Key Findings from the #iSPEAK Focus Groups: Results of the Rutgers University—New Brunswick Campus Climate Assessment

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Focus Group Key Findings: A Summary

Below are the main findings from the 21 focus groups with 179 students conducted as a part of the #iSPEAK campus climate assessment on the Rutgers University—New Brunswick campus. The full report follows.

- Many students defined “sexual assault” as related to either obtaining consent and/or a physical act.
  - Several focus group members seemed to believe that “sexual assault” and “sexual harassment” were equivalent.
  - Many focus group participants learned about sexual assault before coming to campus through their primary school education or the media.

- Alcohol and drug use were identified by students as main factors that facilitate sexual violence among students.
  - The role of alcohol and drugs in sexual assault was identified as a “gray area” for some students wherein alcohol and drug use within situations of sexual assault make consent and what constitutes an assault difficult to determine.

- A majority of students stated that sexual violence was a problem on campus.
  - Many students knew a peer or friend who had been sexually assaulted or heard of a sexual assault occurring on campus.
  - Generally, focus group participants had mixed viewpoints on how Rutgers University—New Brunswick responds to incidents of sexual assault with some reporting a positive impression of the university and others reporting a negative impression.
  - Many students were unaware of university policies related to sexual assault.

- Frequently, students reported that during their studies at Rutgers University—New Brunswick, they had received at least some education about sexual assault.
  - Students often learned about sexual assault through campus crime alerts or SCREAM Theater—a bystander intervention program.
  - Many focus group participants recognized the Office for Violence Prevention and Victim Assistance, Rutgers Counseling and Psychiatric Services, and the Rutgers University Police Department as resources for sexual violence.

- Many students discussed bystander intervention as a form of promising sexual violence prevention.
  - Some focus group participants acted as a helpful bystander while on campus.
  - Barriers to intervening as a bystander include: physical safety concerns; feeling uncomfortable; and/or feeling unsure about the situation.
Introduction

Recently the nationwide problem of sexual violence on college campuses emerged as a national priority. The White House Task Force to Protect Students from Sexual Assault released its report, Not Alone, as part of a larger response to the issue of sexual violence. The White House Task Force and the U.S. Department of Justice’s Office on Violence Against Women invited the Rutgers School of Social Work’s Center on Violence Against Women and Children (VAWC) to pilot a campus climate survey regarding students’ experiences, behaviors, and attitudes related to sexual violence on campus. In an effort to fully engage students on the subject of sexual violence and increase survey participation, VAWC branded the study as “#iSPEAK” and conducted an extensive outreach campaign in conjunction with the survey. Researchers from VAWC also conducted focus groups as part of this campus climate assessment.

In the 2014-2015 academic year, Rutgers University—New Brunswick implemented a comprehensive campus climate assessment process that consisted of three major components: 1) a resource audit of available campus resources on sexual violence, 2) campus climate survey, and 3) focus groups with students. For more information on the resource audit or the campus climate survey, including the results, please visit the VAWC website: https://socialwork.rutgers.edu/centers/center-violence-against-women-and-children/research-and-evaluation/understanding-and

The focus groups were held after the resource audit and survey as a way to gather more in-depth information about the issue of sexual violence as a whole, as well as particular dynamics on the Rutgers University—New Brunswick campus. A total of 21 focus groups were conducted with 179 participants. Students from both the general student body and specific subsets of the student population were invited to participate in the focus groups. The findings in this report are general, broad findings that were discovered across groups. Subsets of the student body included groups of athletes; students from fraternities and sororities; resident assistants; student government representatives; sexual assault survivors; lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) students; and those associated with cultural centers. Because these groups differ in their risk factors for both sexual violence victimization and perpetration and specific groups of students might be underrepresented in the survey sample, the research team felt it was important to hear from these students in the focus groups.
Participants & Procedures

In order to gain a variety of perspectives on the issue of sexual violence and the campus climate and culture at Rutgers University—New Brunswick, two different sampling methods were used. First, for thirteen focus groups, participants were recruited through differing student groups (numbered 1-7 in Table 1). Participants for each of these groups were directly recruited through a University affiliate who worked with the student population. An additional eight focus groups (numbered 8 and 9 in Table 1) were conducted with the general student population. Participants for these groups were recruited through a mass email sent by the Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs as well as postings to University affiliated websites. Students interested in participating were directed to a website where they could sign up; over 750 undergraduate and graduate students signed up to join one of the focus groups. For each timeslot, 15-20 students were randomly selected and invited to attend the focus group.

