Discourse:  
A Case Study Analyzing the Effects of Campus Communication About Sexual Assault

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A thesis  
presented to  
the faculty of the Department of Communication and Performance  
East Tennessee State University  
In partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree  
Master of Arts in Professional Communication

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by  
Melissa H. Nipper  
May 2016

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Dr. Amber Kinser, Chair  
Dr. Wesley Buerkle  
Dr. Stacey Williams

Keywords: Sexual assault discourse, rape myths, stigma, speech communities

## ABSTRACT

Divergent Discourse:

A Case Study Analyzing the Effects of Campus Communication About Sexual Assault

by

Melissa H. Nipper

This research analyzes campus discourse at a university in south central Appalachia in an effort to highlight the role of communication in the prevention of sexual assault and its powerful effects on communities and individuals. Using a critical feminist lens, this qualitative case study identifies the communication goals, interpretations, and strategies of two important speech communities who participate in sexual assault discourse on college campuses—campus professionals who communicate about the issue of sexual assault (issue managers) and sexual assault survivors whose identity is shaped by sexual assault (identity managers). While both groups talk about the problem, the parties diverge on the core function of sexual assault communication. Findings from these speech communities suggest the need for targeted efforts to decimate rape myths on university campuses, as well as the necessity to create safe spaces for survivors to report and talk about sexual assault and form solidarity with other survivors.

## DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to my family—my husband, Brent, and our beautiful daughters, Katie and Sarah. They make every day worthwhile.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

*“We never know how high we are till we are called to rise.” —Emily Dickinson*

I owe special thanks to Dr. Amber Kinser, an exceptional advisor and extraordinary woman. Her expertise in feminist thought, her precision and passion for language, and her genuine concern for my work helped me to chisel away at a rough idea to give it shape and meaning. She challenged me to rise—to sculpt every idea, phrase, and word. It was not easy, but it was worthwhile; I am extremely grateful for her guidance. I also would like to thank Dr. Wesley Buerkle and Dr. Stacey Williams for their willingness to serve on my committee and for their valuable input throughout the process. In addition, I am grateful for Dr. Kelly A. Dorgan and Dr. Andrew Herrmann. Their encouragement, mentoring, and wisdom have been integral parts of my graduate studies. Thank you to Ms. Lori Ann Manis and Ms. Allison Smith, whose assistance made this process smoother and simpler. I also wish to thank the East Tennessee State University School of Graduate Studies for the grant that helped make this research possible. Finally, I gratefully acknowledge the eight individuals I interviewed for this research. I appreciate their time and insights. I especially admire the courage and candor of the four sexual assault survivors who never asked for this identity, but who were willing to talk about it anyway.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

National headlines and campus climate surveys proclaim a disturbing and increasing problem on America's college and university campuses—sexual assault and its effects on individuals and communities. The United States Department of Justice (2014) reports that from 1995-2013, college-age females (ages 18-24) had the highest rate of rape and sexual assault victimization reports compared to females of other age groups. One in five women is sexually assaulted in college, usually by someone she knows (White House Task Force, 2014). However, a more recent campus climate survey by the Association of American Universities (AAU) suggests that the average rates of nonconsensual sexual contact due to physical force or incapacitation may be higher than prior surveys have indicated (Cantor, Fisher, Chibnall & Townsend, 2015, p. iv). With findings varying according to the institution, 13 percent to 30 percent of female undergraduates in the AAU survey reported nonconsensual sexual contact involving force or incapacitation (Cantor et al., 2015, p. x).

Additional findings illuminate the ways in which sexual assault affects individuals and campus communities. Sexual assault rates are highest among females and those who identify as transgender, genderqueer, non-conforming, or questioning (Cantor et al., 2015, p. iv). However, men are not immune from sexual assaults. In fact, college-age males made up 17 percent of the reported rape and sexual assault victimizations against students (U.S. Department of Justice, 2014, p. 5). Other studies point out statistics illustrating connections between college football and sexual assault. Lindo, Siminski, and Swenson (2016) found “significant and robust evidence that football game days increase reports of rape victimization among 17-24 year old women by 28 percent” (p. 2). Reports increase by 41 percent on home game days (Lindo et al., 2016).



Perhaps as troubling as the increasing occurrences of sexual assault on campus are the statistics that reveal the silence that often surrounds the issue. College students who are sexually assaulted are considerably less likely than those in other demographic categories to report their assaults (U.S. Department of Justice, 2014). About 80 percent of rape and sexual assault victimizations of students went unreported to police, while 67 percent of nonstudent victimizations went unreported (U.S. Department of Justice, 2014).

These distressing trends and the shocking headlines<sup>1</sup> in the news recently have captured the nation's attention, up to the very highest public official. In 2014, United States President Barack Obama formed a White House Task Force (2014) and website, NotAlone.gov, which promotes ways to protect students from sexual assault. This initiative was followed with the September 2014 launch of the It's On Us program, which attempted to steer the national conversation in a different direction, this time explicitly and purposefully encouraging men to join the conversation (White House, 2014). As Vice President Joe Biden proclaimed at the It's On Us launch, "violence against women is not a women's issue alone. It's a men's issue" (White House, 2014). The announcement of the It's On Us campaign by Biden and Obama suggested that instead of focusing on the traditional ways that have been used to combat sexual assault (such as victim-centered rape prevention), the nation needs to undergo a fundamental change in the ways it thinks about and addresses sexual violence, or as Biden explained, "It's on us to change the culture that asks the wrong questions" (White House, 2014).

Emphases on involving men in the conversation are not new to sexual assault discourse. Long before the inception of the It's On Us campaign, feminist activists have studied the ways in which we talk about the issue of sexual assault, steering the questions and conversations in directions that seek to break the silence surrounding the issue, involve men, and empower

survivors (eg. Boyd, 2015; Harris, 2011; Philadelphoff-Puren, 2003; Worthington, 2008). Even as far back as the late 1800s and early 1900s, feminist writers such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman addressed matters at the core of the discussion of sexual violence against women, including some men's proclivity to dominate and subordinate women (Degler, 1989, p.19). In addition, Perkins Gilman's arguments for the abolition of prostitution foreshadowed some of the same conversations currently conducted about sexual assault. Perkins Gilman emphasized men's role in prostitution and challenged reformers who honed in on prostitutes' actions while ignoring the client's involvement in prostitution (Allen, 2009). Prostitution would not exist if there were no one willing to pay for it; therefore, the conversations about solutions must involve men. While prostitution and sexual assault are clearly separate issues with their own complexities, Perkins Gilman's contention that society must address those who are actually creating a climate for a problem can be applied to sexual assault discourse. Today's conversations about sexual assault often place the blame on women instead of focusing on men's perpetration of sexual violence toward women. More than 100 years after Perkins Gilman, her message continues to resonate in analyses of sexual assault discourse.

As the 20<sup>th</sup> century progressed, so did the feminist discourse surrounding sexual assault. In the 1970s, feminist scholar Mary Daly called attention to ways in which discourses keep the status quo in power relations (Daly, 1978). Other scholars have used Daly's insight on discourse analysis (Dragiewicz, 2000) to interrogate the ways people talk about rape, and the ways in which these dialogues mirror what they really think about rape. In addition to Daly's work, the 1970s proved to be a generation of progress in acknowledging sexual assault as an important issue; the first rape crisis center opened in 1972 in Washington, D.C. (Byerly, 1994), and Susan Brownmiller's (1975) groundbreaking book, *Against Our Will*, brought rape to the forefront of

theoretical and empirical discussions. The 1970s also was a significant period for Black Feminist thought, and many Black feminist writers, including Barbara Smith and Angela Davis, delved into issues of race, gender, and sex during this period. Smith (1979) studied the ways in which Black women writers have been ignored and devalued, often resulting in their voices being silenced. Later, Smith (1985) began to emphasize the common struggles between feminist and antiracist movements, using rape and sexual assault as examples of oppression. She pointed out that the “feminist movement and the antiracist movement have in common trying to insure decent human life” (p. 257).

The conversation evolved throughout the 1980s, as feminists began including men in the dialogue. In 1983, feminist scholar Andrea Dworkin delivered a pioneering speech about rape to a group of men in which she proclaimed a desire to “scream” and thereby break through “the deafening sound of women’s silence,” (Dworkin, 2005, p. 13). Building on the theoretical foundations of Daly, Brownmiller, Dworkin, and others, voices of feminist scholars grew louder in the 1990s as discussions began to touch on the ways in which survivors are silenced. Feminists such as Germaine Greer (1995) continued to focus on empowering women to talk about their rapes and sexual assaults on their own terms, using language that adequately allows the victim to define her own experience. Greer grappled with this issue in a very personal way when she wrote about her own rape experience and the ensuing backlash she underwent after she revealed this part of her past. The public reaction, including accusations of lying and exhibitionism, proved to Greer the ongoing need for a dramatic change in the way rape is discussed because “to report a rape is to be assaulted all over again” (Greer, 1995, para. 2).

Joining Greer and the intensifying voices of other contemporary feminists, Black feminist thinkers such as Patricia Hill Collins (2004) again brought issues of race, sex, and gender to the

forefront of the discussion. Collins emphasized the complexities of race when applied to sexual assault discourse. For example, since Black men are often viewed as sexual predators in a dominant white society, Black women often practice “self-censorship” when they are assaulted by Black men (Collins, 2004, p. 226). They may choose to stay silent about their assaults in order to protect their community or the reputation of the Black male (Collins, 2004). Collins adds that Black feminists who examine Black women’s victimization “must tread lightly through this minefield of race, gender and sex” (p. 227).

The past 25 years also have brought forth some critique of contemporary feminist discourse. For example, some conservative writers such as Camille Paglia (2014) and Christina Hoff Sommers (1994) challenge the focus on rape culture, positioning it as feminist propaganda. These critics are outspoken opponents of studying rape and sexual assault from the perspective of gender bias or patriarchy (Paglia, 2014, para. 6; Sommers, 1994, p. 225). Instead of interrogating ways to change a culture by attempting to involve men in conversation and transformation, these critics often label sexual assaults as some form of miscommunication and as the fault of both parties. This view is evident as Paglia (2014) describes sexual assaults on campuses as “oafish hookup melodramas, arising from mixed signals and imprudence on both sides” (para. 3).

Despite some oppositional perspectives in contemporary sexual assault discourse, in the last 10 years or so, feminist critics have continued to illuminate ways to give women a more present and powerful voice, while also increasing men’s participation in conversations about this important issue. Even so, campus sexual assault remains a critical problem and universities are positioned to engage this problem institutionally, publically, and strategically. A significant

component of that engagement comprises campus dialogues about the roots, repercussions, and prevention of sexual assault.

The purpose of the present study is to interrogate these campus dialogues in an effort to highlight the critical role of communication in the prevention of sexual assault and its powerful effects on communities and individuals. To that end, the discussion that follows identifies a framework for informing university and college campus conversations and language choices in ways that better respond, and communicate responsiveness, to the issue of sexual assault. My analysis begins with a discussion of critical feminist theory that informs the key issues examined from the extant literature on sexual assault discourse. These issues include rape myths and stigma, and the media maintenance of each. Finally, I observe various ways college and university campuses are addressing sexual assault.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Conversations about sexual assault often reveal underlying attitudes about women, masculinity, and power. Feminist research propels an understanding of these attitudes that prompt and affect discourse about violence against women (Corrigan, 2014). An interpretation of these attitudes from a critical feminist lens provides a background for an exploration of the ways in which institutions and communities talk about sexual assault. In the following analysis, I explore ways in which critical feminist theory can inform research pertaining to sexual assault on college campuses.

### **Critical Feminist Theory: Emancipation & Empowerment**

The troubling statistics presented thus far indicate that a change of course is needed to create safer campus communities that are free from sexual assault and the stigma associated with it. Critical theory provides a sound and formative framework for researchers who want to

analyze discourse about sexual assault because *change* is central to a critical researcher's work. Critical research goes beyond the description of statistics and circumstances, seeking to transform the conditions of oppression through justice or change (Glesne, 2010, p. 10).

Struggles of power and identity are the foundation of a critical theorist's ontological views (Creswell, 2013). Furthermore, a researcher guided by critical theory knows reality "through the study of social structures, freedom and oppression, power, and control" (p. 37) and believes that research can change this reality. Critical theory is an empowering tool, with the potential to transform and "emancipate" (Glesne, 2010, p. 7). The numbers illustrating the problem of sexual assault on college campuses are in place; now what is needed is additional research that interrogates the myriad ways we talk about and address the problem.

The concept of women's emancipation from sexual assault and from the stigma they face resulting from the ways in which we talk about this issue places the current study in the purview of critical feminist theory. Often joined with critical theory, critical feminist theory also attempts to transform "asymmetrical power relations, particularly as applied to women" (Glesne, 2010, p. 11). As the statistics reveal, women comprise the majority of sexual assault survivors. Therefore the hierarchy of power is clear—women are the subordinated group.

Tackling this issue from a critical feminist perspective goes beyond acknowledging that sexual assault is a crime that mainly affects women (Cantor et al., 2015). In the discipline of communication, feminist research strives toward "gender justice" (Dow & Condit, 2005, p. 449), taking into consideration the ways that gender "intersects with race, ethnicity, sexuality, and class" (p. 449). This concept of intersectionality introduces layers of complexity to a study of sexual assault. For example, some researchers (Edgar, 2014; Phillips & Griffin, 2015) have scrutinized high-profile assault cases involving women of color, interrogating the way their race

influences media coverage and public perception. Additionally, sexual assault survivors from different cultural or religious backgrounds, such as traditional Muslim countries where rape can dishonor the victim and her family, may face harsher backlash from their families or communities after they report (Weiss, 2010). These discrepancies in treatment of sexual assault survivors, in addition to the way the survivors handle their assaults, point out that sexual assault survivors are not a homogeneous group facing the same set of difficulties; their situations differ, depending on other factors in their lives and circumstances.

Finally, studies about sexual assault's effects on women also are strengthened by the fact that feminist theories "value the lives and the knowledge of subordinated groups" (Wood, 2005, p. 63). Feminist scholars illumine the important issues, such as eradicating sexual violence, by examining the issues and questions that are important to these subordinated groups (Wood, 2005). Critical feminist scholarship actively seeks positive social change, specifically attempting to topple oppressive communication practices and to uphold better communication rituals (Dow & Condit, 2005, p. 461). It becomes the theoretical engine that drives the research in the direction of sorely needed positive social change to free women from sexual assault in their communities. One path to freedom is communication. In the college and university setting, many researchers have studied the communication tools and patterns of the officials and policymakers. However, critical feminist scholarship gives voice to another group that also has a stake in the issue of sexual assault—survivors. Unfortunately, survivors often choose to stay silent about their assaults; therefore, their messages and everything we can learn from them are muted.

### **Muted Group Theory: Speaking from the Margins**

Understanding that sexual assault survivors are members of a muted group is critical to examining their communication. Muted Group Theory, a feminist theory which focuses

primarily on the communication strategies of women, provides an interesting lens with which to examine sexual assault discourse. Muted Group Theory calls attention to the ways in which power is manifested through language (Wood, 2005). This theory interrogates how communication practices and language “address the experiences of women” (Orbe, 1998, p. 4) and other groups that are not in power positions of a given social hierarchy. Muted Group Theory suggests that these groups are “muted because their lived experiences are not represented in these dominant structures” (p. 4). This silence often is created by the dominant group’s effort to maintain its control by “stifling and belittling the speech” of women (Kramarae, 2005, p. 55). Muted Group theorists not only look at how the marginalized group is silenced, but they also consider the ways in which the muted group implements its own communication practices to surmount the silence and make their voices heard (Orbe, 1998).

Muted Group Theory presents many opportunities for sexual assault research. Beginning with a study of the origins and the spread of rape myths throughout a culture, it can inform the way these myths work to silence and stigmatize survivors of assault. This theory also provides a context for investigating the language that colleges and universities use to educate their campuses about this issue. Realizing that the communication strategies and the vocabulary of sexual assault survivors, as the muted group, are different from those of the dominant group on campus (i.e., administration) is helpful in providing direction for productive discourse between the two groups. It also points toward a need for a more intentional outreach to sexual survivors in order to learn from their insights and experiences. Ultimately, when applied to sexual assault discourse, Muted Group Theory can illuminate the ways survivors have been silenced and can also suggest reform so that “women’s experiences from women’s perspectives” (Wood, 2005, p. 63) are heard and heeded. Recognizing the perspectives of the muted group is fundamental to



analyzing sexual assault discourse, however, the identification of a muted group is a reminder that there is another critical party in the conversation, the dominant group.

