Simple actions could save the next girl. Anything from speaking out against a sexist comment or suddenly turning off loud music at a party to spilling a drink on a would-be aggressor could be enough to create a distraction that may prevent the next girl—or the next guy—from becoming another sexual assault statistic.

When incoming freshmen and transfer students arrive on the Fitchburg State University (Mass.) campus for orientation, they are required to participate in the Bystander Intervention Program to learn practical strategies for safely stepping in when they think someone might be in danger. Sponsored by FAVE—Fitchburg Anti-Violence Education—the program also includes a presentation of Drawing the Shades, a student-directed play relating the experiences of sexual assault survivors. If students don’t attend the sessions, a hold is placed on their account to prevent them from registering for the next semester until the requirement is completed.

“There’s an expectation that this is what you do if you’re a Fitchburg State University student,” says FAVE co-director Erin Travia, who also is assistant director of the university’s Counseling Services Office. “We all play a role in keeping our community safe, and that message is really part of our campus culture. We are all FAVE. It’s the community standard here.”

FAVE is a campus-wide initiative designed to prevent interpersonal and relationship violence, sexual assault, and to support women and men affected by violence. A collaborative effort with departments across the university, FAVE strives to create a “safe and respectful community for all.”
Travia says, by offering educational programs to promote healthy relationships and to empower victims and survivors of sexual assault. FAVE was established in 2010, thanks to a grant from the Department of Justice Office on Violence Against Women. Though the grant funding has ended, the university remains committed to the program.

FAVE provided a multi-faceted approach to prevention of sexual assault. The Ask First, Kiss Second social marketing campaign—illustrated with giveaways such as Hershey’s Kisses and chapstick—explains what consent means and emphasizes the importance of obtaining consent before engaging in any form of sexual contact. Each year, FAVE hosts a White Ribbon Day to support the international campaign that involves men in the effort to end violence against women, and partners with the university’s Counseling Services to support Take Back the Night to promote awareness about sexual assault. FAVE awards a few grants each year to faculty members who incorporate issues of domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault and stalking in the classroom. And FAVE creates and distributes numerous marketing pieces to promote on- and off-campus resources and services for victims and survivors of sexual assault.

“We're really trying to come at it from as many angles as we can, and want to do some of this work in the classroom,” says Beth Walsh, FAVE co-director and criminal justice professor. “FAVE is integrated into the culture here at the university—it’s part of the classroom and part of student life. FAVE is really a part of everyday life here on campus.”

A Public Health Problem

The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) recognizes sexual assault as a public health problem. Statistics show that one in five women are sexually assaulted on college campuses, and in most cases, the survivor knew her attacker. Most assaults are committed by someone the victim knows, and few of these incidents are reported to the police or campus administrators. Men also are victimized, though at a much lower rate.

Numerous national efforts have drawn widespread attention to sexual violence on college campuses. In 2011, for example, the U.S. Department of Education clarified that sexual violence and sexual harassment fall under Title IX regulations, which prohibit sexual discrimination at educational institutions. In 2013, President Obama signed the Violence Against Women Reauthorization Act, which includes the Campus Sexual Violence Elimination Act (Campus SaVe). This legislation expanded the rights of victims of sexual assault, dating violence, domestic violence and stalking. And most recently, in a far-reaching effort to combat sexual violence on college campuses, President Obama convened the White House Task Force to Protect Students from Sexual Assault in January 2014.

Colleges and universities can make a difference in dramatically reducing rates of sexual violence, experts say, by creating a culture where students respect themselves and each other, and where threatening and intimidating behavior isn’t tolerated.

“You have to go back to our basic purpose, and it is my expectation—and that of students and parents—that universities should be safe havens where students focus on intellectual development, social development and academic success,” says Dianne Harrison, president of California State University, Northridge, which offers a variety of sexual assault prevention and awareness programs, including the mandatory Greek Life PREP (Pre-recruitment Education Program) for students interested in joining a fraternity or sorority.

