

2017

Campus Sexual Assault: College Women Respond

Haley Williamson
Taylor University

Follow this and additional works at: https://pillars.taylor.edu/acsd_growth



Part of the [Higher Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Williamson, Haley (2017) "Campus Sexual Assault: College Women Respond," *Growth: The Journal of the Association for Christians in Student Development*: Vol. 16 : No. 16 , Article 10.

Available at: https://pillars.taylor.edu/acsd_growth/vol16/iss16/10

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Association of Christians in Student Development at Pillars at Taylor University. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Growth: The Journal of the Association for Christians in Student Development* by an authorized editor of Pillars at Taylor University. For more information, please contact pillars@taylor.edu.



Campus Sexual Assault: College Women Respond

Germain, L. J., 2016
Baltimore, Maryland: John Hopkins University Press

Reviewed by Haley Williamson

How do we prevent cases of campus sexual assault? By conducting bystander training, installing safety poles, and educating students about why they should not walk home alone at night? These are questions many higher education professionals are asking. Lauren J. Germain agrees these questions and actions are good-faith efforts at reducing the number of campus sexual assaults, but, she suggests, maybe we are approaching this all from the wrong angle. In her book, *Campus Sexual Assault: College Women Respond*, Germain presents the idea college educators and administrators should not focus solely on what leads to rape, but what women do after they experience sexual assault (Germain notes both men and women experience sexual assault but that she chose to focus on women, who experience sexual assault at higher rates, in her research). Maybe by considering the hours, days, and years following sexual assaults, institutions can learn where the faults in their systems lie, and start to make more effective changes.

Germain begins by providing background for why she conducted this research and how the research unfolded. Additionally, she outlines what higher education professionals may not know when it comes to campus sexual assault. She starts with the history of campus sexual assault and describes federal intervention efforts,

including the Clery Act and the *Not Alone* report issued by the White House Task Force, to protect students from sexual assault. Germain also presents rape myths common on college and university campuses. Once Germain lays the foundation for her work and shows where the gaps in our current knowledge prevail, she explains the research she conducted.

At an unnamed institution (referred to as “the University”), Germain interviewed 26 undergraduate students presenting 28 unique cases of campus sexual assault. From those 26 interviews, eight forms of post-assault agency emerged: Embodied agency; managing identity; silence; self-expression; pursuit of individually defined justice; transitive (formal); transitive (informal); and empowerment. Germain divided these eight themes into five sections, each presenting blended stories of the women interviewed: becoming an embodied agent; managing identity; telling friends and family; seeking justice; and taking part in the empowerment of others. The book concludes with what Germain calls “the way forward,” which seeks to answer the questions: What do we do with the stories, numbers, and convictions that fill the pages of her book? How do we process, engage, and put to action the lessons that emerged from the honesty and vulnerability of women who faced campus sexual assault?

In discussing the paradox of an embodied agent in the second chapter (the first theme of post-assault agency), Germain introduces a key idea for college leaders to recognize: the perfect victim. Germain presents the idea that many women compare themselves to what a perfect victim would do if they experienced campus sexual assault. For instance, a perfect victim would be appalled by the act, immediately collect the physical evidence, report the incident to authorities, and then seek medical attention and undergo a rape kit. Germain argues women who hold this view of the ideal victim may believe they are unable to seek justice, closure, or help, if, after experiencing sexual assault they fail to respond as the perfect victim would. They may believe if they respond as their instincts suggest – by showering, sleeping, or choosing not to report the assault immediately, for example – they have somehow done something wrong. This view of a perfect victim is widely held on college campuses by students, educators, and administrators. The idea of perfect victimhood is perpetuated through campus rape myths, which are harmful and untrue and are discouraging women from seeking help, guidance, or justice. Germain’s point is for college administration to recognize the existence of the perfect victim myth, give language to the myth, and begin working to undo it.

Why should Christian college leaders read Germain’s work? The perception at many Christian colleges may be that students are discouraged

from talking about sex or that sexual assaults ‘don’t happen here.’ Yet Germain exposes the reality of campus sexual assault, which is a critical if uncomfortable topic to address. The names, statistics, and stories Germain describes shed light on cases of campus sexual assault that are prevalent on every college campus, even those that are religiously affiliated. Administrators and educators at Christian institutions must create spaces where students feel able to address campus sexual assault, in order to heal the wounds caused by the myth of the perfect victim. Germain offers professionals at both faith-based and non-faith-based institutions language to empower and to give voices to those who experience campus sexual assault. In her description of her research, Germain models what all educators should strive for when sitting with students who have experienced campus sexual assault: she listens. She provides a safe space for women to come, share their stories and receive what they often feel they need most: to be heard.

As higher education professionals, we cannot go back in time and erase the damage of sexual assault, right the terrible wrong victims experience, or take their pain away. But we can listen. We can sit in the grief, confusion, and emotion, and listen. We can stand alongside individuals and empower them to use their voices, as they in turn empower others. If you walk away from this book with nothing else, walk away with a new understanding of the power of a story and how important it is to listen to our students in the days, months, and years following a campus sexual assault. I am grateful for the honest, challenging, and convicting words of Germain and for the stories she brought to light. I am grateful for the women who were brave and vulnerable, sharing their stories in the hopes they would empower others.

Haley Williamson will complete her Master of Arts in Higher Education and Student Development from Taylor University in May 2017.