### **Masculinity Studies: Shifting the Conversation**

As the dominant group, men play a vital role in sexual assault discourse and are involved in the conversation on many levels. Recent studies of masculinity highlighted how analyses of masculinity and femininity inform and complement each other in communication discourse (Dow & Condit, 2005). It is valuable to understand what kinds of messages are being communicated to, by, and about men, as well as the ways these messages are shaping people's perceptions of sexual assault.

The implications of this focus on masculinity within sexual assault literature are significant because they move the conversation away from solely looking at how women can protect themselves, and add an extra dimension: an examination of the male's role (often, but not always, as aggressor) in sexual assaults. Essentially, many feminist scholars embrace studies of masculinity because a "relentless focus on women leads us to the conclusion, however erroneous, that women are the problem and that the feminist project can be accomplished through change on only one side of the (constructed) gender divide" (Dow & Condit, 2005, p. 460).

Positive change can occur as a result of shifting the conversation in sexual assault discourse. One of the first hurdles is getting men interested in participating in sexual assault discourse. Stoltenberg (2005) points out that there is a "deafening silence" (p. 265) surrounding sexual assault because many men do not want to be part of the conversation. He suggests bringing the issue to the forefront of American conversation in various ways including increased media attention, better sex education in schools, speaking up against pornography that promotes

rape or is made from actual rape, and strengthening the emphasis on prosecuting sex crimes (pp. 265-266). Instead of overlooking or downplaying men's role in the issue, such conversations ought to highlight and center men's aggressive and violent behaviors and the components of masculinity that facilitate rape. In other words, the burden ought to rest on men, who should not rape women (Barber & Kretschmer, 2013; Foubert, Godin, & Tatum, 2010). This transfer of the burden can be implemented into education and outreach programs, as well. Instead of discourse encouraging women to change their behaviors in order to avoid sexual assault, the real solution is "transforming masculinity" (Kimmel, 2005, p. 156) so that men reconsider their behaviors, attitudes, and choices that perpetuate the problem of sexual assault. Ignoring men's culpability in the issue is not only detrimental to women, but also to men because it "freezes men in a posture of defensiveness, defiance, and immobility" (Kimmel, 2005, p. 156). Rather than stunting the conversation at the gender divide, masculinity studies have moved discussions forward, building bridges for better understanding of sexual assault discourse.

### **Literature Review**

Critical feminist research and studies of masculinity provide a background for an exploration of the ways in which institutions, media, and survivors talk about sexual assault. Researchers who have examined these conversations have gained valuable insight on communication practices and language, and their effects on sexual assault. In the discussion that follows, I focus on three compelling themes that arise within these conversations: the existence and perpetuation of rape myths that blame victims and create stigma; the roles of media in the maintenance of these myths; and the ways in which colleges and universities are attempting to mitigate the pervading rape-supportive culture. Each of these areas can provide valuable insight

to improving sexual assault discourse on college campuses, beginning with knowledge of the misperceptions that can cloud communication.

### **Rape Myths: Blaming and Shaming**

Whether they linger quietly in the subtexts of a conversation or they forcibly make their way to the forefront, rape myths can infuse any discussion of the issue of sexual assault. Myths function in a variety of ways and a thorough explanation of their origins and applications are beyond the scope of the present study. However, an understanding of the rape myths that “pervade the public consciousness” is essential to an examination of the problem of sexual assault (Kahlor & Morrison, 2007). Rape myths are false attitudes and beliefs about rape “that serve to deny and justify male sexual aggression against women” (Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994, p. 133). Spoken and latent attitudes toward sexual assault perpetuate many detrimental behaviors such as doubting the validity of a survivor’s claim of rape, blaming a survivor for her own rape, and compartmentalizing rape to a particular stereotype of women (Newcombe, Van Den Eynde, Hafner, & Jolly, 2008). According to Newcombe and colleagues (2008), such myths can erode the seriousness of the crime, providing excuses for perpetrators to rape and reasons for women to resist reporting rape. Researchers have focused especially on three areas of the rape myth phenomenon—the perpetuation of victim-blaming, stigma, and the media’s role in the maintenance of rape myths.

**Victim-blaming.** Accusations and questions can tear down the victim, while building up rape myths: “He was her boyfriend” or “Why didn’t she fight back?” “Her clothes are too tight” or “She drank too much.” Whether the words are uttered aloud or tossed around in the confines of private thoughts, these statements are victim blaming—they lift the weight of the situation from the perpetrator, the rapist, and place the heavy burden squarely on the back of the victim by

accentuating her actions (Edgar, 2014). Sometimes victim blaming is blatant, revealed in fingerprinting word choices and questions; other times it remains below the surface, subtly revealed by a silent refusal to talk about the problem. Edgar (2014) asserted that when conversations concentrate on the victim's power, action, or inaction in a situation, while ignoring the role of the attacker, the discussions "reframe gendered violence through victim-blaming discourses" (p. 138).

Many variables affect rape myth acceptance and cause people to victim-blame. In her classic study on rape myth acceptance, Burt (1980) concluded that Americans believe many rape myths and that these beliefs are difficult to change since they are "strongly connected to other deeply held and pervasive attitudes such as sex role stereotyping, distrust of the opposite sex (adversarial sexual beliefs), and acceptance of interpersonal violence" (p. 229). A specific area of interest for scholars is the difference in men's and women's tendencies to accept rape myths. Two separate surveys of undergraduate students demonstrated that men accept rape myths to a greater degree than women (Aronowitz, Lambert, & Davidoff, 2012; Newcombe et al., 2008). Another variable that plays an important role in rape myth acceptance is sexual knowledge, such as information about sexually transmitted diseases, birth control, and ways to get sexual satisfaction without intercourse (Aronowitz et al., 2012). Aronowitz and colleagues (2012) clearly demonstrate that "the more sexual knowledge the student had, the less likely he or she would be to accept the negative social norms of peers, and the less likely the student would be to accept rape myths" (p. 179). In other words, knowledge and education wield power in eroding the rape myths that distort cultural perception of the problem. This places a greater onus on the role of communication when confronting the problem of sexual assault; what is said in public arenas and personal conversations, and how it is said, can shape people's perceptions and their

propensity to blame the victim (Botta & Pingree, 2010; Harris, 2011; Philadelphoff-Puren, 2003).

Victim-blaming is not only an outward construct imposed upon someone; it can be internalized by victims and manifest as self-blame. One indicator of whether a victim might be experiencing self-blame is to study the ways in which survivors of sexual assault conceptualize and communicate about their experience. In other words: Do survivors call their experience rape or assault, or do they label it something else, such as a “serious miscommunication” (Orchowski, Untied, & Gidycz, 2013, p. 940), that shifts the blame from the perpetrator of the crime onto themselves? Instead of blaming the perpetrator of the assault, Orchowski and colleagues (2013) speculate that women who label their experience as miscommunication might believe that it is their fault for not more aggressively communicating their lack of consent (p. 953). Furthermore, they concluded that women tended to use the label “serious miscommunication” (p. 953) as a self-blame tool, especially in situations of sexual coercion and when alcohol was involved. A survivor’s decision whether to report the crime committed against her is another possible indicator of the presence of self-blame. In one qualitative study of rape survivors, women were asked to describe their rationale for reporting or not reporting rape (Heath, Lynch, Fritch, McArthur & Smith, 2011). The survivors often referenced “self-blame, shame, [and] questioning whether the event was really a rape,” and indicated “they would only feel comfortable reporting if they had obvious bruising or physical evidence” (Heath et al., 2011, p. 606). Therefore, if their outward appearance did not communicate the assault they encounter, then neither would they. Clearly, self-blame exercises great power in how women respond to and communicate about their assault. In fact, victim blaming, including self-blame, and a belief in rape myths often predict the stigmatization of sexual assault survivors (Weidner & Griffitt, 1983, p. 159).

**Stigma & silence.** Stigmatized groups are “social categories about which others hold negative attitudes, stereotypes, and beliefs” (Crocker & Major, 1989, p. 609). Crocker and Major (1989) also explain stigmatization using notions of the dominant group in culture, arguing that the stigmatized “are devalued not only by specific ingroups but by the broader society or culture” (p. 609). Sexual assault survivors are relegated to a stigmatized category because they are debased by those who question and blame them (Weidner & Griffitt, 1983).

Many sexual assault survivors can and do choose to conceal the fact that they are a member of a stigmatized group. In his classic work, Goffman (1963) describes the Greek origins of the word “stigma,” which refers to “bodily signs to expose something unusual and bad about the moral status of the signifier” (p. 1). However, as Goffman expounded on stigma, he pointed out that not everyone who experiences stigma shows outward “stigma signals” (p. 45), such as a disability that is evident from the external appearance of an individual. Many stigmatized groups, including assault survivors with no bruising or visible signs of physical trauma, can conceal their stigmatized social identity or control the amount of information they reveal about it (p. 109). However, even though someone might keep their membership in a stigmatized group a secret so that they do not suffer from public stigma, they often still face the effects of self-stigma. Public stigma occurs when an individual experiences “negative or unfair treatment by others, whereas self-stigma is the internalization of the public’s beliefs or unfair treatment” (Deitz, Williams, Rife, & Cantrell, 2015, p. 602). As Goffman (1963) pointed out, “the stigmatized are not persons but rather perspectives” (p. 138). As with blame, these perspectives can be imposed upon or adopted by the survivor. Even if the survivor chooses not to reveal her status as a sexual assault victim, society’s perspectives about the issue, including rape myths and victim-blaming, can affect her thoughts and actions in various ways.

The effects of this devaluation of the sexual assault survivor is manifested in several ways, but most notably by the silence that results from the stigmatization. To reduce the discomfort of being blamed or having to defend herself, the stigmatized individual might avoid all discussions of the stigma (Goffman, 1963). In the case of sexual assault, avoiding conversation often translates to not reporting a rape or sexual assault. Survivors may fear public exposure and the weight that accompanies a stigmatized identity, or they may be wary of the criminal justice system (Weidner & Griffitt, 1983). Even the threat or possibility of being stigmatized has the power to mute survivors and, by doing so, remove them from beneficial discourse that could lead to healing and change (Miller, Canales, Amacker, Backstrom & Gidycz, 2011). Goffman (1963) discussed the importance of the stigmatized unifying with others in their stigmatized group to share a “public presentation” (p. 25) of their issues and status. However, instead of uniting as one voice in a public outcry against sexual assault, stigmatized survivors often go unheard among the cacophony of rape myths perpetuated by the dominant groups. The views of the dominant group often are supported and spread by various media sources, which frame the issue of sexual assault and drive discussions that propagate or dissuade rape myths and stigma.

### **Media Maintenance of Myths**

Sexual assault discourse is observed in obvious and more subtle mediated manifestations. Rape pornography, which depicts sexualized domination through “explicit scenes of rape, bondage, abuse and torture” (Caputi, 2011, p. 313), is one of the most blatant mediated messages. According to Caputi (2011), even “everyday porn” (p. 313) portrays these behaviors in subtler ways. However, porn is not the lone wolf in disseminating and encouraging rape myths. The myths also are evident in more mainstream types of media, such as television, news,

and sports media (Byerly, 1994; Cuklanz & Moorti, 2006; Kahlor & Morrison, 2007; Worthington, 2008).

An overview of research examining television and news coverage of sexual assault indicates that media often ignore or downplay the voice and experience of the sexual assault survivor, instead creating a platform for the dissemination of rape myths. Cuklanz and Moorti's (2006) analysis of feminism and the victimization of women on television sifts through specific rape narratives on television. They note that in television detective genres for example, "victim voices and perspectives are rare" (p. 307) and that these shows more often focus on men and masculinity. In fact, television rape scenes often overlook "feminist understandings of rape," (p. 307) instead focusing on graphic rape scenes and the objectification of the victim. Additionally, Kahlor and Morrison (2007) made an interesting discovery in their study of undergraduate women's television use and the correlation to their acceptance of rape myths. Unlike previous studies, which had identified a link between pornographic and erotic television viewing and rape myth acceptance, Kahlor and Morrison's (2007) study indicated "a link between *general, daily television use* and the acceptance of rape myths" (p. 735). This link is critical because it assumes a large audience, thus wider dissemination of rape myths and broad categories of content that are seemingly innocuous, and hence go unexamined for the role they play in shaping perceptions of rape.

Even news coverage, which purports to bring issues to light for public consumption, can mute the voices of sexual assault survivors through the ways in which it shapes the public's perception of assault survivors and the perpetrators. The news angles the media choose to pursue when covering a sexual assault story can influence the narrative and conversations surrounding the incident (Worthington, 2008). Essentially, careless or uninformed reporting can bolster rape



myths and misunderstanding (Byerly, 1994). For example, Worthington (2008) explored the investigative reporting of a campus rape scandal and the ensuing comments the story produced on the television station's Web site. In this case, the investigative news report emphasized the administration's role in the case, including the questions of the institution's responsibility and the issue of campus security. By focusing on these elements of the case, the news reports ignored important tenets of this case and other sexual assault cases, including "the responsibility of male perpetrators and patriarchal social structures" (p. 364). Indeed, the media hold the power as gatekeeper, choosing what *to report* and what *not to report*, including which elements of a case are worth emphasizing. For example, in her study of a high-profile 2006 rape case at Duke University, Barnett (2012) distinguished how four major newspapers "focused on individuals' moral character rather than the larger issues of sexual assault and exploitation" (p. 11). Barnett lamented that the media did not cover issues such as how this incident of false rape "affected the work of rape crisis centers and women's advocates who have long battled the claim that women lie about rape" (p. 26). She pointed out that stories about these women "vanished among stories that highlighted the effects of the case on powerful individuals and powerful institutions" (p. 26). Essentially, the news was silent about issues facing stigmatized sexual assault survivors, such as power injustices, reasons for false allegations (such as mental illness, exploitation, or poverty, for example), factors that might compel a woman to lie about rape, and issues of agency for women (p. 27).

News coverage that overlooks the issues faced by sexual assault survivors continues the cycle of silencing other survivors. Several researchers have identified how survivors' fear of being publicly blamed or shamed in the media has influenced their choice not to report their assault; not reporting is often the first line of silence. In her study of the 2006 Duke case, Barnett

(2012) notes that the media largely ignored how this case would affect women who were considering reporting a sexual assault. In their own study of the same case, Phillips and Griffin (2015) examined how public opinions were spread by the media, pointing out that even before the charges were legally dismissed against the accused, the woman who reported the alleged rape was vilified, ridiculed, and silenced. This treatment of the woman could have extremely harmful repercussions on other survivors of sexual assault who were considering reporting. When other survivors see how women are treated poorly in the media, they could assume (whether correctly or erroneously) that “their identities, character, sexual behaviors, and vocations will be publicly lambasted” (p. 51) if they choose to report. It is critical to combat this perception among survivors by creating safe spaces for them to feel secure enough to report their assaults without fear of embarrassment or harassment, especially on college campuses, which have the lowest reporting rate among survivors (U.S. Department of Justice, 2014).

### **Mitigating Rape-Supportive Culture**

Colleges and universities have struggled with elements of the community that can foster a rape-supportive culture. Whether valid or unwarranted, several aspects of college community life, including Greek life, alcohol consumption, and athletics, are often cited or discussed when a sexual assault is reported (eg. Abbey, 2011; Wantland, 2005; Young, Morales, Esteban McCabe, Boyd & D’Arcy, 2005). In response to this important issue, colleges and universities are making strides in their effort to subvert rape-supportive culture. Whether this is through official sexual assault education efforts or by using grassroots means to rally individuals and bring attention to the issue, researchers have studied the effectiveness of these attempts to mitigate rape culture on campus (Klaw et al., 2005; Strout, Amar, & Astwood, 2014). These efforts include general communication practices and rape prevention programs used on college campuses, as well as

specific measures that reach out to men to promote their role in the struggle against sexual assault.

**Prevention and education.** Researchers have argued that healthy campus climates promote empowerment for survivors rather than emphasizing survivors' roles in preventing their own sexual assault (Boyd, 2015; Hayes-Smith & Hayes-Smith, 2009). Hayes-Smith and Hayes-Smith (2009) conducted a website content analysis of the availability of women's resource centers on college campuses, specifically focusing on sexual-assault related resources. They reviewed the extent to which the website content focused on what survivors should be doing or should have done to assuage the possibility of sexual assault, rather than emphasizing to victims that "it is not their fault and there are people to support them" (p. 117). A simple way to empower those who have been sexually assaulted is instead of using the term "victim," which can be disempowering, consider using the term "survivor" (p. 118). Education about consent and bystander responsibility is another way campuses are shifting the emphasis to the perpetrators and witnesses of assault, rather than focusing on what survivors can do or should have done to prevent it. Universities have initiated education efforts specifically aimed at discussions of consent in sexual situations (Jozkowski, Peterson, Sanders, Dennis, & Reece, 2014). When examining how men and women communicate consent, Jozkowski and colleagues (2014) identified "significant differences in how men and women indicated their own consent and nonconsent" (p. 904). This signals a need for clear channels of communication and sexual assault education on college campuses. Other researchers such as Branch and Richards (2013) also highlight a need for more community-wide education, including bystander education on college campuses.