“Universities should not be a place where sexual assault is rampant, and where sexual assault is excused or somehow ignored. As leaders in higher education, we have a responsibility to create a cultural shift in our attitudes and perceptions and behaviors,” says Harrison. “We need to prevent sexual violence from occurring in the first place. We shouldn’t look at it just as a legal requirement—it’s a human issue. We know that both women and men are victims all over the world, so why can’t we be leaders in changing those dysfunctional, violent behaviors we shouldn’t tolerate in any form?”

Prevention Is Everyone’s Responsibility

Bystander intervention programs have gained popularity over the past decade or so, and there are a number of curriculums available, including Bringing In the Bystander, developed by Prevention Innovations (PI)—a research unit based at the University of New Hampshire (UNH). The collaborative
“Culture of Respect has amassed best practices for sexual assault prevention so that our campuses don’t have to reinvent the wheel. They can draw on this to improve or build on the work they are trying to do.” —Muriel Howard

organization serves institutions all over the U.S. and abroad, as well as the U.S. military. The highly interactive program approaches sexual assault prevention from the standpoint of community responsibility. Customizable to reflect the unique culture of any campus, the Bringing in the Bystander curriculum helps participants learn to identify potentially harmful behaviors and includes role-playing exercises through which participants practice safe interventions and support to victims. After completing the program, participants take a “bystander pledge,” promising to become an active bystander in their communities.

Bringing in the Bystander has measurable, proven results to demonstrate its effectiveness, says Jane Stapleton, PI co-director. Studies show that participants have an increased awareness of the problems of sexual and relationship violence and stalking; an increased understanding of bystander intervention; a decrease in the tendency to blame the victim; and an increase in self-reported bystander behaviors. The White House, the U.S. Department of Justice and the CDC have recognized Bringing in the Bystander as a model program.

"Studies suggest that perpetrators of sexual violence on campus will not stop their behavior just because you make them sit through a prevention program," Stapleton says. "The way we’re going to change those men’s behavior is to stop normalizing it. That’s where bystanders come in. Bystanders stand up and say, ‘No, it’s not okay. It’s not okay to get a girl drunk and have sex with her.’"

“Bystander intervention looks at sexual and relationship violence as a public health problem where communities take responsibility for ending perpetration in their communities,” Stapleton continues. “Bystander intervention doesn’t approach women as victims or potential victims, or men as perpetrators and potential perpetrators. It says that everyone has a role to play in ending sexual and relationship violence and stalking. It’s really meant to engage everyone as part of the solution.”

Confronting Alcohol Abuse

Alcohol often is a factor in many sexual assault cases. The State University of New York New Paltz has partnered with local bar owners to increase awareness of the problem among students and to promote safety and better decision-making when it comes to drinking.

Last year, the university renewed the longstanding Tavern Owners Agreement—a 15-year partnership with the New Paltz Tavern Owners Association to promote responsible and lawful consumption of alcohol, as well as appropriate civic customer behavior. The agreement emphasizes that customers should be 21 years or older to consume alcoholic beverages and promises to adhere to drinking laws by requiring valid personal identification to prove age before serving any patron.

Bar owners pledge to refuse service to any customer who is visibly intoxicated or who appears to be consuming dangerous amounts of alcoholic drinks. They also agree to avoid advertising, in print or social media, drink specials that promote high-risk drinking or sexually exploitive drink specials (such as Wet T-Shirt Nights). “Respectful Community” signs posted in the local bars remind customers to be considerate and respectful neighbors. The “One Less” campaign encourages students to make safe and responsible decisions about drinking.

“We can’t be everywhere all the time, so we’re not always present to provide guidance to our students,” says SUNY New Paltz President Donald Christian, who notes that this initiative is just one piece of the university’s comprehensive effort that includes bystander intervention, education and Title IX training. “We have to educate students to make good choices, and we are casting our efforts broadly in terms of safety and community standards of mutual respect.”

Resources for Victims and Survivors

While most university campuses have some mix of services ranging from police departments, student health care, and counseling services that help victims and survivors, many have pulled together these services in the form of 24-hour crisis response centers.

A horrific gang rape on the campus of UNH in the late 1980s was the impetus behind the creation of the Sexual Harassment and Rape Prevention Program (SHARPP)—one of the nation’s first on-campus rape crisis centers, which provides advocacy and support to survivors and victims.

