

Speaking Publicly About Sexual Assault on Campus



Seven Strategies for Senior Leaders



The Case for Speaking Up About Sexual Assault

When senior leaders speak publicly about sexual assault on campus, it demonstrates awareness of the issues and provides the opportunity to lead by example and affirm the institution's commitment to creating a safer campus environment for students.

By speaking proactively, you:

- Demonstrate institutional commitment to ending sexual assault
- Build goodwill with those on your campus and in the community
- Affirm a campus culture that doesn't tolerate sexual assault
- Model language for other college leaders to use
- Focus institutional attention, and resources, on the importance of prevention

In fact, institutions whose senior leaders shy away from communicating regularly about sexual assault are less likely to have comprehensive prevention and response practices in place or experience the positive shifts within the campus community necessary to reducing the prevalence of sexual violence on campus.

Higher education institutions have seen unprecedented student activism, media attention, legislative oversight, and enforcement actions focused on their prevention and response efforts. In keeping with growing expectations and increased scrutiny, it is critical that those in leadership positions take a proactive and vocal stance on the issue.

But how public a stance should campus leaders take in addressing sexual assault? While the answer to this question depends on needs and expectations of your institution's community, the truth is most campus leaders are not speaking up enough.

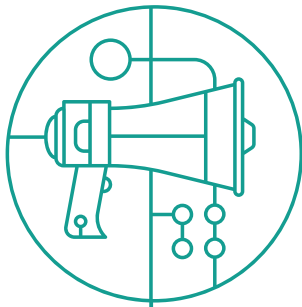
Only 25%

of college presidents issued four or more public communications on the topic of sexual assault in the 2017-18 academic year.

Nearly Half (45%)

of college and university presidents communicated publicly about this issue only once or not at all.

Public statements by campus leaders play a key role in shaping the internal priorities and external perceptions of their institutions. Read our seven strategies about speaking publicly on sexual assault to learn how to craft clear and effective messaging on this issue.



Seven Strategies for Speaking Publicly About Sexual Assault

- 1 Consult your campus experts
- 2 Understand your perspective and define your institution's position
- 3 Be intentional with your language
- 4 Talk about prevention early and often
- 5 Provide context with data and information
- 6 Share progress
- 7 Stand by your commitments

1

Consult with Your Campus Experts

Are you writing an email to share campus-wide? Speaking to the media? Delivering a keynote or address for the student body? Sending a tweet? Regardless of how you'll communicate, begin by going to the best-informed resources on your campus to help craft an effective prevention message.

Identify and communicate with faculty and staff members who have expertise and experience on the issue of sexual assault. Collaborate with your institution's subject matter experts and use their insights to inform your messaging.

Communicate Your Institution's Position on Sexual Violence

- **Health Promotion/Violence Prevention Professionals:** These individuals provide context to understand how the institution's violence prevention efforts are a part of a comprehensive health and wellness approach. The health promotion and violence prevention professionals can help you understand the prevention efforts your institution has undertaken previously, the evidence to support ongoing efforts, and the short- and long-term goals for the institution.
- **Title IX Coordinator:** This staff member understands the rate and trends of sexual assault on your campus. The Title IX coordinator stays up-to-date about how many reports your institution receives, the common trends on your campus, and your institution's process for responding and reporting.
- **Campus Advocates:** These individuals share data and trends regarding the use of institutional support services. Campus advocates articulate campus-specific experiences of students who have experienced harm and provide support in ensuring messaging is trauma-informed.
- **Research Faculty:** These faculty members situate the institution's efforts within a broader background of sexual assault prevention and response efforts.

Ask the Right Questions:

Once you identify who to collaborate with, it's time to gather the right information. Asking your sexual assault and prevention experts the right questions will help you communicate most clearly about the issue.

- Focus on the 5 Ws and don't forget the H: Who? What? Where? When? Why? And how? Answer as many questions related to the issue as you can to deliver a comprehensive message.
- Seek to understand the attitudes and beliefs in your community, and stay informed of recent events on campus. Use this information to craft messaging that reflects a deep and accurate understanding of your campus community.
- Anticipate potential resistance or opposition. Despite your best efforts, there are those who may be critical about your message. Think about the questions naysayers may have when you're preparing your message. Develop written responses to those questions, or, if appropriate, address the issues in your communication.

2

Understand Your Perspective and Define Your Institution's Position

Make sure you know where you stand personally on the issue before communicating publicly about it. Know exactly what the position and priorities of your institution are regarding the issue as well. Most importantly, understand where your personal opinion and your institution's position overlap and diverge.

Communicate Your Institution's Position on Sexual Violence

When communicating as a college or university representative, make sure your statements are clear and align with your institution's policies and practices.