Scholars have learned much about the effectiveness of these campus outreach programs and messages by studying their outcomes. These outcomes often are measured by awareness and reporting of sexual assault occurrences on campus. Klaw and colleagues (2005) examined an intensive semester-long rape prevention training program, located at a large, public Midwestern university that empowered participants to facilitate their own rape education efforts on campus. Their study revealed that the participants became more conscious of rape and that “intensive, sustained rape education efforts play a vital role in dismantling rape supportive culture” (p. 48). This dismantling came through an increased awareness of sexual assault on campus, dealing with emotions that resulted from discussing this issue, and increased activism in challenging rape culture (p. 58). Other studies point toward the importance of campuses creating safe communication practices so that survivors will be more likely to report assault when it occurs (Strout et al., 2014). Creating a safe climate to report and discuss sexual assault is another area that requires clear and consistent communication, and Strout and colleagues (2014) emphasized the important role that key professionals on campus can play impacting the “campus climate on sexual violence” (p. 136). The researchers concluded that campus-based women’s centers have important insights on this issue and that these staff members can play a key role in influencing women to report occurrences of sexual assault. Their qualitative study provided insight on policies, procedures, and campus reporting of sexual assault, all while touching on the communication aspects of these critical issues. While important, these official campus communication measures have not garnered as much attention as some of the grassroots methods, such as the SlutWalk movement and men’s education efforts, which both highlight men’s participation and complicity in sexual assault or rape culture.

**SlutWalk movement.** One of the most recognized transnational feminist movements to take a stand against victim-blaming and rape culture was organized in response to something that took place on a college campus. The first SlutWalk, which occurred in 2011, was formed after “a Toronto police officer told a college audience at York University in Toronto, Canada, that if women want to prevent becoming victims of sexual assault, they should ‘avoid dressing like sluts’” (Barber & Kretschmer, 2013, p. 41). To protest this slut-shaming view, a group of women organized a march, which was attended by 3,000 to 5,000 people (O’Reilly, 2015). The event grew quickly as others were organized around the globe and SlutWalks became an international movement. The movement serves to “protest men’s complicity in sexual assault” (Barber & Kretschmer, 2013, p. 41), and is attended by men and women of all ages and sexual orientations. Men who attend the SlutWalks often don shirts imprinted with “Real Men Don’t Rape” and hold signs that say “Don’t Rape People” (Barber & Kretschmer, 2013, p. 42).

A significant feature of the SlutWalk movement was that it was conceived and carried out by women who had no official communication responsibilities or formal affiliation with the university’s rape education or prevention efforts. Instead, as O’Reilly (2015) pointed out, the first SlutWalk unfolded “swiftly and spontaneously” (p. 23) and “was initiated and organized by a handful of young women with no money, little time, and no formal support from any governmental, university, or social agency or department, and all in a matter of six weeks” (p. 24). These women used social media to help spread the word and had no idea that the event would transform into its own phenomenon that has been copied, criticized and carried out throughout the world (O’Reilly, 2015). While researchers have studied many individual rape education and bystander intervention programs, none have captured the international spotlight quite like the SlutWalks movement.

**Speaking to men.** While SlutWalks have attracted a lot of media interest for bringing men into the national conversation about rape, there are many other official programs on university campus that are trying to do the same thing through different channels. Men are joining the conversation in other public ways, including their participation in rape prevention programs that are targeted at males. Foubert and colleagues (2010) surveyed men who were involved in an all-male sexual assault peer education program at a southeastern public university and found that 79 percent “reported that their attitudes and/or their behavior changed because of the program” (p. 2243). Attitude changes included a shift in how the participants viewed alcohol consumption and sexual activity; an increased understanding of the seriousness of rape and the trauma that results from rape; and the fact that communication is critical to consent during sexual activity. Changed behaviors mentioned by one-fifth of the respondents included an increased focus on intervention to keep their friends safe; in other words, they “looked out for their female friends to make sure other men did not take advantage of them and they looked out for their male friends to make sure they didn’t drink too much or become forceful around women” (p. 2247). Approximately 10 percent of the respondents also reported that they communicated better with their partner to ensure consent during sexual situations and that they stopped joking about rape. Foubert and colleagues concluded that this type of training for men can be successful in sexual assault prevention.

Recently on the national stage, the White House’s It’s On Us campaign has gained attention, with the media weighing in on how effective it has been with its target audience—college-age males (Culp-Ressler, 2015). When one journalist interviewed several male students who serve in leadership roles on college campuses throughout the country, most stated that they thought the It’s On Us campaign initiated on the national level was sending a positive message

and had potential to do good work (Culp-Ressler, 2015). However, one of them noted as well that “a national ‘one size fits all’ campaign may not have as much impact as the grassroots student activism that’s already happening on the ground” (Culp-Ressler, 2015, para.12). The success of the SlutWalk movement combined with this observation about an “official” national movement inciting men to prevent sexual assault suggest that there is value in students driving the conversation and taking the initiative in sexual assault discourse and directing attention to men’s involvement.

Central to each of these studies of campus prevention, training, and awareness efforts to prevent sexual assault is the role that communication plays in dismantling rape culture on campus. It becomes clear that campus communities must consider not only the language of the messages they are sending, but the intended audiences of these messages and the senders of the messages. An open dialogue about sexual assault among the entire campus community—not just women—is necessary to better educate about this complex issue and, by doing so, work to eradicate sexual assault (Aronowitz et al., 2012).

### **Summary of Literature Review**

The literature I have reviewed elucidates three formative elements of sexual assault discourse—rape myths, the media’s role in driving or diminishing those myths, and the alleviation of rape culture on university campuses. Researchers have indicated that these themes are interconnected in various ways and are best understood in relation to one another. While rape myths could cause victim-blaming and stigma, blaming the victim also feeds and propels the rape myths. Mediated discourse plays into this circle of blame and doubt. To break the cycle, researchers (eg. Boyd, 2015; Hayes-Smith & Hayes-Smith, 2009) suggest a shift in culture from

victim-blaming to support for survivors, including the way we educate and inform audiences, such as college communities, about this issue.

Analyses of college community discourse about the issue of sexual assault can provide insight about university communication strategies and their effectiveness at eradicating this problem on campus. Much of the current scholarship, including key studies that I have covered in this literature review, hone in on one of two foci: (1) They examine the effectiveness of a particular rape education program or awareness initiative, while considering its language, goals, or intended audience, or (2) They examine data revealing the perceptions of one specific group of people involved in sexual assault discourse, such as media, campus program leaders or administrators, or survivors. Rarely have researchers examined the communication practices, specific language, and perceptions of sexual assault survivors compared with the official communication occurring on campus. Such a comparison would reveal where these groups align in their understanding of healthy sexual assault discourse, as well as the areas where they diverge. To succinctly delineate the dilemma: Do they have similar understandings of how sexual assault is communicated? To what extent are they using the same or similar vocabulary to discuss it? Studies that emphasize the communication efforts of just one group or program often overlook an essential feature of sexual assault discourse—the dominant speech community such as campus administration likely uses different vocabularies and communication goals than the muted group of sexual assault survivors. It is critical to study the language and communication tactics of both groups in order to bridge the gap in their communication practices and gain a better understanding of how to effectively eradicate rape culture on campus.

The current study contributes such an analysis by looking at one university with an eye toward suggesting communication strategies that can reduce stigma for assault survivors, while



ultimately decreasing the incidents of sexual assault on campus. Therefore, instead of a dedicated analysis of one campus program or one demographic of a campus community, my qualitative case study seeks to fill a gap in the literature by searching for insights to be gained by comparing the perceptions and communication of the muted and dominant participants in the conversation. In the study, I examine the discourse of one university campus located in south central Appalachia through several data points: (1) Sexual assault survivors' perceptions about communication on campus; (2) Campus professionals' (counseling center staff, administration, and programming facilitators) insight on the issue; and (3) analyses of language, literature, and materials used to raise awareness of this issue. My analysis of the data is driven by the following general research questions: (1) How does the discourse of a college campus represent and address sexual assault? and (2) How can this discourse optimally aid in responding to the issue of sexual assault on campus and reducing survivor stigma?

## CHAPTER 2

### METHODOLOGY

I analyzed college campus sexual assault discourse using a qualitative case study, which provides “in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system” (Merriam, 2009, p. 42). The thick description resulting from a case study is beneficial for studies that seek to examine the “how and why questions” (Merriam, 2009, p. 45) of a particular phenomenon. When exploring the issue of campus sexual assault, there are already many statistics that illustrate the problem (what) and the parties it affects (who). My study seeks to probe the issues of how and why campus sexual assault discourse is important. Instead of identifying a problem, a case study aids in “the search for meaning and understanding” (Merriam, 2009, p. 39).

A case study’s bounded system could be an entity, individual, group, policy, organization, or institution (Merriam, 2009). As the preceding review of literature demonstrates, sexual assault is a broad topic that can be examined from various institutional, mediated, and academic vantage points. Therefore, a case study provides an opportunity to narrow the focus on specific elements of the issue that have not yet been examined. This case study surveys the sexual assault discourse at a mid-size university located in south central Appalachia.

There are various motives for conducting a case study. If the case is unique on its own merits and therefore worth studying, it is an *intrinsic* case (Creswell, 2013, p. 98). The instances of sexual assault and the need for communication about sexual assault at the university examined in this study are not unique to this institution, as is evident from the national statistics. Universities across the country are dealing with this issue. In contrast, the current study functions as an *instrumental* case because it can serve as a tool to augment our understanding of the issue of sexual assault (Creswell, 2013). In other words, this study helps to answer the question: *What*

*general lessons can we learn from this case and how can these lessons be applied at this university and other college campuses?*

### **Data Collection**

A case study is pursued by way of exploring in-depth “data gathered through participant observation, in-depth interviewing, and document collection and analysis” (Glesne, 2010, p. 22). In the present case study, although I did not collect data longitudinally, I employed each of these methods to gain understanding of sexual assault communication strategies. These complementary data collection methods provided valuable insight to my study, beginning with my role as participant observer.

### **Observation**

Before I conducted any interviews, it was imperative that I understand the types of discussion about sexual assault that were occurring on campus so that I could position the experiences my participants shared with me within the context of the campus climate I observed. To learn about some of the formal campus discourse, over the course of a semester I attended four campus events that were announced and open to the public. These events included Take Back the Night, a candlelight vigil for sexual assault survivors; Walk a Mile in Her Shoes, an event to raise sexual assault awareness among men on campus; Greek Sex: Sororities, Fraternities, and Sexual Assault, an academic lecture on sexual assault and Greek life; and Yes, No, Maybe So, a workshop focusing on how gender differences and communication styles relate to sexual consent.

My role at each of these events was as participant observer. Researchers who employ participant observation put themselves amidst a group or within a situation in order “to describe what goes on, who or what is involved, when and where things happen, how they occur, and

why—at least from the standpoint of participants—things happen as they do in particular situations,” (Jorgensen, 1989, p. 12). This type of data collection allowed me to observe a segment of the campus community that gathered for the purpose of sexual assault discourse, the expressed topic of my study. By being there and inserting myself into an existing discourse, I was able to sift through “the meanings people use to define and interact with their ordinary environment” (p. 23). It allowed me an opportunity to provide descriptive analyses of several sexual assault awareness/education events and to experience first-hand some of the events that were described by interviewees later in my study.

For example, at the Take Back the Night candlelight vigil, I stood in the circle holding a lighted candle alongside the other attendees. At that same event, I applauded when a presenter sang a song he wrote about sexual assault. I was part of the audience at each event, however I also carefully observed those in attendance, as well as the event speakers, to ascertain the purpose and tone of the gathering, as well as how other participants seemed to be responding to the messages emerging from it. When I could do so unobtrusively, I took brief field notes during the events. I did not want to do anything to draw attention away from the proceedings at the event, so my notes were sometimes sparse. However, after the event, I expanded my field notes, filling in any gaps and elaborating on my observations of the events. I repeated this approach at the Walk a Mile in Her Shoes, Greek Sex, and Yes, No, Maybe So events, as well. As I wrote my field notes, I attempted to capture the identity and purpose of the group gathering (Ensworth, 2004). I explored their group identity first by observing characteristics of the designated speakers, as well as those of the audience. I noted the speakers’ credentials and demeanor as they were introduced, including their role on campus and at the event. In addition, I considered the makeup of the audience, which I could only identify in a general way by observing gender, race,

approximate age, and their level of participation or engagement. Going even farther, I examined the words and actions of the individuals who spoke, as well as the audience members who commented or participated. I noted the specific language and phrases they used as they discussed issues related to sexual assault (Goodall, 2000). I attempted to identify the “work” (Goodall, 2000) their words were doing within the context of the setting, including the main messages they communicated. Finally, I also noted verbal, non-verbal, and artifactual symbols that were used or addressed at each of the events (Goodall, 2000). For example, symbols of discomfort in talking about the issue included the high heel shoes at Walk a Mile in Her Shoes and the intentional moments of silence introduced at Take Back the Night. The candles at Take Back the Night, reminiscent of the lighting of candles at a religious or sacred event, emphasized the somber tone and the seriousness of the issue. These words and symbols are evidence of the type of communication occurring on campus about the issue of sexual assault.

## **Interviews**

The largest segment of my data collection consisted of eight in-depth interviews, which sampled two specific groups on campus—four employees of the university whose job in some way deals with the issue of sexual assault on campus, and four sexual assault survivors who are part of the campus community. I focused on these two groups in particular because I was interested in investigating the perspectives of the dominant and the marginalized groups who are most affected by the issue. According to Orbe (1998), the dominant group functions “at the top of the social hierarchy” and regulates “to a great extent the communication system of the entire society” (p. 4). When examining the issue of sexual assault communication in a university setting, the dominant group would be the policymakers, administrators, and those campus professionals who hold jobs that require that they address the issue; the marginalized survivors

bring a personal, first-hand perspective to the issue. Both of these groups generate important insights for a discussion of sexual assault, and including their viewpoints provides a platform for comparison.

I used different methods to recruit participants for each group. For the campus professionals, I searched the university website and spoke with some of the organizers at the events I attended. These efforts pointed me toward the key individuals on campus who work most closely with sexual assault communication and awareness. I approached four of them about participating in my study. They were eligible for participation by virtue of their position responsibilities and adult age. Each consented to a confidential interview and signed an Informed Consent Form approved by the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB). To recruit sexual assault survivors who were willing to be interviewed, I posted flyers throughout several main buildings on campus; these also were approved by the IRB (see Appendix A). To be eligible for participation in the study, these participants had to: 1) self-identify as a sexual assault victim or survivor; 2) be eighteen years of age or older; and 3) have been a member of the campus community for at least one year so that they had a frame of reference to draw from when asked about communication on campus. There were no gender requirements for participation. I interviewed the first four individuals in each group who responded with interest and met the participation criteria. Each of the interviewees self-reported as a survivor of sexual assault and signed the consent form, agreeing to a confidential interview. It was not essential to my research that their assault occurred on the university campus.

I conducted the personal interviews in various locations on campus, depending on where each participant requested we meet. Per their wishes, I interviewed all four of the campus professionals in their respective campus offices; the interviews lasted an average of 49 minutes.

The sexual assault survivors' preferences for meeting locations varied, but all of their interviews were held in private spaces on campus where they could talk freely without being heard or seen by anyone else. Two of the interviews took place in a private departmental conference room, one in a private meeting room in the campus student center, and one in an empty classroom. The interviews with the survivors lasted an average of 22 minutes. I gave each survivor participant a modest gift card for their participation. (The campus professional participants informed me that they could not accept a gift card.)

I developed my interview protocol based on Creswell's (2013) premise that interview questions often are derived from the sub-questions in the research study itself (p. 164). Therefore, my interview questions stemmed from my three research aims. Each of these aims seeks to add to the themes that arose in the literature review: rape myths, how media and communication perpetuate these myths, and the ways in which colleges and universities are dealing with rape culture. My first aim was to identify *the ways in which the university responds to the issue of sexual assault*; this portion of the interview discussed the language and methods used in official campus conversations about the issue. My second aim was to *identify perceptions of how the university responds to this issue*; questions related to this aim gauged the participants' attitudes and opinions about the university's current communication efforts. *My third aim was to identify areas where campus communication about this topic could be improved*; to work toward this aim, I asked the participants about ways that the university and colleges more broadly can do a better job responding and communicating their responsiveness to sexual assault.