Questions addressed during the focus groups included the following broad topic areas: 1) students’ sense of connection to Rutgers University—New Brunswick and the campus as a whole; 2) impressions of the #iSPEAK campaign, including the outreach campaign designed to encourage students to participate in the campus climate survey; 3) general thoughts about sexual assault, including how the term is defined by students; 4) views on factors leading to risk of sexual assault victimization and perpetration at Rutgers University—New Brunswick; 5) knowledge of resources and policies for sexual violence; 6) students’ willingness to serve as prosocial bystanders; and 7) opinions regarding sexual assault prevention measures. Participants drawn from the subset of the student body who belong to specific student groups were asked additional questions regarding how their student group addresses sexual violence.

Audio files of the 21 focus groups were transcribed verbatim by researchers affiliated with VAWC over a two month time period. Concurrently, four VAWC researchers developed the coding scheme for content analysis of the focus group data. The coding scheme was developed through a series of iterative rounds of coding, comparisons, and recoding. Twenty-four percent (n=5) of the transcripts were double coded to ensure inter-coder reliability. All coding was done in ATLAS.ti (version 7) coding software.

Table 1 shows the type of focus groups conducted as well as the number of students who attended these groups. A majority of the students (84%) who participated were undergraduate students and approximately half of the participants (56%) were female. Other demographic characteristics of the student participants are found in Table 2.
Table 1. Focus Groups Types

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Group</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Number of Groups</th>
<th>Number of Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Athletes</td>
<td>Female(1), Male(1), Mixed(1)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Cultural Centers</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Greek Organizations</td>
<td>Female(1), Male(1)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 LGBT</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Resident Assistants</td>
<td>Female(2), Male(1)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Sexual Assault Survivors</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Student Government</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 General Undergraduates</td>
<td>Female(3), Male(3)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 Graduate Students</td>
<td>Female(1), Male(1)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>21</strong></td>
<td><strong>179</strong></td>
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Table 2. Focus Group Participant Demographics

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<th>(n=177)²</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>n</td>
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<td>%</td>
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**Class**

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<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Undergraduate</td>
<td>148</td>
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<tr>
<td>Graduate</td>
<td>23</td>
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**Race**

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<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
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<tr>
<td>Asian American</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>21</td>
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**Latino**

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<th></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>38</td>
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</table>

**Gender Identity**

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<table>
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<tr>
<th></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Man</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Another</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Disability Status**

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¹ This table also appears in the report on the campus climate survey results. For more information, please view the report on our website: [https://socialwork.rutgers.edu/centers/center-violence-against-women-and-children/research-and-evaluation/understanding-and](https://socialwork.rutgers.edu/centers/center-violence-against-women-and-children/research-and-evaluation/understanding-and)

² Two focus group participants did not fill out a demographic form; not all participants answered all questions so numbers and percentages may not add up to 100%.
### Results

Content analysis of the focus groups examined broad, overarching themes based on the questions asked within the focus group guide. For this analysis and summary report, the findings are reported from all (n=21) of the focus groups held at Rutgers University—New Brunswick. The main findings are listed below.

1. **Many students defined “sexual assault” as related to either obtaining consent and/or a physical act.** Some focus group members discussed that sexual assault might be a verbal act, seemingly confusing the term “sexual assault” with “sexual harassment.” Alternatively, some students viewed sexual assault along a continuum of sexual violence in which hostile verbal remarks are viewed as part of sexual violence along with physical acts. For example, when asked to define sexual assault, a female sorority member said, “I would say it would [be] any unwanted sexual contact, whether it be verbal or physical, that continues after the other person requests to stop.” Students within the focus groups reported learning about sexual assault predominately in their primary school education or through the media (e.g., the TV show *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit*). However, some students reported not hearing about sexual assault until they arrived on the Rutgers—New Brunswick campus. A female undergraduate student said,

   *Everything that I’ve learned about it [sexual assault] before coming here was through YouTube and like these YouTubers that would talk about it . . . . But I didn’t really know exactly what it [sexual assault] was, and exactly what it represented until I came here [Rutgers University—New Brunswick] which I think is great. But definitely high school didn’t even talk about sexual assault as much as it did like drugs, alcohol.*

Similarly, on the campus climate survey, over half (61%) of all students who took the survey reported receiving some information or education about sexual assault before coming to Rutgers—New Brunswick.