- Define your institution's stance on sexual assault at the beginning and end of the communication. Be sure to include why this is the position of the institution by answering the all-important question: What values of your institution's mission have led to this stance?
- Define the policies, programs, and initiatives currently in place to support your institution's stance and affirm that they are consistently enforced.
- If relevant, identify current shortcomings in the institution's work and communicate next steps to address the issue.
- Articulate a positive vision for the future and the steps your campus is taking to reach those goals.



3

Be Intentional with Your Language

Given the sensitive nature of issues related to sexual assault, it is important to choose your words carefully. Use positive, clear, and objective language when crafting your prevention messaging and reaffirm your institution's commitment to creating a safe and healthy environment for your community.



Use the Right Words and Avoid the Wrong Ones

- ✓ Keep your words supportive, compassionate, caring, and committed to ending sexual violence.
- ✓ Refrain from language that assumes or normalizes that sexual assault is an inevitable part of the higher education environment.
- ✓ Use more inclusive terms like “person” or “student” unless the specific sex or gender of an individual or group is central to the conversation.
- ✓ Refrain from language that assumes or normalizes a certain sexual orientation, particularly statements that marginalize individuals who do not identify as heterosexual.
- ✓ Stay away from statements or language that justifies or minimizes an unacceptable behavior, shifts the blame to the harmed student, or denies or minimizes a student’s experience of victimization. For example, avoid statements like “sometimes students regret sexual activity and call it assault” or “students can’t protect themselves when they drink too much.”

4

Talk About Prevention Early and Often

While many schools have invested heavily in response-related initiatives, the solution to ending sexual assault ultimately lies in prevention. Communicating about sexual assault prevention early and often signals that the issue is a top priority for campus leaders. Providing regular updates about the institution's investments in this area demonstrates genuine commitment to prevention.

Below are a few strategies for integrating messaging about sexual assault into your campus communications:



Speak about the issue during a formal public address such as convocation.



Release an annual prevention report.



Commend the positive and proactive work that your staff is doing.



Celebrate progress toward your prevention goals.



Acknowledge a student group that is working on the issue.



Even short emails and tweets highlighting ongoing efforts can be incredibly meaningful for students, faculty, and staff.

5

Provide Context with Data

Your message should provide context so that your audience knows why you're communicating about sexual assault in the first place. When you don't provide context, your audience has more questions than answers and they're left guessing the purpose of your message. You can help educate your audience, justify the work you're planning to do, or spread awareness about the scope of the issue when you:



Share what is happening in your community. Consult with those who work directly with students and make yourself aware of anything that may impact how your message is received.

Communicate specific statistics referenced in your institution's annual Campus Safety and Security Report or Campus Climate Survey Report data, ongoing plans for prevention efforts on campus, and upcoming opportunities for students, faculty and staff to get involved.



Recognize that many of the sexual assaults that occur on campus are never reported. As such, numbers like Clery statistics may not paint the most complete picture.

6

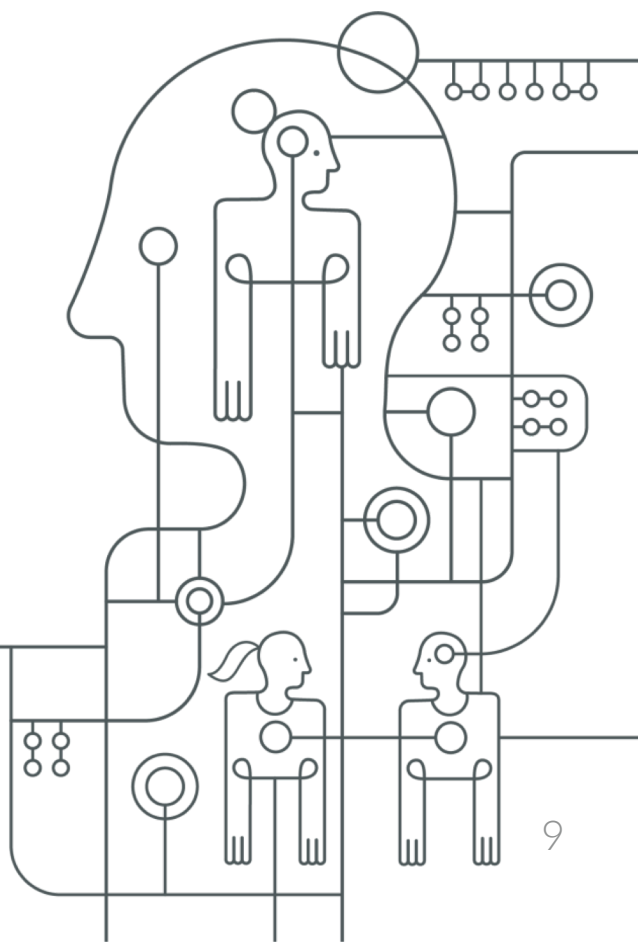
Share Progress

By being proactive with your messaging, rather than waiting for an incident to happen, you can highlight the ongoing work that's taking place in your community to end sexual assault. This type of communication demonstrates transparency and builds goodwill.

