

# Researchers call for interdisciplinary look at sexual violence on campus

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National thought leaders convened at Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health yesterday for a symposium identifying gaps in understanding the prevention of sexual violence on college campuses, calling for a broad interdisciplinary agenda for the next generation of research on a significant problem that became front-page news around the country this year.

The day-long event, "Transforming the Campus Climate: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Sexual Violence," was one of the first public activities sponsored by the Sexual Health Initiative to Foster Transformation, or SHIFT, a research initiative announced in February by Columbia University President Lee Bollinger to explore the evidence and theoretical perspectives of campus sexual violence.

"Sexual violence has deep roots within our society," said Jennifer Hirsch, PhD, professor of Sociomedical Sciences at Columbia's Mailman School of Public Health, who will co-direct the SHIFT study. "In order to address it effectively, we need to understand more about the individual, social, and institutional factors that make it more likely to occur."

Incidents of sexual assault on college campuses, approximately 90 percent of which are not reported, are thought to be pervasive across most kinds of educational institutions. The most recent national study indicates that as many as one in five women, and one in 16 men, experience some form of sexual violence while in college.

The conference included national leaders in sociology, medicine, and psychology who spoke on a range of individual, social, and structural factors that underlie student vulnerability to sexual violence. Enriching this understanding is among the goals of Columbia's SHIFT study.

"As we work to address gender-based misconduct, our highest priority remains to prevent sexual violence before it occurs," said President Bollinger in the initial announcement about SHIFT. "But to do this most effectively, we need to help remedy what is a national deficit in evidence-based information relevant to creating the most effective prevention programs and policies. This study will consider what can be done to promote healthy relationships and identify important risk factors that must be addressed in order to establish a safer and more protective environment."

The conference, which was also sponsored by the Columbia Population Research Center, was attended by approximately 100 people, including researchers from universities and research centers across the metropolitan area, and was designed to maximize the creation of new and innovative research projects.

"Our capacity to respond effectively to the challenge of building campus climates where everyone is safe must not be held back by a lack of empirical knowledge," said Hirsch in opening remarks.

In addition to the need for interdisciplinary research, the conference generated these findings:

- While some campus programs have been successful at the individual level, there is a need to shape a broad interdisciplinary agenda for the next generation of research to examine social and structural factors that will inform prevention of violence on college campuses.

- Sexual violence is not a problem that will have one solution; multiple determinants and a range of factors that shape vulnerability are vital to helping map how to proceed.
- Generating new research is not enough. Researchers must be attentive to the processes and to the business of translating research into policy.
- For programs to be successful, students must be engaged as partners in the process. Start the conversation at freshmen orientation and embed more broadly in student life programs. Make the college environment more conducive to connectiveness. Engage faculty in student life as well.
- Building on what we already know so that we can be more effective at the interpersonal level in preventing sexual violence on college campuses will advance knowledge about how to improve other areas of sexual health as well as help us think in new ways to prevent violence both within and outside the college campus.

"Today's discussions were extremely promising, said Claude Ann Mellins, PhD, co-director of the study and professor of Medical Psychology in the Division of Gender, Sexuality, and Health, Department of Psychiatry at Columbia University Medical Center. "We gained a better understanding of what research has been done around the country, what interventions have been tried, and what research is still needed to inform prevention programs that will help eradicate the presence of sexual assault on the campuses of colleges and universities around the country."

The SHIFT study will benefit from cross-disciplinary participation of schools from across Columbia's campus including the Mailman School and the department of Psychiatry at Columbia University Medical Center where Professors Hirsch and Mellins are respectively based, as well as the School of Social Work, the Law School, the College of Arts

and Sciences, and the Business School. Professors Hirsch and Mellins will collaborate with a diverse group of faculty with expertise in gender, [sexual health](#), [sexual violence](#), young adult development, mental health, and the use of research to develop programs and policies directed at behavioral change. In addition, to account for the experiences and perspectives of students, faculty, and administrators, they will consult regularly with the study's Student and Institutional Advisory Boards. They have already met for the last half of this semester with 16 undergraduates on a weekly basis to ensure that the research is grounded in the needs and viewpoints of the students.

Provided by Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health

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