Since the two groups of participants were from distinctive segments of the campus community, I worked from two separate interview schedules—one focusing on survivors' understandings and perceptions and the other geared toward the campus professionals'

understandings and perceptions. Each of the two schedules included three primary open-ended questions with possible follow-up probes stemming from each question (see Appendix B). In addition, so as not to incur trauma among the sexual assault survivors, I asked no questions that directly referenced their assault or prompted them to talk about the actual incident in any way. Instead, all of the questions were about their perceptions of sexual assault communication on campus. With a topic as sensitive as sexual assault, an interview could easily go in many directions, including into the participants' emotional and mental trauma that is difficult for the participant and in any case is not the emphasis of my research. Although none of the participants visibly revealed any emotional distress during the interview process, as a precaution, I informed them verbally and in writing of the university counseling center services if they should need to talk with someone trained to help with any trauma or other emotional issues resulting from the assault. The specific contact information for the counseling center was included in their copy of the consent document they signed.

All eight interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim by a member of my research team. Only members of my research team (the transcriber, my advisor, and I) had access to the recordings and the transcripts, which were stored in a password-protected Dropbox folder and on my password-protected laptop computer. None of their names were recorded on the transcripts or used throughout any of my data analysis or findings. Instead, I used pseudonyms for each participant. Below, I briefly describe the participants pseudonymously.

The campus professionals I interviewed work in various aspects of the university's sexual assault prevention and communication efforts and programs. Each of their jobs in some way deal directly with the issue of sexual assault and/or sexual assault survivors. To protect their privacy, no specific identifying factors about their jobs are associated with their pseudonyms. The



professional participants include Casey, Chris, Pat, and Terry. The sexual assault survivors were all female undergraduates who attended the university for at least one year. They include Abbie, Brooke, Carla, and Danica. Like the professionals, other details that could potentially identify the sexual assault survivors are withheld to protect their privacy.

## **Documents**

To enhance what I learned through my observation and interviews, I gathered various paper and electronic texts throughout the course of my research. Creswell (2013) discusses the collection of public or private documents as data to supplement or support a case study. My document collection began at the public events I attended, where I accumulated several handouts provided for the audience. These included a program from Take Back the Night and several campus safety brochures and information sheets, which were available at tables during Walk a Mile in Her Shoes.

In addition, for the purposes of my research I gathered other public documents that were formative to shedding light on my research question, as well as those that gave me a clearer picture of the type of official communication occurring on campus. Most of the documents I collected were mentioned throughout the course of my interviews, so it was essential to see and analyze the specific written communication pieces the subjects referred to in their responses. My interview subjects provided some of these documents to me, including a poster that promotes bystander awareness and that is displayed in various campus buildings and residence halls. The campus professionals also gave me safety brochures and a flyer about consent. I picked up additional brochures about the campus sexual assault counseling center and about preventing assault from a public brochure rack in an office interview.

The campus professionals pointed me toward several documents located on the university's "Violence Free" webpage, which is a repository for important information about sexual assault awareness and prevention on campus. This webpage includes information about reporting, counseling, results of a recent campus climate survey, federal laws and mandates, campus policies, and many other links to information and support resources. It serves as a clearinghouse of sexual assault information available to the public. The web address is promoted on the bystander awareness posters, on all safety notices that are emailed to campus after a sexual assault occurs, and through other educational emails that have been sent to campus community members. All of the documents I used in my study provided some elucidation of the campus communication efforts that my interview subjects utilized and discussed with me.

### **Data Analysis**

Once the documents, observations, and interview notes were collected, I moved toward forming codes or categories from the data which, according to Creswell (2013), signifies "the heart of qualitative analysis" (p. 184). The coding process entailed amassing and categorizing the text from the various data sources in order to find emerging themes and make analytic interpretations (Charmaz, 2006; Creswell, 2013). Borrowing from Charmaz's (2006) Grounded Theory approach, I coded my data in two steps: initial and focused coding. I began the initial coding process by reading through my data sources (field notes, documents, and interview transcriptions) line by line. I made preliminary notes about the significant ideas and language that I noted, highlighting words and ideas that were repeated or emphasized. I listed every possible theme, and then, upon second and third readings of my data, winnowed these 20 or so ideas down into more substantive categories—sometimes combining several narrow ideas into fewer, broader themes. As I combed through the data, *in vivo* codes began to surface. These *in*

*vivo* labels are derived by the “exact words used by participants” (Creswell, 2013, p. 185) to describe a certain phenomenon or feeling. Certain words and sentiments were repeated by the sexual assault survivors and professionals, and they led to other discoveries throughout the data.

At the conclusion of the initial coding process, six distinctive themes were rising from the data. These themes included sexual assault survivors’ feelings of shame; rape myth prevalence on campus; reluctance to report; a desire for more communication, especially among survivors; survivors’ feelings of isolation and alienation; and lack of awareness about consent and other issues surrounding sexual assault. I used these themes to begin my focused coding process, which as described by Charmaz (2006) uses “the most significant and/or frequent earlier codes to sift through large amounts of data” (p. 57) in order to decide which of these could be used to most logically and clearly categorize and analyze my data. I discovered that what initially seemed to be separate ideas were similar in nature and needed to be discussed together. During the focused coding, I concentrated on moving some of the ideas into other categories and ultimately narrowing the focus to three primary themes—the existence of two speech communities with distinct goals, interpretations, and strategies of communication; the need for education and awareness to dispel rape myths on campus; and an emphasis on creating spaces where survivors can talk face to face with other survivors and feel solidarity with others who share their identity. I explore each of these primary themes in the following chapter.

## CHAPTER 3

### FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This case study provided an opportunity to examine sexual assault discourse on a university campus from two significant perspectives within the same community. The views of the officials who mandate and execute communication policies on campus are juxtaposed with the observations of sexual assault survivors in order to create a dialogue that offers new insight about the effectiveness of campus sexual assault communication efforts. However, between the lines of the interview responses of members of both of these groups is a fact that is so obvious, it could be overlooked: While both groups—campus professionals and survivors—talk about the problem of sexual assault and the importance of addressing it on campus, the parties diverge on the core function of sexual assault communication. The campus professionals see sexual assault as a matter of *issue* management, and their communication reflects this view. To survivors, sexual assault is a matter of *identity* management, and that fact drives their communication. This study considers not only what we can learn by examining the issue on a university campus; but also what we can learn from those whose identity is affected by the issue. It points to ways universities can create a climate that is more conducive to healthy dialogue about sexual assault. Such a climate could decrease instances and effects of sexual assault by directing calculated efforts into two critical areas: more pointed action in repelling and dispelling rape myths, and more robust effort in empowering survivors so they will seek help and report the crime.

In what follows, I report findings from four sexual assault survivors, whom I call Abbie, Brooke, Carla, and Danica, and four campus professionals, whom I call Casey, Chris, Pat, and Terry, as well as official university documents and resources (identified in Chapter 2), in order to provide insight for fruitful future campus conversations about the issue of sexual assault. One of

my prominent findings, the existence of distinct speech communities in sexual assault discourse on college campuses, is not suggested in the literature reviewed for this study. However, borrowing from Julia Wood (2011), my findings begin with a discussion of the campus professional and sexual assault survivor speech communities. After delving into some of the differences in the way these groups communicate, I identify and discuss the potential impact of two compelling themes that emerge from the data: the necessity to aggressively decimate rape myths on university campuses, and survivors' desire for safe spaces in which they can report and talk about sexual assault and form solidarity with other survivors.

### **One Problem, Two Speech Communities**

An issue as important and pervasive as sexual assault on college and university campuses elicits many types of conversations occurring at every level of the community—from incoming students to the highest echelon of campus administration. No matter who is discussing the issue, similar themes arise within the discourse. Most of these similarities hover over an area of agreement: Sexual assault is a problem, and it needs to be addressed. This point is clear throughout all of the university documents I studied, and no one I interviewed disagreed with this premise. However from this position, the dialogue often diverges—depending on who is speaking—addressing a myriad of opportunities, secondary problems, suggestions, and solutions. The sexual assault survivors and the campus professionals I interviewed each had distinctively different ways of approaching the subject of sexual assault, and these differences reflected their membership in separate speech communities. Understanding these speech communities, including their motivations, backgrounds, and language choices, is foundational to this study.

Wood (2011) defines a speech community as a “group of people who share norms about communication” (p. 125). The most obvious division of speech communities occurs in situations

where there is a literal language barrier. However, speech communities are often used to explain the differences in masculine and feminine speech. Although men and women might use similar vocabularies, their language often is socialized into their own communication patterns and rules (Wood, 2011). Subtle differences, or “gendered communication practices” (p. 128), often form men’s and women’s talk. However, speech communities are not always divided by gender.

Other elements such as economic status, racial background, and shared experiences can inform a person’s communication patterns and locate them within a particular speech community (Wood, 2011). Even members of the same organization, including those of a university, can form different speech communities (Ehrlich, 1999). As with muted groups, speech communities often reveal a power structure, or the hierarchy of the organization. For example, the campus professionals are responsible for making and enforcing policy, so they are a dominant group/speech community; whereas, the survivors abide by the structures put into place for them, making them part of a muted group. As Uchida (1992) indicated, “if we admit that there is a hierarchy, a power structure in society, it is impossible to claim that it will not affect our everyday interaction” (p. 559). When researchers identify a speech community, they can gain insight by studying the speech community’s shared “understandings about *goals* of communication, *strategies* for enacting those goals, and ways of *interpreting* communication,” (Wood, 2011, p. 125, emphasis added). Applying this framework to a comparison of the survivor and campus professional speech communities can reveal their differences and similarities, including lessons professionals can learn from survivors in sexual assault discourse.

### **Goals of Communication**

Although they share a common interest in the problem of sexual assault, survivor and campus professional speech communities have diverse communication goals that result from and

speak to their situations and roles on campus. Wood (2011) asserted that an appreciation for and awareness of these differences “are foundations for better understanding between people” (p. 136). The most obvious difference between survivors’ and professionals’ speech community goals is that the campus professionals have a duty to maintain official campus communication about sexual assault, while the survivors are more concerned with mitigating unofficial campus communication that occurs in the form of rape myths, stigma, blame, and shame of sexual assault survivors. Their goals arise from their respective positions—survivors as identity managers and professionals as issue managers.

**They say, we say.** The survivors have first-hand knowledge of the effects of sexual assault; this issue has become part of their identity. Since sexual assault survivors belong to a social category about which some people “hold negative attitudes, stereotypes and beliefs” (Crocker & Major, 1989, p. 609), their identity is often stigmatized, as well. As Weidner and Griffitt (1983) pointed out, stigma can result from victim-blaming, including self-blame, and a belief in rape myths (p. 159). The survivors I interviewed were extremely well-versed in the rape myths and stigma that are part of the unofficial communication and conversations on campus. In fact, each of the four survivors talked extensively about one or more rape myths that cause her to want to defend herself or other survivors. This focus on rape myths has shaped the vocabulary of this speech community in a profound way: Their language is a tool of refutation; their words are spoken from a position of defense. This finding is consistent with Orbe’s (1996) observation of communication strategies used by muted group members. A coping tool of the muted group is to “negate the existing stereotypes that society places on them” (Orbe, 1996, p. 167). For sexual assault survivors, the communication pattern often falls into this template: *This is what they say about us, and this is why it is not true.*

The survivors recalled a variety of rape myths they have heard on campus or through outside media sources who reported about sexual assaults that occurred on their campus. For example, Abbie recounted a discussion dealing with the myth of false reports of sexual assault that began in one of her classes after the professor brought up the Safety Notices (discussed in more detail later, in the “Education and Erosion of Rape Myths” section of this chapter) that are emailed to inform the campus about sexual assaults. She recalled that “Half of the students were very judgmental about it, just like ‘Oh, it sounds really sketchy that would have happened; I’m not really sure.’” Another example of rape myth discourse occurred when Danica read an online local newspaper story and the subsequent reader comments about sexual assaults reported on campus. This online content propagated the myth that the victims had in, in some way, wanted or deserved the sexual assault. The comments were upsetting to her, including “one article where the [reader comments] were just saying how the person who was assaulted had asked for it, and they wanted it to happen.” Danica went on to lament that “when victims see that ... they lose what little self-esteem that they have gained back from going to therapy or counseling.” For these survivors, rape myths and stigma are like fingernails raking over old wounds and pulling up the scabs. Healing is delayed, and they must create a communication barrier to protect themselves from further damage. Their communication goal is much different than the campus professionals, who approach sexual assault discourse from a vocabulary of policy and mandates.

**Dutiful discourse.** The four campus professionals I interviewed directly deal with the problem of assault in their day-to-day job responsibilities. They are paid to have answers to particular questions, to implement policy, and to communicate about this topic publicly in ways that are directed by state and university board mandates. Throughout their answers, it was also apparent that, not surprisingly, this speech community is strongly influenced by federal



mandates, such as Title IX <sup>2</sup> the Jeanne Clery Act <sup>3</sup>, the Campus SaVE Act <sup>4</sup>, the Violence Against Women Act <sup>5</sup>, as well as other board and university policies that require them to employ certain communication procedures. For example, Chris pointed out that the Violence Against Women Act and Title IX guidelines have been “critically important” and have “pushed students and the institutions from a compliance perspective,” that is, complying with the mandated policies universities have to follow by law. In addition, Terry mentioned the procedure the university follows for sexual assault investigations, which complies with a policy that “lays out some pretty specific guidelines for that process.”

My conversations with campus professionals suggested that the goal of the campus professionals’ speech community is to clearly and consistently communicate from the platform of mandates and responsibilities inherent to their jobs. Their language is a tool of information; their words are spoken from a position of management. The most obvious example of this is the specific words they use when discussing sexual assault discourse on campus. Terry’s responses to my questions had a formal, almost legal tone, referring to “responding to the complainant,” “an intake process,” “agreeance to participate,” and “policy violation.” Chris mentioned that in the course of a sexual assault investigation, the university’s communication responsibilities extend to those who are accused of sexual assault, indicating that administration must sift through “two different versions of what occurred.” At the end of the investigation, one side “in many cases . . . will not feel positively about the experience.” Unlike the survivors, the language of these campus professionals is directed by university policy and procedure.

### **Interpretations of Communication**

Scholars have compared communication across different speech communities to cross-cultural communication that can result in misunderstandings or different priorities (Wood, 2011,

p. 133). This is the case in comparisons of the survivor and campus professional speech communities. The speech community of the survivors can be distinguished in part from that of the campus professionals by the former's focus on unofficial communication and the latter's focus on official communication. While the campus professionals spoke extensively about programs such as bystander awareness initiatives on campus and sexual assault training for new students, the sexual assault survivors were unaware of many of these efforts. For example, when I asked the survivors to talk about written or online communication that did a good job (or a poor job) in talking about sexual assault, the only pieces mentioned by each of the survivors were the safety notices that are emailed to the campus after a sexual assault occurs. Other than a brief mention of the university counseling center's website, none of the survivors were familiar with or chose to mention any other types of written or online communication. When asked about additional examples of official campus communication, Brooke answered: "I am not sure, really." Later, I asked her if she had observed any barriers to reporting sexual assault on campus. She replied, "Honestly I am not even sure who you initially need to report it to." Although her answer was not a list of specific barriers, her statement itself indicated a present and formidable hurdle—she did not demonstrate an awareness for procedural communication on campus; her vocabulary was rooted in other aspects of the issue.

The survivor speech community's scarce comments on official campus communication should not be equated with an absence of anything to say on this topic. While the survivor speech community did not comment extensively on official campus communication and policies, they had more to say about their personal communication and the unofficial conversations happening on campus. One challenge they indicated is deciding what words they will use to describe themselves and their attack (Harris, 2011; Orchowski, et al., 2013). Carla recounted how the

word “victim” keeps her saddled in thoughts and emotions that remind her of the assault. She said, “I like the word ‘survivor’ better than victim because it makes it like something you can move past.” To her, this word choice loosens the yoke a bit and moves her toward healing.

Carla’s observation supports Hayes-Smith and Hayes-Smith’s (2009) study that found the word “survivor” to be more empowering than “victim.” The survivors have also spent time considering the consequences of talking about their identity as survivors with other members of the campus community. Abbie and Brooke did not talk about their assaults with anyone on campus. Carla had several conversations with her roommates, at least one of which also experienced a sexual assault, but she did not talk with law enforcement or university professionals.