At Fitchburg State, Travia and Walsh take every opportunity to promote the university’s resources for sexual assault victims, including placing refrigerator magnets and business cards into new student welcome packages. Administrators, faculty and staff also are educated about sexual assault and are provided with the same marketing collateral so that they can point students to resources on- or off-campus.
“Students may not be comfortable coming directly to the counseling office if something happens to them, but they may be connected to a faculty member,” Travia explains. “So if a student comes to a faculty member with concerns, we want that professor to have the information available to share with students. We’re trying to make accessibility to our services as easy as possible. That means making sure they are listed in multiple places—whether on our website or social media or on a magnet that can be placed on a file cabinet. We want every single employee to have those phone numbers at their fingertips.”

Culture of Respect

AASCU has partnered with Culture of Respect, a nonprofit organization to help colleges and universities strengthen their efforts to prevent sexual assault on campus. The organization’s website is a clearinghouse of leading evidence-based best practices for sexual assault prevention and response.

“We work with leaders in research, violence prevention and education, legal issues, higher education, and campus activism to create an online portal of comprehensive sexual assault prevention information,” says Allison Tombros Korman, executive director of Culture of Respect. “We also provide a roadmap, our CORE Blueprint, for creating change across all constituent groups on campus. We look forward to engaging with AASCU members and are incredibly grateful for AASCU’s support. Their early belief in us helped us launch this critical effort.”

The CORE Blueprint is a Six-Pillar-Strategy that universities can use to guide them as they design or revise their sexual assault prevention and response efforts. It includes a robust self-assessment for colleges and universities to benchmark their progress. While it is prescriptive, it is flexible enough to accommodate each school’s unique infrastructure, traditions and culture. The CORE Blueprint contains the tenets and actionable steps schools need to undertake to create successful change on campus, including providing the following: support for survivors; clear policies on adjudication and penalties; robust education for stakeholders at all levels of campus life; public disclosure of sexual assault statistics and information; school-wide mobilization in partnership with campus organizations and student leadership; and on-going self-assessment.

“We found this to be a new and fresh approach to addressing an important issue for our campuses,” says AASCU President Muriel Howard. “This national approach is accessible to everyone. We can do things campus by campus, but this not-for-profit has amassed best practices for sexual assault prevention so that our campuses don’t have to reinvent the wheel. They can draw on this to improve or build on the work they are trying to do.”

The University of Texas at Brownsville will be one of the first AASCU schools to participate in Culture of Respect’s Pilot Program. While UT Brownsville already has a number of programs to engage students in the prevention of sexual assault, Dean of Students Douglas Stoves says this partnership will help his campus better coordinate efforts that already are underway, including an annual Spring Break Luau that emphasizes the message, “Party Smart, Party Safe.”

“It’s very important to develop programs based on best practices, so it’s exciting for us to partner with Culture of Respect,” says Stoves. “It allows us to become a leader in education and prevention of sexual assault. This is an area where we can’t be satisfied with where we are now. We have to continually get the word out to our students and find creative ways to reach them.”

For campuses that are just getting started in efforts to increase awareness about sexual violence or strengthen efforts to educate students about prevention, Travia recommends taking time to do a thorough needs assessment. When she was helping to start FAVE, Travia and her colleagues visited every academic department and talked to as many people as possible, sharing their goals and asking for feedback.

“It was time consuming, but it helped set the foundation for the community-wide effort,” Travia says. “It feels like it’s been a more effective culture change than if we were just trying to change the culture based on our experiences in counseling and criminal justice. The campus-wide nature and the support from the top down from day one have been important. If you get that on your campus, you’re in a really good place.”

Stapleton emphasizes the importance of constantly measuring the effectiveness of programs. That will allow campuses to make adjustments as needed.

“If you don’t know that what you’re doing works, then you could be putting a whole lot of time and energy and money into something that might not have a positive effect—and potentially a detrimental effect,” Stapleton says. “Look up best practices and think about your institution’s particular needs. We don’t believe in a one-size-fits-all or cookie-cutter approach. Find out what works best for your institution.”

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