Graduate Assembly

The Problem

Sexual violence is a pervasive issue on college campuses, and UC Berkeley has proven to have particular difficulty in preventing and appropriately responding to it. While on average more than 1 in 5 women nationally on college campuses experience sexual violence, some surveys estimate that 1 in 4 women at UC Berkeley experience sexual violence. Furthermore, the recent lawsuit raised by 31 complainants against UC Berkeley tells us that there are long-standing issues with how survivors are (not) supported on campus. This is unacceptable and preventable.

According to the CDC, sexual violence "is any sexual act that is perpetrated against someone’s will. Sexual violence encompasses a range of offenses, including a completed nonconsensual sex act (i.e., rape), an attempted nonconsensual sex act, abusive sexual contact (i.e., unwanted touching), and non-contact sexual abuse (e.g., threatened sexual violence, exhibitionism, verbal sexual harassment)." Sexual violence is an act of asserting unhealthy, unwelcome power and control over another person.

The circumstances surrounding the sexual violence that graduate students (as opposed to undergraduate students) experience on campus tend to be distinct in several ways:
1) Graduate students have less anonymity in reporting due to the smaller cohort sizes.
2) Graduate students may have a harder time reporting sexual violence perpetrated by a faculty member who has high amounts of power in determining said student’s academic/professional future.
3) Graduate students may not want to seek support from campus entities for fear of running into students they GSI for in those offices.
4) Graduate students are more likely to have had multiple exposures to sexual violence (given the higher average age) and therefore may have more exposures to poorly handled responses.

The Solution

Currently, UC Berkeley has some infrastructure in place to handle campus sexual violence. There is the University Health Services (that houses Social Services), Office for Prevention of Harassment and Discrimination (that houses the Title IX Officer), UC Police Department, Gender Equity Resource Center, Student Advocate’s Office, Center for Student Conduct, Ombudsperson, and Student Legal Services. There are also a number of campaigns and student groups currently addressing sexual violence on campus (e.g., Cal Consent Campaign, It’s On Us).

This year our objectives include
(1) collaborating with the newly hired confidential advocate, Mari Knuth-Bouracee, to strengthen her presence and resources on campus,
(2) bringing faculty voices and responsibility into the campus’ comprehensive plan for preventing and responding to sexual violence,
(3) supporting student activists who are experiencing burnout,
(4) sharing out lessons learned and best practices from Futures Without Violence’s National Conference on Health and Domestic Violence, and
(5) building institutional partnerships with campus entities to coordinate more effective and appropriate prevention and response efforts.
This year’s objectives fit into our long-term goal to see a campus where prevention is the primary focus because sexual violence occurs rarely but is routinely responded to appropriately and effectively when it does. Response would be a coordinated effort between campus and city entities that would reflect and exceed established best practices.

Campus Stakeholders

In order to create a campus where sexual violence is not committed nor condoned, absolutely everyone in the UC Berkeley community must actively promote and endorse practices that make healthy, respectful relationships and sexuality the norm. Faculty, staff, undergraduate students, and graduate students each play important and distinct roles in ensuring that we develop a campus free of sexual violence.

Currently, staff play a crucial role in changing the campus culture around sexual violence. Staff must ensure that appropriate policies are developed, implemented, and evaluated for effectiveness. In particular, we believe that Chancellor Nicholas Dirks and other senior administration must allocate due funding to support programmatic and staffing efforts to prevent and respond to sexual violence on campus. Staff directly working to prevent and respond to sexual violence, such as Denise Oldham (Title IX Officer) and Mari Knuth-Bouracee (Director of Sexual Violence Prevention and Student Advocacy), must advocate on behalf of their departments and constituencies. These roles should be routinely evaluated to ensure that staff are appropriately fulfilling their responsibilities, and action should be taken if they are not (e.g., additional training, removal).

In addition, faculty must ensure that their classrooms, research, and labs are free from sexual violence. They must actively create and defend physical and social spaces where sexual violence is not permitted while humbly evaluating how they contribute to those spaces. As the largest constituency on campus, undergraduate students must ensure that they act as positive bystanders to prevent potential sexual violence and support survivors, while also raising their voices to help keep a temperature on how our campus relates to sexual violence. Finally, graduate students must harness their unique position as both campus leaders and learners. They must they act as positive role models for the students in their classrooms, respectful colleagues with their fellow graduate student peers, and critical checkpoints with their faculty affiliates.