One of the survivors, Danica, experienced five sexual assaults and took a different communication approach in the aftermath of her assaults. While Danica made several references to “the weight” of these assaults pressing down on all aspects of her life, the burden has not stopped her from talking about the assaults. For her, talking to others about her assault is therapeutic, almost restorative, and helps her “to be able to not feel the weight of [that time] on me anymore.” She has utilized counseling services on campus, and when she meets with her therapist, “the weight just lifts, and it’s gone.” Similar to the other survivors I interviewed, Danica’s interpretation of communication about sexual assault was that it was a way to process and facilitate her personal health and well-being, rather than a way to participate in discourse about an issue’s effects on the campus community as whole. These priorities and understandings helped shape the survivors’ strategies of communication, as well.

### **Strategies of Communication**

The approaches the campus professionals and sexual assault survivors I interviewed use to communicate about sexual assault on campus are consistent with their communication goals

and interpretations. Women's and men's speech communities have developed different patterns of communication, thereby cultivating "distinct ways of communicating," (Wood, 2011, p. 126). The survivors are focused on handling the emotional, psychological, and physical challenges of sexual assault in their personal lives, while campus professionals hone in on their official responsibilities to reduce the instances, effects, institutional reputation, and legal ramifications of sexual assault at the university. From these positions, they have developed strategies to manage the issue (professionals) and manage identity (survivors).

**Strategies of proactivity and consistency.** Campus professionals often used examples of proactive programming to outline their communication strategies. When grappling with the issue of sexual assault, they point out that the university is "ahead of the game" or "on top of wanting to hit this ahead of time." Chris mentioned the importance of staying "in touch with best practices." These words and expressions illustrate their desire to be in an offensive position to address sexual assault. For example, Casey said, "We have been ahead of the game as far as the laws go, the White House goes. All these mandates that have come down.... We were doing them beforehand."

An additional common strategy mentioned by all of the campus professionals was a desire to develop transparent and consistent communication about the issue of sexual assault. First, they were all in agreement that official messages about sexual assault need to be clear and readily available to the campus community. Chris pointed out that more transparent communication helps "reduce the stigma, or at least helps students feel that there are supports that are there to help them." The need for consistency stems from the fact that many offices and departments deal with the issue—from campus law enforcement to counseling services to student affairs. That is significant because each of these offices communicates with survivors who report

at some point during the process. They expressed a desire to communicate a consistent message to eliminate confusion and help guide survivors through the reporting process, and to guide them toward counseling in order to cope with the trauma resulting from the assault. “The sooner [survivors] get some type of counseling, the easier it is for [them] to deal with it,” Casey said.

Additionally, the campus professionals set the tone and the message for official communication, including definitions of sexual assault and consent, and these must follow the federal and university guidelines. However, beyond this handful of campus professionals who serve on the front lines, a host of other organizations and offices such as Greek life, human resources, athletics, the Women’s Resource Center, and other faculty and staff members periodically communicate about sexual assault. An emphasis on a consistent message about consent in particular has been a driving force of education efforts throughout the country, according to Jozkowski and colleagues (2014). Terry pointed out the importance of keeping campus sexual assault discourse as “centralized” as possible. “We don’t want there to be mixed messages coming from dozens of different locations on campus. We try to funnel everything so that the message is consistent,” Terry said. Pat also emphasized consistency, especially in dealing with the topic of consent: “I think that everyone needs to hear the same thing about the components of consent.” Despite these official campus strategies in place to influence sexual assault discourse, sexual assault survivors have developed their own strategy—and since it often involves silence, it can be perceived to be in opposition to the goals and strategies of the campus officials, whose intent is to foster open communication about this issue, as well as an environment that encourages survivors to report assault.

**The strategy of silence.** While the survivor speech community’s goal is to offer a counter-narrative of sexual assault that helps them manage their identity, they also employ a

strategy of silence to accomplish that goal. They often choose to withhold information so as not to generate a rape myth-narrative that threatens the identity that they are attempting to manage. Despite the campus professionals' efforts to nurture an environment conducive to reporting and talking openly about sexual assault, all four survivors described silence as one of their communication strategies for handling the many issues arising from sexual assault, including deciding whether to report the incidents. As previous researchers (Miller et al., 2011; Weidner & Griffitt, 1983) have shown, survivors' silence is manifested in several ways, including not reporting the crime committed against them and reluctance to seek professional help to assist them in recovery. The survivors I interviewed indicated a variety of reasons they did not report the assault or chose not to confide in anyone on campus, including a fear of what others might think or say about them and use of drugs before a sexual assault. The most common, overriding reasons were self-protection and identity management. These reasons echoed many of the same arguments mentioned in previous studies cited in Chapter 1, however my interviews with survivors also offered new insight into their choice to use silence as a strategic tool.

A closer look at the survivors' reasoning for keeping quiet about their assaults reveals a broader motive that encompasses all of their arguments. To some degree, all of the survivors speculate that talking about their assault would be detrimental to them. They remain defensive by considering their options and deciding not to talk about their assault in order to protect themselves from additional (real or perceived) harm. Even the campus professional participants, including Pat, noted times when campus survivors are reluctant to talk about their assaults because of "self-protection or self-preservation." This defensive silence positions the survivors as identity managers, and is consistent with Goffman's (1967) findings about identity management. Goffman (1967) described two points of view that people maintain while

managing their identity: “a defensive orientation toward saving [her] own face and a protective orientation toward saving others’ faces” (p. 14). Throughout the interactions described by the participant survivors, it is evident that they carefully sought ways to protect themselves, as well as the reputation of the survivor speech community, in general. In each case, they suggested that silence served them better than talking about the issue.

Initially, Abbie chose not to report her assault because she was taking an illegal substance and she was afraid of embarrassment and getting in trouble. Her brother took her to the hospital for treatment, where she said she received a lecture on why she should not do drugs and that was sent home “with like a million pamphlets” about drug use. “It was a really bad experience,” she said. She thought about it more, and decided not to tell anyone about the assault since she didn’t believe her attacker understood that what he did was assault. “And so, I don’t know why, I just didn’t want to open that can of worms,” she explained. Abbie not only dealt with the physical wounds of her assault, but also with shame and blame she felt was directed at her by the health care professionals at the hospital. From that point on, she concealed her identity as a stigmatized group member in order to avoid additional pain or discomfort, as Goffman (1963) argued some stigmatized members would. Abbie’s choice is consistent with Orbe’s (1996) research on the communication strategies employed by muted groups. Because of her membership in the muted group, Abbie’s communication strategy could be categorized as “avoidance” (p. 165).

Brooke said she weighed the benefits of reporting and keeping quiet about her assault, and made the decision to stay silent. While she concedes that something good might have come from her reporting, she did not see how reporting could be positive *for her*. She recalled her reasoning for her decision:

The person involved wasn't a student on campus, so I am not sure that [reporting] would affect a great amount of change. And at that time, it wasn't going to be helpful to me to report. . . . I feel like maybe it would've helped, I don't know, a greater gauging of [sexual assault] statistics or something of that nature.

Contributing to statistics was not a compelling enough reason for Brooke to report. In fact, Brooke had not mentioned her assault to anyone on campus—until she agreed to participate in the interview for this study. She even met a classmate who confided in her that she had been assaulted; Brooke did not reciprocate the confidence. She listened to her classmate, sympathized with her story, and offered her classmate support. However, Brooke did not reveal her own status as an assault survivor. Brooke's conversation with the classmate presents an interesting look at how members of a muted group perceive messages (verbal and, in this case, non-verbal) from the dominant group:

I know a girl who is a sexual assault survivor, and the university actually moved her out of classes because she had a class with the perpetrator. . . . They chose to disrupt [her life]. I feel like it communicated that she should be the one that feels ashamed. You know, it makes me feel really uncomfortable that they did that.

While there may be details about the situation about which Brooke is not aware, her understanding that her classmate had to change her schedule after reporting prompted Brooke to keep her own story quiet. A decision to interrupt her friend's class schedule instead of the perpetrator's schedule signaled for Brooke her membership in the muted group, whose "knowledge is not considered sufficient for public decision-making or policy making processes of that culture" (Kramarae, 2005, p. 55). Brooke's understanding of the way in which those in



power, or the dominant group, handled her classmate's situation confirmed for Brooke that silence was the better option for her.

Carla also used silence as a protective measure. At the time she was assaulted, she did not realize that what happened to her is considered assault. However, once she understood more about consent and what had happened to her, she "felt like too much time had passed." She had "already moved past it," and did not want to reopen any old wounds by reporting or even talking about it. She decided to protect herself from the shame and stigma the best way she knew how—by keeping quiet. "I feel like sometimes it's hard to talk about . . . because there's kind of a shame of having been sexually assaulted," she said.

Danica revealed another, ultimately more disturbing, reason for staying silent. She was assaulted five times and reported only two of the instances. Reporting two of the assaults "was a real stressful process," she said. She decided against reporting the other three because she was afraid it would end up in her school record in some way. She did not want to be stigmatized as a five-time sexual assault survivor; it led to too much explaining, too much to relive. However, for Danica, the decision not to report extended beyond her personal situation. Ultimately, Danica expressed a lack of faith in the system and its ability to offer justice or change. She said survivors often "feel that there is no way to escape it" and they fear retaliation in some form, so they see little or no value in reporting. "Something like [sexual assault] will never end by reporting," she said. As Muted Group Theory suggests, members of the muted group "may have a lot to say, but they tend to have relatively little power to say it" (Kramarae, 2005, p. 55). Like Danica, the sexual assault survivors may feel powerless to change such a pervasive problem, so they adapt their own communication strategies, which could include silence. In this way, "silence is as complex as speech" (Wood, 2005, p. 60).

Although “silence can be a protective, necessary, and proper response” (Wood, 2005, p. 60) for members of a muted group, previous research has revealed that there are also many benefits to the survivor speech community talking about their assaults. First, disclosing a sexual assault is often beneficial to the survivor’s mental health and reducing possible occurrences of revictimization. As Miller and colleagues (2011) explained, “nondisclosure is related to greater psychological vulnerability following sexual assault and, perhaps a maladaptive recovery course” (p. 120). The findings of these researchers strongly suggested that women who did not disclose their assaults due to their fear of stigma could experience an “increased risk of future sexual assault” (p. 126). In addition, talking about sexual assault also helps other survivors. Women who talk about their rapes often encourage other women to speak up about their assaults and get help when necessary (Botta & Pingree, 2010). Therefore, although silence might seem like, and in particular cases may be, the safest option for some survivors, it is not always the best strategy for healing and fostering a healthy environment. With this premise at the forefront, the remainder of my findings includes a discussion of two areas that the survivor and campus professional speech communities have identified as critical to discouraging sexual assault and encouraging survivors to report and seek help when they need it. These areas include eliminating rape myths from sexual assault discourse and developing safe spaces where survivors do not feel alone or stigmatized.

### **Education and Erosion of Rape Myths**

Dispelling rape myths and educating the campus community are vital steps to creating an environment where sexual assault survivors feel safe and comfortable talking about their assaults. Rape myths, or false attitudes and beliefs about rape, not only cause others to blame a survivor for her own rape, but they can also be the impetus of self-blame and stigma (Lonsway &

Fitzgerald, 1994; Orchowski et al, 2013; Weidner & Griffitt, 1983). Burt (1980) points out that rape myths foster “a climate hostile to rape victims” (p. 217), therefore they have power to stigmatize and harm. Researchers such as Deitz et al. (2015) have studied stigma’s effects on trauma severity and survivors’ psychological health, pointing out that self-stigma is a powerful force and a contributor to areas such as “decreased self-esteem and increases in mental illnesses” (p. 609). Stigma was a common obstacle faced by all of the survivors I interviewed, and several of them described times when they have grappled with self-stigma.

Since most of the survivor participants in this study have chosen not to publicly reveal their membership in a stigmatized group (Goffman, 1963), they predominantly described situations when classmates or acquaintances talked about other sexual assault cases. They pointed out situations when discussions shifted agency from the attacker to the victim (Edgar, 2014), a primary weapon in the rape myth arsenal. Illustrating this point, Abbie described a rape myth suggestive of a “she asked for it” attitude that she has heard in campus conversations:

One thing that really bothers me . . . I have definitely heard it before [when people say], ‘She was the kind of person who would be in a bad situation, so it would make sense that [sexual assault] would happen to her,’ and that kind of rhetoric surrounding it. I feel that it places a lot of blame not only on that victim, but all of the victims.

The survivors indicated that they wished the members of the campus community had a greater understanding of the facts about sexual assault on college campuses. For example, Abbie noted the skepticism that often surrounds accusations of sexual assault, and she wished that people knew “that there is a very, very low percentage of people who actually report who are lying about” their assault. In addition to overcoming skepticism, Carla highlighted survivors’ attempts to explain how they feel and what they are going through to others who do not share

their survivor status. She said that assault “is hard to talk about,” especially to those who have not been through it themselves.

The professionals I interviewed acknowledged the problem of survivor stigma and highlighted ways they are trying to surmount it on campus. For example, Casey observed that it is often the reaction of the first person the survivor comes into contact with after the assault that has the greatest impact on whether or not she will report or seek help. Casey explained, “. . . that [first] person’s reaction can make a huge difference in what happens and whether the victim blames herself. . . . So, we have to change the way that we react to people, and that is another education part.” Abbie’s negative experience in the hospital, including the lecture and pamphlets about drug use, are indicative of how others’ reactions influence survivors’ decisions to report or not. Abbie acknowledged that she might have reported if the hospital visit had gone differently. However, she said she felt that she was in a situation where the blame would automatically be placed on her “rather than on the person where it really deserved to be.” Another factor that prevents survivors from disclosing an assault is stigma that their friends and families might place upon them. Worry about how their peers on campus might perceive them also stands in the way of reporting, said Casey. Oftentimes, survivors are afraid that even those closest to them—their parents and families—might find out about the assault and think they are “tainted” due to their cultural, religious, or ethnic backgrounds, said Terry. “So part of our response is kind of helping them through that disclosure and supporting them physically, mentally, spiritually, and emotionally—connecting them to resources to help them through that,” said Terry.

To help overcome these rape myths, several of the survivors and campus professionals mentioned the need for better awareness and education efforts, including clear and consistent definitions of terms such as sexual assault and consent. For example, one of the four survivors

did not realize immediately that what happened to her was sexual assault; another of the survivors suspected that her assailant did not understand that he was committing sexual assault. Pat, one of the campus professionals whose responsibilities include education and awareness, explained that talking about issues surrounding sexual violence includes equipping the community with the proper vocabulary to do so. Avoiding conversations about sexual assault can communicate an undesirable message—that sexual assault is acceptable and not a problem to be discussed and addressed. For example, if a rape “joke” is told at a fraternity party, Pat suggested, and no one addresses it as wrong, “then that is communicating to the entire group that this is okay, and this is acceptable, and this is encouraged.” To combat this scenario, Pat and colleagues seek to educate the campus community to use language as a tool to resist rape culture on campus. The campus professionals’ emphasis on education reinforces the findings of Klaw et al. (2005), who determined that “intensive, sustained rape education efforts play a vital role in dismantling rape supportive culture” (p. 48).

My finding that more education is necessary was consistent with quantitative findings from an institutional campus climate survey that was administered on the campus during the same year this study took place. This voluntary survey asked a host of questions—from probes to reveal perceptions about how campus administrators handle sexual assault to questions dealing with the students’ overall sexual assault awareness. According to the survey’s official analysis of findings, “Students’ perception of sexual violence on campus illustrates that students are generally neutral on the topic, which may indicate a lack of awareness and engagement in the discussion on campus” (Campus Climate Survey Executive Summary, 2015, para. 10). For example, only 33.65 percent of the survey respondents indicated agreed or strongly agreed that they understand the school’s formal procedures to address complaints of sexual assault (Campus

Climate Survey, 2015, p. 24). Additionally, the majority of the survey respondents denoted that they had received no training at the university in the following areas related to sexual assault: behaviors defined as “sexual assault;” how to report a complaint of sexual assault; the availability of confidential on-campus resources to help victims of sexual assault; and the procedures followed to investigate a complaint of sexual assault (p. 22). While the university may have been providing education about some or all of these matters, this finding offers some indication of the education’s effectiveness.

The most widespread and visible tool to remedy some of the issues highlighted in the survey and to inform campus about sexual assault are the Safety Notice emails, which are sent to the entire campus community and posted on the public safety website when a sexual assault is reported on campus. On October 20, 2014, the university’s vice president for student affairs sent a campus-wide email to explain the Safety Notices. He wrote that the Safety Notices are different than campus Safety Alerts, the latter “designed to bring timely information and warnings about immediate threats to campus, such as hazardous weather or an active shooter.” Campus Safety Notices, in contrast, “are general notifications to help you develop risk reduction strategies and to provide safety education.” A typical Safety Notice sent to campus includes a textbox with the pertinent information about the event, including the incident type; date of the report; location (often kept general to protect the complainant’s identity); and a brief description of the event, usually just a couple of sentences. Underneath this information is a list of educational resources and safety tips, often followed by the Board of Regents’ definition of consent, prominently highlighted. Also included is a link to the university’s Violence Free website, which serves as a clearinghouse of sexual assault information, policies, statistics and resources. Included on the

site are phone numbers to various campus offices for reporting information about the incident, as well as a general list of questions and answers regarding sexual assault on campus generally.

