



Campus rape and victim blaming

Currently in the United States, 55 colleges are under federal investigation for their mishandling of sexual assault cases. One of these institutions, the University of Virginia (UVA), was the subject of a recent report in [Rolling Stone magazine](#), recounting the brutal gang-rape of a woman in a fraternity house, and her inability to get her subsequent complaint pursued seriously by the university authorities. UVA—which has never expelled a single student for rape—is now engaged in frantic attempts at damage limitation. The belatedness and apparent cynicism of these efforts can be criticized, of course. But at least the authorities are mouthing the right words. By contrast, there are colleges whose ideas about how to deal with their endemic sexual violence problem are so wide of the mark, they make you wonder what planet their senior officers live on.

At Eckerd College in Florida, for instance, where the local newspaper reports that there have been ‘more than a dozen’ sexual offences (a figure that presumably refers only to reported sexual offences) on campus since 2011, College President Donald Eastman III sent out an email to the university community on the subject of rape culture and how to combat it. [You can read it in full here](#), but the gist of it is that students can solve the problem by obeying two simple commandments. First, don’t consume excessive amounts of alcohol (President Eastman noted that ‘Socrates included wine at his symposium, but he did not get drunk’), and second, don’t have sex without ‘commitment’. ‘Virtue in the area of sexuality is its own reward’, the President opined, ‘and has been held in high esteem in Western Culture for millennia because those who are virtuous are happier as well as healthier. No one’s culture or character or understanding is improved by casual sex, and the physical and psychological risks to both genders are profound’.

Questioned by journalists about this homily, a strange cross between an old-style ‘Western Civilization’ course and a Christian fundamentalist sermon, Eastman acknowledged that some people took a different view: ‘Don’t tell us this is the fault of the victim, don’t blame sexual assault on alcohol, don’t blame sexual assault on casual sex’. But he added that he was sticking to his guns because those who criticized his approach ‘haven’t told me what you really ought to blame it on’. The obvious answer—that you should blame it on those who perpetrate the assaults, or in plainer English, ‘rapists’—apparently had not occurred to him.

The President of Eckerd College may be an extreme case of ignorant, bigoted victim-blaming, but his words and actions point to a more general lack of awareness among people in positions like his. It is now more than ten years since [a research study conducted on a university campus by David Lisak](#) suggested that as many as 90% of campus sexual assaults are committed by the same relatively small group of serial offenders. The average number of women victimized by these ‘undetected rapists’ is six: sometimes the same assailant has been reported to the authorities by more than one woman, but no single case has been judged strong enough to stick, and the college authorities have failed to join the dots because of inadequate procedures or record-keeping. A number of subsequent studies have also found that the women rapists victimize are often deliberately targeted because they appear vulnerable (e.g. they are socially isolated, sexually inexperienced, new to the campus) and that alcohol is used to increase their



vulnerability: getting women drunk, or preying on those who are incapacitated, minimizes both the victim's ability to resist and the likelihood that she will remember enough to give credible testimony if she later reports what happened.

So, we have plenty of evidence that rape is not just something that happens when men and women drink too much, it is something men use alcohol to facilitate; and it is not casual sex 'gone wrong', it is a calculated act of violence which the men involved often plan, and for which they may well have selected their victims in advance.

In the US, the White House has taken an active interest in the issue of sexual assault on campus; maybe college presidents across the nation should be summoned to a meeting at which they would be forced to listen to the findings of research and told that they cannot just go on burying the facts under a pile of victim-blaming horseshit. In the UK, the agencies that oversee higher education institutions should be telling universities in no uncertain terms that their current approach is inadequate and may breach their statutory obligations under equalities law. Not only do we need better procedures for dealing with complaints in order to secure justice for women, the research suggests that a more robust approach by universities could actually prevent some of the assaults committed by the repeat offenders who are currently going undetected. If the university authorities listened to women and kept decent records, they would stand more chance of identifying these men at an early stage of their criminal careers. Even if this did not produce the kind of evidence required for a criminal prosecution, it would enable universities (whose disciplinary procedures are not required to use the criminal standard of proof 'beyond a reasonable doubt') to expel men whose presence is particularly dangerous to women.

I have no way of knowing whether President Eastman of Eckerd actually believes his own peculiar blend of Plato and the Bible, but even if he does, sincerity is no defence. A man who has no clue about what rape actually is (not 'sex without commitment' but 'sex without the other person's consent') has no business being in charge of a university. But arguably Eastman is an easy target. Most institutions of higher learning are run by more sophisticated people, people who know what kind of language they should and shouldn't use if they don't want to be pilloried by the press. And yet beneath the polished surface, the same kind of victim-blaming is rife: I've heard it in every university I've ever worked at. This is a serious issue, not least because the figures for campus sexual assault are shockingly high—in the US some studies suggest that 35% of women students may have experienced sexual violence, while in the UK a survey done for the National Union of Students put the figure at one in seven. There is now considerable pressure for this epidemic of violence to be addressed; but one precondition for addressing it effectively is to stop the victim-blaming which silences so many women.