Effective progress-focused messages:

- Highlight the successes of the individuals on your campus who are working hard to support survivors, educate the community, and eliminate sexual assault.
- Describe your current prevention efforts and goals for your campus.
- Talk about education programs you are currently implementing, volunteer opportunities in the community, and available resources for student, faculty and staff in need of assistance.
- Acknowledge that most college students already have healthy attitudes and behaviors regarding the issue of sexual assault.
- Recognize that the vast majority of students want to have healthy relationships, and live and learn in a healthy and safe community.
- Tailor communications to engage students as part of the solution.

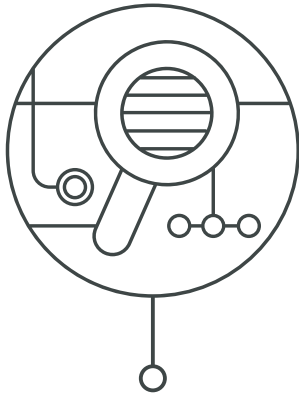
While sexual assault is a serious issue, your proactive messaging gives you the opportunity to communicate your institution's positive efforts to end sexual assault in your community.



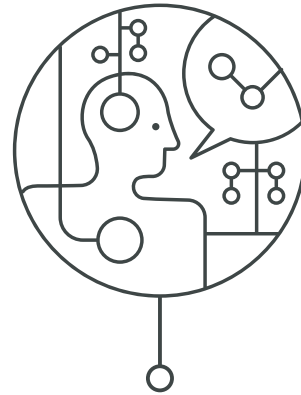
7

Stand By Your Commitments

Prospective and current students, parents, alumni, trustees, and legislators are becoming more aware of the issue of sexual assault on college campuses. Be prepared to follow through on any commitments you make on behalf of the institution by providing the leadership and resources necessary to support your intended outcomes.



Before making public statements, review your communications to identify any promises or planned actions. Where you do make a commitment, be prepared to share a plan or outline the next steps for action.



Once a commitment is made, keep your community updated on how your plan is being executed. When you provide regular updates, you show the community your commitment to ending sexual assault.



Conclusion

Consistent and ongoing institutional support is critical to ending sexual violence on campus. As a senior leader, you play a critical role in ensuring that prevention efforts are a top institutional priority. Communicating publicly and frequently about sexual assault shows that you're serious about your prevention efforts.



EVERFI, Inc. is the leading provider of enterprise technology powering prevention education, data analytics, and research for 1,500 higher education institutions. Serving more than 5 million learners annually, EVERFI helps its college and university partners create safer, healthier, and more inclusive campus communities. Through online prevention education and compliance training, policy and program guidance, professional development, data insights and performance benchmarking, EVERFI delivers solutions that make colleges and universities great places to live, learn, and work.

Seven Strategies for Speaking Publicly About Sexual Assault

When leaders communicate about sexual assault, it demonstrates a genuine commitment to the issue and garners goodwill within the community. Follow these seven strategies to craft clear, effective communication about ending sexual violence on campus.

1

Consult with Your Campus Experts

Seek input from sexual assault and prevention experts in your community to understand key trends at your institution and across the nation. In addition to data about the issue, they can also provide valuable insight into community opinions and offer guidance about how to navigate sensitive areas, choose the best language, and identify potential areas of resistance.

2

Understand Your Perspective and Define Your Institution's Position

Your personal opinions and understanding of the issue may not be the same as your institution's position and policies. Make sure you understand where these overlap and diverge in order to clearly and consistently communicate your institution's perspective on the issue.

3

Be Intentional with Your Language

Keep your words supportive, compassionate and caring by avoiding victim-blaming and using inclusive terms like 'person' and 'student' rather than sex- or gender-specific terms. Affirm your institution's commitment to ending sexual violence on campus.

4

Talk About Prevention Early and Often

When senior leaders talk about an issue publicly and commit to taking action, it sends a signal to the community that it is an institutional priority. Demonstrate your commitment to ending sexual assault by keeping the community up-to-date on your prevention efforts.

5

Provide Context with Data and Information

Provide context so that your audience knows why you're communicating about sexual assault. Use data and information to educate your audience about the scope of the issue and promote the work you're doing to address the issue.

6

Share Progress

Proactive messaging gives you the opportunity to communicate about the ongoing efforts to end sexual assault on your campus. Keep your community up to date by sharing the impact of existing prevention efforts, promoting new education programs, describing the resources available for those in need of assistance, and highlighting opportunities to get involved with the issue.

7

Stand by Your Commitments

Before making public statements, review your communications to identify any promises or planned actions. Where you do make a commitment, be prepared to share a plan or outline the next steps for action.