The Safety Notices were the one piece of campus communication mentioned by all four of the survivors I interviewed. This is not especially surprising considering these notices are sent unsolicited to the entire campus and do not need to be sought out by individuals. Carla and Danica had positive things to say about the Safety Notices. Carla appreciated the restrained transparency of the notices—she felt that they were informative without revealing too much information about the survivors. Danica, who reads each notice in its entirety, agreed:

I think that the Safety Notices do a good job. I mean, they give enough details to the student body to know this is what happened . . . and this is where it happened. But it doesn't give specifics, it doesn't give a name, a room number, or anything like that. It doesn't give exact details. . . . but it does a really good job at letting people know this is happening. . . . Then they give the little tag at the end that says if you have experienced this or whatever, you can go to the counseling center.

Abbie and Brooke raised a few issues with the Safety Notices, and unlike Carla and Danica, they wanted more details included in the emails. Abbie noted that the first Safety Notice she recalled receiving (she could not remember the exact date) was worded in a way that invited skepticism about the survivor's story. The lack of details combined with the language used "just seemed not supportive," she said. However, she remarked that after that first notice, subsequent Safety Notices have "been a little better." Similarly, Brooke wants the emails "to make it a little bit more clear what is happening," and would even like to see follow-up emails to make the campus community aware if charges are filed. Despite a couple of suggestions for improvement, all four of the survivors read the notices and were able to comment on specific details about

them. Whether the Notices prompt study participants' responses because they are survivors or because they are members of the campus community is unclear. That is, whether the Notices function as pre-emptively informative and educational for the campus broadly is a research question worthy of future exploration.

Like the survivor participants, the professional participants also see advantages and drawbacks to the notices. Sending campus-wide emails creates the transparent communication environment they desire. However, the professionals suggested that the Safety Notices sometimes instill unfounded fear in some members of the campus community. After a Safety Notice is sent out, Casey sometimes hears concerns from people who are worried that "there is a serial rapist on campus." As Casey pointed out:

We have to send out those notifications. So, it looks like we are having a lot more [sexual assaults]. But in all reality, they are just being reported a lot more. So the statistics haven't changed. . . . It is just we are telling you about it now.

Overcoming the misconception that the university has experienced a surge in sexual assaults is a challenge noted by Chris, as well. Chris mentioned that the local media also have been interested in the Safety Notices and the overarching story of sexual assault on campus, at points questioning whether the university has a greater problem than in years past. On the contrary, Chris stated that just because the community is now hearing about the issues through the Safety Notices, this does not mean sexual assaults were not happening in years past. What *is* different, Chris added, is that the university's communication is now more direct and widespread, thereby raising awareness and promoting conversation. In fact, the purpose of the campus Safety Notices is more than just informing the community about what happened on a particular date in a certain location; the professional participants described the Notices' function as opportunities to



promote conversation on campus about the issue. Abbie's story (from the "They Say, We Say" section of this chapter) recalling the classroom discussion about one of the Safety Notices indicates that such conversations are occurring. The intention of the Safety Notices hints at a shift in the overall communication culture on campus and perhaps reinforces the importance of Aronowitz et al.'s (2012) findings revealing that the more sexual knowledge a student possessed, "the less likely the student would be to accept rape myths" (p. 179).

Another area that can help wear away rape myths is discourse that involves and educates men and bystanders about their role in sexual assault prevention. Interventions that only focus on preventative measures women can take to avoid rape are detrimental because "they inadvertently support the myths that most rapes are stranger rapes and that women's behaviors increase their risk" (Aronowitz et al., 2012 p. 180). Therefore, many national programs are targeting men and bystanders in their awareness campaigns. In 2015, the university featured in this case study hosted Jackson Katz, a nationally known speaker and leading anti-sexist male activist. According to Chris, more than 1,000 students heard his message and Katz additionally worked specifically with about 100 male leaders on campus. Chris said that it is often appropriate to have mixed gender conversations; however Chris also supported the practice of working with men separately, saying that there needs to be "a space to have conversations with men" in order to address rape myths, the definition of consent, and other misconceptions men might hold about sexual assault. Pat took it a step farther, suggesting that it is helpful when campus conversations targeted at men are led by men, as well. Chris had a similar view:

It is one thing if they hear about it from an administrator; it's another to hear about it from your fraternity brother or the person on your athletic team, or a person in your hall.

So, we need to be building cohorts of students who understand [sexual assault] and are willing to take leadership roles in getting the message out.

An additional well-attended outreach to men that prominently featured male leaders on campus was the Walk a Mile in Her Shoes event. Walk a Mile in Her Shoes is “an international men’s movement to stop rape, sexual assault, and gender violence” (Walk a Mile in Her Shoes, 2015). Held in the spring of 2015, Walk a Mile in Her Shoes was clearly designed for male participation. The men gathered outside the university student center in anticipation of a “race” around campus to raise awareness of sexual violence against women. The catch was that the men had to race while wearing high-heel shoes, and thus “walk a mile in her shoes.” Red high heels were available for rent, or participants could bring their own. Many of the men who were in attendance wore T-shirts with their organization’s name or logo; these included fraternities and members of the scholarship/leadership programs on campus. Members of the university Army ROTC wore their uniforms, the army greens a stark contrast to the red heels. Some participants made signs to carry throughout the race, and there was a buzz in the air as they gathered and posed for pictures in their heels. A representative from the counseling center said a few words about the purpose of the event before they race began, and they were off.

While light-hearted and fun, this event addressed the severity of sexual assault and did not shy away from its focus. The fun run and silly high heels were contrasted with the booths providing materials and pamphlets about sexual assault awareness. The participants also ran past a field filled with clotheslines donned with white T-shirts that had been decorated by members of the campus community with their thoughts about sexual violence. Words like “Rape” and “Stop Violence” were scrawled in marker on the T-shirts flapping in the wind. The wobbly legs and click-clack of heels along the sidewalk made the men’s stride seem uncomfortable and

awkward—perhaps just as uncomfortable as some of them might feel talking about the issues articulated on the T-shirts. But they were there, at least, one step closer to the conversation.

While these events are creating awareness and bringing men forward to join the dialogue, the survivors I interviewed indicated that men still have a long way to go before they are fully participating in the campus conversation. I asked all of the participants if they see any differences in the way men and women talk about sexual assault on campus; and if so, what are those differences? The survivors' responses overwhelmingly indicated that men do not talk about the subject as much as women because men do not perceive sexual assault as something that affects them. Danica mentioned the fact that many men do not think they could be a victim of sexual assault, which, she pointed out, is not true. Carla gave a very similar response, stating that men "have a more relaxed way" of thinking about sexual assault since, she believes, it is something they do not feel could happen to them. Abbie agreed, surmising that because there are not as many male victims, men are isolated from the issue. Almost across the board (three of the four responses), the survivors indicated that sexual assault is an issue that only victims talk about; in other words, men aren't usually victims of this type of violence, so why would they talk about it? Men's feelings of isolation or immunity from this topic could reinforce rape myths, such as: It only happens to women; it only happens to women who are in the wrong place or sending the wrong signals; or it is a problem in which men who have not, or believe they have not, perpetrated rape play no part.

The campus professional participants are attempting to combat this misperception by focusing on bystander prevention and awareness. This entails a significant change in culture, noted Pat. "We think of [sex] as personal, none of our business . . . once that person's dorm room is closed, that is their private business, not my deal. Right?" However, Pat said that this mentality

needs to change so that people take responsibility to change rape culture. Chris highlighted many programs the university is undertaking to raise bystander awareness about “our collective roles in assuring a safe campus.” Like the focus on men, these programs are in step with the shifting national focus highlighted by initiatives such as the White House’s It’s On Us campaign. The bystander awareness initiative is evident in posters displayed around campus, encouraging people to exercise their options when they see or suspect violence. The poster includes suggestions for alleviating potentially dangerous or harmful situations, putting the onus on them to try to make a difference. Tips are also included in the campus Safety Notices previously discussed. Additionally, the professionals are trying to pull in more campus student leaders to speak, lead programs, and set an example for their peers. For Chris, the culture shift will come faster when students become “actively engaged and part of the solution.” The next challenge is finding ways to engage survivors and learn what we can from their speech community.

### **Seeking Solidarity & Safe Spaces**

Recognizing that silence is not the only communication that would help them, the survivor participants also crave face-to-face communication with other survivors. Their longing for solidarity is evident throughout their interview responses. “It is empowering for [survivors] to be able to sit down with others who have been through similar situations,” said Danica. By doing so, survivors can “hear similarities between stories,” and help each other navigate the healing process, she added. Danica commented that solidarity is important because survivors share an identity that has been altered in a way that others who have not experienced assault cannot understand:

I wish that people knew that just because a person survived sexual assault, it doesn’t mean that they are the same person as before it happened. Once a person is sexually

assaulted, it changes them. It changes something inside of them. I mean, the person could be happy, full of life before and be a social butterfly, and then after the sexual assault, the person's wanting to stay locked away and not wanting to participate in outside activities with peers.

Survivors need opportunities to communicate with people who can relate to their challenges, she said. In addition, Abbie said survivors blame themselves less "knowing that there are other people out there." Also finding solace in verbal communication, Carla considers conversations with other survivors as a light at the end of a dark tunnel: "It feels good knowing that someone's been through the same thing and been okay afterwards." Solidarity can give survivors hope and comfort, and it makes talking about the issue a viable option for them.

The survivors I interviewed indicated that the solidarity they seek only can occur in spaces in which they feel safe. Danica, who as previously mentioned has the most experience participating in group communication about her assault, pointed out the importance of creating a "no-judgement zone," where survivors can focus on "being there for each other, supporting each other, and building each other back up to live through another day." This idea of creating groups of survivors who meet together on campus came up repeatedly during Danica's interview. Later, she again mentioned the significance of allowing "people who have been victimized to come together and share strength and knowledge with everyone, with others." Despite her participation in off-campus groups, she was not aware of any campus support groups for sexual assault survivors and, at the time of our interview, none were advertised on the university webpage or the counseling center webpage and literature <sup>6</sup>. Abbie also mentioned the need for creating "a healthy environment" on campus that will not further traumatize survivors. Such an environment would allow them to speak about their assaults if they wish, but not pressure them to do so if

they prefer not to talk about it. “There are some people who like to keep private things private, and that is totally okay,” Abbie said, suggesting that survivors should never be made to feel bad for employing silence as a communication strategy. However, Abbie wants a safe space for survivors who do want to talk about their assaults.

A few of the survivors mentioned specific circumstances or events on campus where they experienced solidarity or observed safe conversations about sexual assault. Danica recalled the Red Flag Campaign, whose purpose was to raise bystander awareness and encourage students to identify and consider any relationship red flags. To get to class, Danica had to walk past the field of red flags that had been placed in an outdoor campus commons area by various students. The student participants had written “red flags” (or warning signs of potential problems that require attention) onto actual red flags that were planted all around the lawn. Like hundreds of her classmates, Danica had to walk past these flags, which piqued her curiosity. After stopping to learn more about the event, she thought it was an effective way to “catch people’s attention” and to “start the conversation” about sexual assault. Abbie attended the Greek Sex lecture and she also has benefited from her association with the campus’s Women’s Studies Program. Although she has not revealed her assault to anyone there, she noted that “the positive dialogue” in that program has helped her work through some of the issues she has experienced since her assault. Both of these survivors found a safe space to internally manage their identities, and neither felt that their silence was being “pried away by well-wishing others” (Wood, 2005, p. 60).

Take Back the Night is another event that seeks to be a safe space for the survivor speech community. This annual event is a candlelight vigil held to raise awareness about sexual violence. Held at this campus and other universities throughout the country, Take Back the Night gives voice to the issue of sexual assault in an exceptional way by using both words and silence

to make a point. The event was hosted by the sexual assault counseling center on campus, along with a sorority, and took place on the patio outside a busy entrance to the student center—a visible place and somewhat of a campus crossroads where students come and go with their coffee. It was a public event, advertised to the entire community. Additionally, passers-by could see and hear the proceedings, and stop if they chose to join the audience. As they arrived at the event, attendees received a program that clearly stated the purpose in a large, bold font: “Shatter the Silence . . . Stop the Violence!” It continued with a detailed description of the event’s purpose, which is to:

raise awareness about issues surrounding sexual violence, while also protesting the current climate of fear and violence that women must confront in today’s society. It aids women in finding and demonstrating their empowerment, provides a forum for women to make their voices heard, and creates an environment in which survivors of sexual assault can begin to heal. (Take Back the Night, 2015)

Instead of individuals talking on behalf of survivors, the organizers invited sexual assault survivors to speak for themselves and share their stories. In this way, survivors are encouraged to move from being passive participants at an event toward becoming active communicators. This is also evidenced by the name and proceedings of the program. The admonishment to “*Take Back the Night*” employs an active verb that seizes the power from the perpetrators and returns it to survivors. Participants shared their experiences through music and poetry. Near the end of the event, the floor was open to anyone who wanted to speak. It concluded with a candlelight vigil in which all of the audience members and participants formed a circle, held their lit candles, and observed a moment of silence. The silence served as a time to reflect on the words that were

spoken; it was powerful punctuation to poems, songs, and stories. However, it was also a symbolic reminder of the silence surrounding this issue.

Although none of the survivors I interviewed attended Take Back the Night, each acknowledged the importance of providing opportunities for their speech community to share their stories in order to break the cycle of silence surrounding this issue. They suggested a realization that silence perpetuates silence, so it is important to speak. Abbie said it was “eye-opening” to realize that there are so many other women who have experienced sexual assault. “I think it’s inspiring for survivors to talk about their experiences,” she added. Brooke suggested that panel discussions involving sexual assault survivors would draw more attention to the issue than printed or online information. From firsthand experience with outside support groups, Danica suggested group therapy or discussion as a means to spur conversation and healing. However, even though Danica has communicated through official campus channels (counseling services) more than the other three survivors, she also expressed the most frustration with her own struggles to break free from silence and speak out during casual conversations on campus. Often, survivors’ silence is made more pronounced by the contrasting barrage of words that blame victims. Hearing victim-blaming unnerves Danica and reinforces some of the reasons she has not disclosed all of her assaults:

[Victim-blaming] makes me basically want to scream at the person, ‘I did not want this to happen. I didn’t deserve this to happen to me! And you don’t know my life; you don’t know what I am going through here.’

This longing to scream out and defend herself against rape myths again points to the importance of concentrated attention to eliminating these myths that can lurk in conversations, defile the safe



spaces survivors long for, and ultimately inhibit survivors from being able to speak up and get help.

### **Bridging the Speech Communities**

As this university and other colleges and universities across the nation turn a spotlight toward illuminating more and better ways to transform rape culture on college campuses, my findings advocate the value in examining the differences between the key speech communities on campus who are concerned with this issue. Both the sexual assault survivor and campus professional speech communities identified in these findings contribute a beneficial perspective to sexual assault discourse. The campus professionals approach communication about sexual assault as issue managers, looking toward best practices, policies, and mandates to assess their successes and weaknesses. Their strategy consists of implementing transparent and consistent communication in hopes of instigating positive change in sexual assault statistics. In addition, they use official communication channels to convey their message (e.g. policies) and judge their effectiveness (e.g. campus climate surveys). Their interpretation of communication is more formal and direct: They are charged to manage an issue, and their communication reflects that duty.

Sexual assault survivors are members of a speech community whose identity is affected by the issue of sexual assault. While the policymakers and official communicators approach sexual assault as an institutional issue worthy of attention, the survivors, as the muted group, offer a different perspective that is equally worthy of careful examination. As evidenced by the interviews in this study, survivors often approach the issue from a position of self-preservation, defending themselves and other members of their speech community against rape myths and seeking out safety and solidarity among others who have also experienced sexual assault. Due to

these rape myths, survivors might feel a need to conceal their membership in a stigmatized group and instead present an idealized impression of themselves (Goffman, 1959; Goffman, 1963). One of their strategies of identity management may well include staying silent about their assault. While silence is a valid strategy, this study also points out benefits of survivors acknowledging their assault to others. Therefore, their insights highlight the need to focus on eroding rape myths in order to create an environment where they do not feel alone and where they can choose to speak without fear of blame, shame, and stigma. Their stories of assault and survival can reveal the devastating effects of sexual assault, give hope to other survivors, and share perspectives that can help cast light into the dark, insidious corners of rape culture.

## CHAPTER 4

### CONCLUSION

*How does the discourse of a college campus represent and address sexual assault? How can this discourse optimally aid in responding to the issue of sexual assault on campus and reducing survivor stigma?*

The national conversation about sexual assault arises from headlines that pronounce its pervasiveness, as well as awareness campaigns that seek to loosen its grip, especially on college and university campuses. While national leaders and higher education authorities are talking about the problem of sexual assault on many levels—from prevention protocol to bystander awareness—the disturbing fact remains that college-age females have the highest rate of rape and sexual assault victimization reports compared to females of other age groups, and they are considerably less likely than those in other demographic categories to report their assault (U.S. Department of Justice, 2014). The statistics indicating the low reporting rates—about 80 percent of rapes and sexual assaults of students go unreported to police (U.S. Department of Justice, 2014)—illustrate that the voices of the sexual assault survivors on campus often remain silent throughout discussions of this problem.

Critical feminist theory provides a platform for analyzing the problem of sexual assault, with the ultimate goal of listening to the marginalized voices (survivors) in order to create safer spaces for college students to study, work, live, and communicate. Among the critical feminist theories, Muted Group Theory demonstrates the ways in which survivors' voices are subdued because their marginalized experiences are not represented in society's dominant structures (Orbe, 1998, p. 4). Examining how struggles of power and identity can shape ways the muted

group talks about an issue or cultivates its own communication strategies for dealing with its effects is paramount to the discussion of sexual assault.

Sexual assault survivors often confront the power of rape myths that are perpetuated by the media and are evident in conversations they encounter. These rape myths usually blame the victim, fostering shame and blame that often manifest as self-blame within the survivor. Victim-blaming removes the responsibility for the crime from the perpetrator, and places it on the shoulders of the victim, often by pointing out how she could have prevented or avoided the situation (Edgar, 2014). These victim-blaming rape myths can lead to a rape-supportive culture that stifles healthy dialogue and creates a climate that contributes to fear of reporting or even taking about rape and sexual assault (Edgar, 2014). Colleges and universities across the country have tried to combat rape-supportive culture with educational programs and bystander awareness initiatives, and by making conscious efforts to include men in conversations about sexual assault. By expanding the conversation beyond that of educating women about how to prevent their own rapes, these efforts are in fact removing some of the burden from survivors and potential victims by pointing out how the responsibility lies on men (often the perpetrators of assault) not to assault women, and on bystanders to speak up when they see a person being assaulted or in danger.

This case study analyzed examples of campus communication at a university in south central Appalachia in order to investigate ways that sexual assault discourse can erode rape myths and create a healthier environment that has fewer sexual assaults and survivors who are more willing to report them when they occur. As the findings indicate, the first step toward understanding how sexual assault survivors perceive campus communication is to realize that this muted group is part of a speech community that operates with its own communication goals,

interpretations, and strategies. Their communication protocol diverges from those of the campus professional participants. Survivor participants functioned in several ways as identity managers, using communication strategically to ward off rape myths and deal with fears of how they might be perceived by others because of their assault. Conversely, campus professional participants operated as issue managers, communicating from a position of policy and mandates, and working to find the right words and methods to communicate their official messages about procedure.

By interrogating these official and unofficial messages, this study identified two critical areas where this university, and others, optimally respond to the issue of sexual assault on campus and reduce survivor stigma. These foci include taking an assertive stand against rape myths and providing safe spaces where survivors can unify and talk with others who have shared similar experiences. Developing opportunities for survivors to acknowledge their assaults can lead to positive outcomes, including lowering their risk for future sexual assault and encouraging other survivors to get help when necessary (Botta & Pingree, 2010; Miller et al., 2011).

### **Recommendations**

This study sheds new light on the area of sexual assault discourse on college campuses. Some of this study's unique findings are specific to the university that was the setting for this case study. However, the recommendations that follow could be generalized and applicable to other campuses, as well. As professionals at this university and others seek to implement communication practices to address sexual assault, they could consider the following suggestions:

## **Educate to Eradicate**

Keeping in mind Burt's (1980) discussion of rape myths and the formidable task of dispelling them, this university and others must continue to emphasize and develop additional educational efforts to increase students' sexual knowledge, including their understanding of the definitions of consent and sexual assault. While this university has been intentional in its prior educational efforts (including hosting a workshop about consent and routinely incorporating the definition of consent in campus correspondence dealing with sexual assault), it is evident from both survivor participant and campus professional participant interviews that there is room for improvement. At one point, one of the sexual assault participants did not understand what sexual assault is, and another did not report her assault because she believed her assailant did not understand that what he did was sexual assault. The campus professional participants also indicated that education about consent is a priority.

Oftentimes on this campus and others, communication about definitions and terms gets relegated to pamphlets, webpages, or campus-wide emails—written communication. However, this study suggests that face-to-face communication might be equally if not more valuable when dealing with such an important topic. Brooke proposed that a speaker or panel discussion might be more effective than printed or online information. "I think [an event] draws more attention," she said. Carla echoed some of Brooke's sentiments about effective education outreach by pointing out other examples of in-person communication such as seminars or skits. These events draw attention, thus they have the potential to educate a wider audience.

Both the survivor and the campus professional speech communities have identified education as a critical component to stimulating productive conversations about the issue of sexual assault. However, these findings suggest that education efforts must go beyond print and

online written communication highlighting definitions, policies, and procedures, and beyond their current use of in-person communication. While these written methods are necessary to explain complex protocol and to serve as an official information resource, the survivor speech community recommended that the campus professional speech community focus on more face-to-face events held in public spaces, especially during high traffic times of the day when passers-by might stop out of curiosity and/or participate. Public gatherings, such as those held at the student center or on the campus commons, have the potential of reaching a broad audience who might not otherwise pay attention to sexual assault discourse on campus. Such events are prime opportunities to educate, and by doing so, eradicate rape myths.

### **Strength in Numbers**

The survivor participants overwhelmingly indicated that they wanted to feel like they were not alone, like there are others who shared their particular concerns and identity. To create more solidarity among the survivor speech community, this university and others might consider organizing additional events that resemble the Red Flag event or the Take Back the Night and Walk a Mile in Her Shoes gatherings. These events created visual representations of the magnitude of the problem of sexual assault by displaying hundreds of red flags and dozens of white T-shirts (accompanying the Take Back the Night and Walk a Mile in Her Shoes) in a prominent place on campus. The sheer number of red flags planted in the ground or the multitude of white T-shirts pinned to clotheslines on the commons area were obvious reminders of the number of people affected by the problem of sexual assault. These events communicate solidarity because survivors do not have to seek out others like them; they are reminded of their presence on campus by the very nature and the presentation of the event. Danica recalled that this event served as both a way to attract people's attention to the issue and start conversations

about it. For sexual assault survivors such as herself, Danica said that the act of putting a flag in the ground was an opportunity to “speak up” along with others who had experienced similar circumstances.

Incorporating similar events throughout the university calendar has the potential to communicate to survivors that they are not alone, while at the same time demonstrating the plight of the muted group to the rest of campus. The problem is presented in a public place, in plain daylight. It cannot be ignored when it is situated within the context of students’ daily routines. They do not have to seek out information or solidarity. The awareness event is there in front of them, part of their daily walk to class—just as the problem is part of their day-to-day identities.

### **Face-to-Face Spaces**

A sense of solidarity may lead to the safe spaces that sexual assault survivors crave for communication. An example of a safe space for Danica is a support group or group therapy/counseling session that she has attended off campus. She was interested in finding the same type of group on campus in order to talk freely about her own assaults and their effects on her life. As mentioned previously, Brooke brought up panel discussions that could include survivors of sexual assault talking about their experiences in front of an audience of other survivors. One similarity among all of the survivor participants’ suggestion for campus communication is a call for face-to-face communication opportunities *with other survivors*. They want to talk with other people on campus who understand what they are going through and with whom they do not have to manage their identities from a defensive position. The scenarios they recommended also point toward survivor-driven discussion geared toward helping survivors navigate their own emotional issues, rather than discourse manufactured for the benefit or



education of others outside of the survivor speech community or for the primary purpose of reporting mandate compliance. All of this points toward a need for concerted efforts to form on-campus support groups and/or group counseling sessions for survivors of assault. Empowering the survivor speech community to talk about their experiences could help them to overcome other communication barriers with campus professionals and ultimately add their voices to those that combat rape myths and stigma.

Ultimately, as the university and others develop communication practices and programs to prevent sexual assault and to promote reporting, campus professionals must not be discouraged by the survivor speech community's occasional silence on this issue. Since campus professionals work as issue managers, it might be disheartening to learn of unreported cases of sexual assault, or to discover a survivor who is unwilling to seek help. Instead of getting frustrated with the survivor, attributing her unwillingness to something she should or should not be doing, and working to convince her to act differently, campus professionals must work to understand the strategies of silence employed by survivors. Such understanding can direct energy instead to the campus climate and prompt exploration of specific ways to transform that climate so that survivors feel safer speaking up when they want or need to talk. This understanding and subsequent exploration begin with visible, targeted education to eradicate rape myths, and continue by nurturing safe communication spaces where survivors feel comfortable to report their assaults and seek help.

While it might be tempting for campus professionals to focus all of their communication energies on official rape prevention programs or bystander awareness initiatives (as is the current trend in sexual assault discourse), this study indicates that colleges and universities must not overlook the emotional, social, and communication needs of sexual assault survivors—a

population comprising one out of every five women on college campuses (U.S. Department of Justice, 2014). This is the group whose identity is affected by the issue, and much can be learned by what they choose to say and not to say about its implications. All of the recommendations in this study hinge on ways to involve survivors in the discourse and learn from their insights and experiences.

In conclusion, interviews with the survivor participants revealed many key lessons regarding campus sexual assault discourse, stemming from what campus officials can learn from survivor-driven discussion. All of the survivor participants had experienced the effects of shame, blame, and stigma associated with rape myths. In explicit and implicit ways, each of the survivors urged more communication that will educate the campus community in order to dispel rape myths. The survivors appreciated the e-mailed Campus Safety Notices and indicated that they read them. They also suggested more follow-up to the emails in order to let the campus know the resolution of the situations (as much as possible under privacy and other legal limitations). Finally, they praised the campus communication efforts that draw public attention to the issue of sexual assault. While the survivors sometimes choose silence as a strategy in their own situations, they do not want campus professionals to be silent on the issue. The survivor speech community's communication goal is to refute the myths and offer counter-narratives that are productive and restorative.

To recap in brief, the author recommends the following four university action steps for addressing the problem of sexual assault:

1. Develop more opportunities for face-to-face communication and educational outreach events, such as panel discussions utilizing cohorts of student leaders on campus.

2. Organize more public events in visible, high-traffic spaces on campus in order to reach a broader audience and simultaneously create a sense of solidarity among survivors.
3. Establish and publicize multiple support groups for survivors so that they can meet consistently, discuss their experiences with those who share and understand their identity, and ultimately experience opportunities for healing through communication.
4. Expand efforts to confront specific rape myths within the Campus Safety Notices that are emailed to campus after a sexual assault is reported. Current use of definitions and information within the notices is good and can be expanded to include statistics that correct misinformation and erode rape myths.

### **Limitations**

While this case study identified several consistent and convincing themes, the results have some limitations. First, all of the self-identified survivors who responded to the flyers and subsequently participated in the interviews were Caucasian women. This demographic, restricted in race, sex, and gender identity, limited my ability to examine how issues of intersectionality might affect perceptions of campus sexual assault discourse in this case study and might impact therefore the appropriate recommendations for university action steps. Having no male, transgender, or gender non-conforming survivor participants constrained my findings, so that I was not able to examine ways in which these individuals who have experienced sexual assault might fit into the muted group/survivor speech community. Additionally, persons of color or individuals from other cultural backgrounds might have provided more depth to discussions about dominant/marginalized groups, as well as cultural expectations, including how families of

different cultural backgrounds react to sexual assault and choose to support or not to support the survivor. Likewise, the geographic region in which this study took place also imposes some limitations on its results. Many of the students at this mid-size university in south central Appalachia are from rural areas, are first-generation college students, and grew up in the South, surrounded by the gender normative assumptions that reside there. Such assumptions might shape both survivor and campus professional discourse differently than in other geographic locations and might therefore impact the issue/identity management distinction in speech communities.

Another factor that limited my interviews with the survivor participants was their possible identification as a vulnerable population by the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB). To address this, I took specific recommended precautions, including refraining from asking survivors to describe details about their sexual assault. The reason for avoiding questions pertaining to the actual assault was to protect the survivor participants from possible trauma resulting from reliving the experience during an interview. However, eliminating questions about the assaults also limited my scope of background and context information about the participants as I considered their responses to my questions about campus communication. Additional details about the survivors, including particulars about whether their assault occurred on campus, whether there were bystanders, what type of communication occurred during or after the assault, and whether the assailant was a recognizable part of their social circle, could have provided more insight to the analysis.

I also experienced limitations with the campus professional interviews. First, I was not able to interview every professional on campus whose job it is to deal with the issue of sexual assault; expanding the size of the research pool from just four survivors and four campus

professionals could provide additional insight to this study. As I made clear in the findings, the campus professionals spoke about sexual assault as something they manage as part of their jobs. At times, they might have refrained from inserting their personal opinion or straying from descriptions of their official duties for fear of making the university look bad. Even though they were aware that the findings were confidential, they spoke to me as official representatives of the university, which would likely discourage them from sharing their personal reflections or priorities.

My technique as an interviewer was a further limitation. As a former journalist, I am used to beginning an interview with a purpose and a few key questions. From there, journalists often proceed to develop additional questions throughout the course of the interview. Outside of academic research, the interviewer can be freer to follow her sources where they take her; one answer might inspire the next question, and the journalist could find herself going in a completely unexpected direction. Because I was conducting academic research that had been approved by the university's IRB, I was more limited in my questions. I submitted a schedule of questions and prompts for IRB approval, and once they were approved, I felt tied to those. As the interviews progressed, I found myself wishing I had asked a question differently, or added another prompt in order to ascertain more in-depth information. This taught me the gravity of asking the right questions and following up with appropriate probes in a qualitative interview setting.

Overall, interviews were the strongest focus of my findings in this study. With more time and resources, there were many campus documents and artifacts that could have been examined to produce additional findings. Additional time and funding might have provided opportunities

and resources to comb through these documents to perform a closer study of the language used in the written communication.

### **Future Research**

This case study situates new findings among a multitude of studies examining the issue of sexual assault on college campuses across the nation. However, there still is room for further research when mining the data from this particular university, especially when examining the issue from the perspective of speech communities. First, this study did not examine how sexual assault discourse at this university occurs within the specific framework of university athletics. One of the most expansive arenas for sexual assault discourse is the campus's reintroduction of its football program. The research for this study was conducted during the inaugural season of the university's football team, which was reinstated after a 12-year hiatus. With the first season now completed and in light of national attention to, and research confirming, the links between athletics (football in particular) and sexual assault, future research could explore the ways in which the university is handling the reintroduction of football culture to campus, as well as any ramifications this development has had on sexual assault discourse.

While this study focused on campus professionals who were on the front lines of sexual assault discourse, no secondary campus communicators were interviewed. Examples of secondary communicators might include coaches, faculty, or even student leaders mentioned by the campus professional participants. Additional research could include interviews with Greek leadership, athletic team captains, and other prominent student leaders on campus in order to gauge their views on the ways in which sexual assault information is disseminated to and through their organizations. Furthermore, male, racial minority, and transgender students were

other speech communities that were not included in the present study, but could be and should be explored for more insight.

In addition to gleaning information from other speech communities, future researchers could also delve deeper into the survivor speech community by seeking out survivor participants who have gone through the university channels to report their assaults. Since the strategy of silence was a reoccurring theme among the survivors in this study, it would be revealing to compare the motivations of survivors who chose not to use silence as a strategy in dealing with the assault. How do their experiences differ from those who opted not to report? Why do some survivors report their assaults or publicly discuss them, while others do not? To what extent do both groups share a desire or goals for face-to-face communication with other survivors? How do their perceptions of campus communication differ?

The introduction of a sexual assault survivor support group on campus provides further opportunities for discourse that is ripe for study. Future researchers could follow the present study with another analysis exploring how this support group is utilized, whether participants report that it provides, and what they suggest might better provide, the safe spaces and solidarity recommended in these findings. Furthermore, the campus professionals mentioned in their interviews that new online sexual assault training was being implemented for all new incoming students. This training could have implications in the areas of education and awareness, as discussed in these findings. Additional studies could examine new student perceptions of this training, as well as the impact of the training on students' awareness and perceptions of sexual assault discourse on campus. Future studies could also specifically examine whether survivors' conscious awareness of the official campus communication is indicative of how much they are impacted by those communications.

Finally, the most direct follow-up to this study is by allowing the survivor and campus professional participants to review the findings and requesting their thoughts on the analysis and conclusions. This next step would permit them to see if: 1) they see the study as accurately representing them, and 2) reading it prompts new ideas that they might want to share. Such an endeavor could weave together suggestions from this study and further recommendations produced from discourse about this study.

### **Research Reflections**

As I contemplated possible topics for my thesis, I knew I was preparing to enter a long-term relationship. Spending a year with a topic is a commitment, and I take all of my commitments very seriously. Sexual assault is a big, heavy topic; I know this. However, I thought I could study it for a year, unscathed. I believed it was an important problem that needs to be addressed, thus worthwhile of my time and significant attention. While I have no regrets about this first formative decision of my research process, I know now that I was not prepared for the magnitude of the topic on several levels. First and foremost, the statistics, implications, and realities of sexual assault are disturbing and weighed heavily on my mind throughout the process. Second, as I began gathering research for my literature review, I realized that I had plunged into a broad pool of research possibilities. From men's role in sexual assault discourse to rape myth acceptance, there were countless directions my study could go. Of course, it was a well-covered topic among the literature, as well. Finding a niche, a different way to approach the discourse, was a challenge. Dwelling on the discourse of rape myths and stigma was also difficult. As I learned more about how these myths and attitudes are engrained into our culture and discourse, it became more disheartening, and I started to wonder if there was any hope for anything different. One of my survivor participants articulated this same sentiment, saying things



would never change. However, I knew change is needed. A critical feminist lens was the only way I wanted to approach this study. Something has to change. So many things have to change.

Once my advisor helped me narrow my focus, the new challenges continued with every phase of the research. The next hurdle was the Institutional Review Board (IRB). As I stated previously in my Limitations section, I was used to conducting interviews as a journalist. Interviews for qualitative research—especially with a population that might be considered vulnerable—was a completely different encounter, requiring calculated research questions, forethought about trauma possibility, and stipulations to protect identities. I had heard cautions about the IRB—get your study approved early, make sure every “i” is dotted and “t” is crossed, and the like. However, with good advice from my advisor and by working ahead on the deadlines, my IRB process was smooth and uneventful. The IRB approved my study with minimal changes, and it proved to be a positive and informative experience. It forced me to think through my study, including identifying early on the specifics of what I wanted to learn and how I wanted to go about learning it. In hindsight, I am grateful that my application had some intricacies and a few complicated areas because it proved to me that I was capable of navigating the IRB process.

The observations and the interviews proved to be the most comfortable portions of the research process. Attending the four events on campus was rewarding, as I enjoyed observing and participating in the discourse that was the subject of my study. The field notes were reminiscent of my work as a journalist, and the experiences allowed me to get close to the issue. Likewise, the interviews also felt natural to me. The only constraint I sensed during interviews was my obligation to stick to the approved set of questions I had submitted to the IRB. If it were not in the service of academic research, my questions would have probed deeper and I would not

have avoided more personal questions about the sexual assaults and how it affected the lives of the survivor participants. This taught me the importance of crafting open-ended questions that are flexible and allow the participants to go in many different directions with their responses.

Coding was the step I looked forward to the most. I had never coded research, but as a writer, I have always analyzed words and phrases carefully. I appreciate words, their power and gravity. Therefore, I looked forward to analyzing the interviews and finding *in vivo* codes, narrowing them, and articulating findings. This process took longer than I anticipated, but it reminded me of fitting together a puzzle, piece by piece, until finally the picture starts to emerge. While trying to make sense of my data, I did get discouraged. However, it all became worthwhile when I could finally see the big picture. The lessons I learned started to come into focus, and I was ready to write.

Writing is a familiar, beloved process for me. I have written professionally my entire career, but it did not prepare me for the academic style of writing required for this study. My insecurities with this type of writing surfaced as I tried to find my voice in the literature review. My first draft approached it as a report of other scholars' work. After considering suggestions from my advisor, I decided to rewrite most of the literature review in order to better guide my readers through my study. The time and angst this cost me were worth it. With a strong literature review to anchor my study, I was ready to write the rest. It was a slow process, with me second-guessing every finding, and my advisor trying to help me sculpt my ideas into something people could grasp and use.

Although I am pleased with my efforts, the final outcome of this research is not what I expected it to be. As a new researcher and a critical feminist thinker, I wanted to do work that might help to enact change. I approached this study idealistically; I wanted to make a difference.

After it is all said and done, I do not know how significant these findings are when situated among the vast landscape of research about sexual assault discourse. I do not know if the recommendations will be heeded. If they are followed, I do not know if it will matter. (I have been told these are the insecurities of many, even experienced, researchers.) Even so, I conclude this research satisfied. I spent a year studying something I believe is important and ended with a plan for future action. There is value in understanding the speech communities and ensuring that muted groups have an amplified voice. Meaningful dialogue about a subject as important as sexual assault is never a waste of time. At its very minimum, this study suggests that we need to create spaces and place for more conversations like this.

## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>For a *small* sampling of the headlines in the news during the research and writing of this thesis, see “Survey: More than 1 in 5 female undergrads at top schools suffer sexual attacks,” (Anderson, Svriuga & Clement, 2015); “The war on campus sexual assault goes digital,” (Singer, 2015); “Sexual assault activists fear Rolling Stone retraction will derail progress” (Holpuch, 2015); and “ETSU targets nation’s ‘rape culture’” (Hrenda, 2015).

<sup>2</sup>According to the National Women’s Law Center (n.d.), “Title IX is a law passed in 1972 that requires gender equity for boys and girls in every educational program that receives federal funding.” The prevention of sexual harassment in education is required under Title IX. Additionally, every school has a Title IX coordinator to enforce gender equity.

<sup>3</sup>The Jeanne Clery Act (Clery Act) passed in 1990 requires that colleges and universities who receive federal funding share campus crime data, and information about their efforts to improve safety, with the public through an annual security report, according to the Clery Center for Security on Campus website (n.d.). In addition, these institutions must provide several types of support to victims of violence, including certain rights in the campus disciplinary process, and outline their policies and procedures with specific details required by the law (Clery Center for Security on Campus, n.d.).

<sup>4</sup>Campus SaVE Act updated the Jeanne Clery Act by adding measures to provide further transparency, accountability, education, and collaboration in the fight to end campus violence against women (Clery Center for Security on Campus, n.d.)

<sup>5</sup>Enacted in 1994, the Violence Against Women Act is federal legislation that takes a comprehensive approach to violence against women (White House, n.d.)

<sup>6</sup>At the time of Danica's interview, the university counseling center sponsored a group called FemSex, which touched on the issue of sexual assault, but was not geared specifically toward sexual assault survivors. However in the Spring of 2016, plans were under way and flyers were circulated to advertise "Survivors to Thrivers," a therapeutic group for survivors of sexual trauma specifically.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Flyer

**Our conversations about  
sexual assault matter.**

**They can blame.  
They can stigmatize.  
They can EMPOWER.**

**Are you a SURVIVOR of sexual assault?**

Your perspective is a valuable part of the conversation. Are you willing to participate in an interview where you can privately and confidentially share your thoughts about how we talk about sexual assault at ETSU?

To participate in a graduate research study examining this issue, please email Melissa Nipper at [nipperm@goldmail.etsu.edu](mailto:nipperm@goldmail.etsu.edu)

*All inquiries and interviews will be kept strictly confidential.  
Participants will receive a \$15 gift card.*

\*This study has been approved by  
the East Tennessee State University Institutional Review Board.



## **Appendix B: Interview Protocols/Schedules**

### **Aims and Goals:**

You have agreed to participate in an interview that will provide data for my study about how we talk about sexual assault on campus. The aims and goals of this interview are:

1. To identify the university's responsiveness to the issue of sexual assault (as evidenced in the language and discourse used in official campus conversations about this issue).
2. To identify perceptions of how the university responds to the issue of sexual assault.
3. To suggest ways that this university, and universities and colleges more broadly, can use campus conversations and particular language choices to better respond and communicate its responsiveness to the issue of sexual assault.

### **Guidelines:**

1. **Focus on how we talk about sexual assault.** I am focusing today primarily on the conversations we have at this university about the topic of sexual assault.
2. **Time.** Our conversation will take approximately 30 minutes to an hour.
3. **Your choice.** You are free to stop the interview at any time or decline to answer any question for any reason.

### **When I Write about Your Experiences:**

1. I am audio recording our conversation.
2. Only the research team will have access to the recording.
3. What you say will be typed up so that I can study the transcript of what was said today.

4. It is my plan to publish my research from these discussions, so your words may be used in my master's thesis and in upcoming research publications and presentations. However, I will remove your name, any other names you use, and any specific titles that identify you.

**Questions:**

- 1. What have you learned from the conversations you've had with sexual assault survivors on this university campus? (Aim #2)**

**Possible probes:**

- a. What elements of your job deal with the issue of sexual assault on campus?
  - b. In what ways (officially and unofficially) do you communicate with members of the campus community about the issue of sexual assault?
  - c. In what ways have you tried to help sexual assault survivors on this university's campus?
  - d. What issues have been brought to your attention through your conversations with sexual assault survivors (campus safety, education, awareness, etc.)?
- 2. What kinds of conversations, events, or initiatives dealing with the issue of sexual assault have you observed at this university in the last year? (Aim #1)**

**Possible probes:**

- a. Do you notice any differences in how men and women talk about sexual assault on campus? [If yes] What are those differences?

- b. Do you notice any difference in how sexual assault is discussed in relation to athletes and Greeks on campus, as opposed to the general student body? [If yes] In what ways?
- c. In what ways do you think stigma is connected to this issue on campus?

**3. What can this university do differently or better in order to protect women from sexual assault and stigma associated with it? (Aim #3)**

**Possible probes:**

- a. What might they do differently?
- b. What might they say differently—to survivors, perpetrators, and to the general university audience?
- c. Have you observed any barriers to reporting sexual assault?
  - i. If so, what are these barriers?
  - ii. How can these barriers be removed?
- d. Has your department/area implemented specific programs to target the problem of sexual assault?
  - i. What is the plan?
  - ii. What is the primary purpose of the plan?

## Interview Protocol/Schedule

### Survivor Participants

#### **Aims and Goals:**

You have agreed to participate in an interview that will provide data for my study about how we talk about sexual assault on this university campus. The aims and goals of this interview are:

1. To identify this university's responsiveness to the issue of sexual assault (as evidenced in the language and discourse used in official campus conversations about this issue).
2. To identify perceptions of how the university responds to the issue of sexual assault.
3. To suggest ways that this university, and universities and colleges more broadly, can use campus conversations and particular language choices to better respond and communicate its responsiveness to the issue of sexual assault.

#### **Guidelines:**

1. **Focus on how we talk about sexual assault.** I am focusing today primarily on the conversations we have at this university about the topic of sexual assault. I am not asking you to describe your experience of sexual assault. Instead, I am interested in your thoughts on the ways we talk (or don't talk) about sexual assault on campus.
2. **Time.** Our conversation will take approximately 30 minutes to an hour.
3. **Your choice.** You are free to stop the interview at any time or decline to answer any question for any reason.

#### **When I Write about Your Experiences:**

1. I am audio recording our conversation.

2. Only the research team will have access to the recording.
3. What you say will be typed up so that I can study the transcript of what was said today.
4. It is my plan to publish my research from these discussions, so your words may be used in my master's thesis and in upcoming research publications and presentations. However, I will remove your name, any other names you use, and any specific titles that identify you.

**Questions:**

1. **What kinds of conversations, events, or initiatives dealing with the issue of sexual assault have you observed on this campus in the last year? (Aims 1 & 2)**

**Possible probes:**

- a. Can you talk about a time when you thought that a program or discussion on campus did a good job of handling the issue of sexual assault? What did it do well?
- b. What about a time when a program or discussion did a poor job in your opinion? What did it do poorly?
- c. Have you seen any printed or online information by the university that you think does a good job of handling the issue of sexual assault? What does it do well?
- d. Have you seen university information that did a poor job in your opinion? What did it do poorly?
- e. What do you wish everyone at this university knew about sexual assault survivors?
- f. Do any particular messages/words make you feel stigmatized (ashamed) because of the crime committed against you?

- g. What type of communication do you feel would be most effective at preventing assault?
- h. Do you notice any difference in how sexual assault is discussed in relation to athletes and Greeks on campus, as opposed to the general student body? [If yes] In what ways?
- i. Do you notice any differences in how men and women talk about sexual assault on campus? [If yes] What are those differences?

**2. What can the university do better or differently to protect women from sexual assault and stigma associated with it? (Aim #3)**

**Possible probes:**

- a. Have you observed any barriers to reporting sexual assault on campus? [If yes] What are these barriers?
- b. What support services on campus have you utilized since your assault?
- c. Have you attended events such as Take Back the Night, Walk a Mile in Her Shoes, or other similar events?
  - i. Were they helpful? In what ways?
  - ii. What other campus events or awareness initiatives might be helpful to implement?

**3. Have you talked..and if so...In what ways (if any) have you talked about your assault with others on campus? (Aim #1)**

**Possible probes:**

- a. What kinds of conversations have you had with other survivors of sexual assault on campus?
  - i. How does it feel to talk to other survivors?
  - ii. What opportunities have you had to share your story on campus?
- b. Did you report your sexual assault?
  - i. Why did you report/not report?
  - ii. Do you regret your decision for any reason? Why or why not?

## Appendix C: IRB Approval Letter



EAST TENNESSEE STATE  
UNIVERSITY

Office for the Protection of Human Research Subjects • Box 70565 • Johnson City, Tennessee 37614-1707  
Phone: (423) 439-6053 Fax: (423) 439-6060

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### IRB APPROVAL – Initial Expedited Review

July 1, 2015

Melissa Nipper

**Re:** The power and gravity of the discourse of campus sexual assault: A case study in South Central Appalachia

**IRB#:** c0615.10s

**ORSPA #:**

The following items were reviewed and approved by an expedited process:

- new protocol submission xform, CV of PI, ICD for survivors version date 6/5/15, ICD for professionals version date 6/10/15\*, flyer, interview protocol ETSU professionals, interview protocol sexual assault survivors, grant

The item(s) with an asterisk(\*) above noted changes requested by the expedited reviewers.

On **June 30, 2015**, a final approval was granted for a period not to exceed 12 months and will expire on **June 29, 2016**. The expedited approval of the study *and* requested changes will be reported to the convened board on the next agenda.

The following **enclosed stamped, approved Informed Consent Documents** have been stamped with the approval and expiration date and these documents must be copied and provided to each participant prior to participant enrollment:

Informed Consent Documents

- ICD for survivors version 6/5/15 stamped approved 6/30/15
- ICD for professionals version 6/29/15 stamped approved 6/30/15

Federal regulations require that the original copy of the participant's consent be maintained in the principal investigator's files and that a copy is given to the subject at the time of consent.

**Projects involving Mountain States Health Alliance must also be approved by MSHA following IRB approval prior to initiating the study.**



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Unanticipated Problems Involving Risks to Subjects or Others must be reported to the IRB (and VA R&D if applicable) within 10 working days.

Proposed changes in approved research cannot be initiated without IRB review and approval. The only exception to this rule is that a change can be made prior to IRB approval when necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to the research subjects [21 CFR 56.108 (a)(4)]. In such a case, the IRB must be promptly informed of the change following its implementation (within 10 working days) on Form 109 ([www.etsu.edu/irb](http://www.etsu.edu/irb)). The IRB will review the change to determine that it is consistent with ensuring the subject's continued welfare.

Sincerely,  
Brittany Wilkins, Ph.D., Vice Chair  
ETSU Campus IRB

cc: Amber Kinser, PhD

VITA

MELISSA H. NIPPER

- Education: Public Schools, St. Petersburg, Florida  
B.A. Communications & English, Milligan College, Elizabethton,  
Tennessee 1996  
M.A. Professional Communication, East Tennessee State  
University, Johnson City, Tennessee 2016
- Professional Experience: Reporter, Elizabethton Star; Elizabethton, Tennessee, 1996-1997  
Reporter/Managing Editor, Georgetown News Graphic;  
Georgetown, Kentucky, 1997-1999  
Sections Editor, Lexington Herald-Leader; Lexington, Kentucky,  
1999-2008  
Writer/Editor, Asbury Theological Seminary; Wilmore, Kentucky,  
2008-2009  
Communications Coordinator, Milligan College; Elizabethton,  
Tennessee, 2009-2014  
Graduate Teaching Assistant, East Tennessee State University;  
Johnson City, Tennessee, 2014-2016
- Honors and Awards: Research grant, presented by the East Tennessee State University  
School of Graduate Studies and ETSU Graduate Research Council