2. **Alcohol and drug use were identified by students as main factors that facilitate sexual violence among students.** Some students appeared confused as to what constitutes sexual
assault, especially related to the role of alcohol and drugs. This is correlated to the theme of sexual assault being in a “gray area,” which was articulated in several focus groups. This theme was captured by an undergraduate female student who said, “I think there is a strong tie between alcohol and sexual assault at Rutgers and just how the party culture is. It’s like enabling in a lot of ways for sexual assault to happen and people don’t see it as assault because there’s that perception; that it’s a grey area.” Additionally, both substance use and power dynamics were thought of as major causes of sexual violence in society at large, not at Rutgers University—New Brunswick in particular. Speaking to ideas of causal factors for sexual violence, a male athlete said “I think people catch other people when they’re most vulnerable. So it’s at a party and somebody's drunk. Or somebody put a roofie or something in somebody's drink. You know they try to take advantage of a person so that's what their mindset is.” On the campus climate survey, students were not asked about their perception of the causes of sexual violence, however, a majority of assaults occurred when the victim and/or perpetrator were under the influence of drugs or alcohol.

3. **A majority of students stated that sexual violence was a problem on campus.** A question on the campus climate survey asked students to rate their agreement with the statement “I don’t think sexual violence is a problem at Rutgers.” A majority (61%) of all students either felt that statement was “not true at all” or “not true.” In the focus groups, many students reported that they personally knew or had heard of a student who experienced sexual assault. Speaking on this topic, a female athlete reported,

> I think that it's [sexual violence] definitely a problem [at Rutgers University—New Brunswick]. I know multiple people who have encountered sexual assault, whether it's something extreme or just someone grabbing their ass at a party or something; it's just unwanted things happening to people.

The survey results indicate that one in five students had a peer disclose to them that they had been a victim of sexual violence.

Overall, students had mixed feelings about how the university responds to incidents of sexual assault. Some students reported a positive perception and others reported a negative perception of how the university has responded to a sexual violence incident. For example, many students felt that Rutgers University—New Brunswick offers suitable resources for sexual violence prevention and response and that the university administration addresses the issue as best they can while taking it seriously. A female resident assistant articulated this theme,

> I think that Rutgers tries to [address sexual violence], especially VPVA [Violence Prevention and Victim Assistance], as much as they can because it’s such a great resource for those
that are willing to go there to get help. But the problem is, letting people know we have the resources available and then encouraging them to get that kind of help if they want it.

Conversely, several students discussed campus investigations into sexual assault taking too long; accused the university of not appropriately punishing perpetrators of sexual violence; or feeling that the administration did not adequately address the issue. Of the focus group participants who spoke about sexual assault policies, a majority were not aware of specific policies with regard to the issue. One female undergraduate student, when asked about sexual assault policies at Rutgers-New Brunswick, replied, “I assumed that there would be some policies but I have no idea what they are.”

4. Frequently, students reported that during their studies at Rutgers—New Brunswick, they had received at least some education about sexual assault. In the focus groups, students were asked about what types of services they knew about on campus related to sexual violence. When discussing the Rutgers University—New Brunswick campus and sexual assault, many students referenced the crime alerts sent out by campus police and SCREAM Theater—a bystander intervention program on campus—as the methods by which they became aware of sexual violence as an issue on campus. As one focus group participant stated, “We learn a lot from the criminal alert[s]. It’s always reported. It’s kind of annoying but it’s happens almost every month, usually saying really late on [sic] night at Friday or Saturday girls just were groped.” In terms of resources for sexual violence, often students identified the Office for Violence Prevention and Victim Assistance (VPVA), Rutgers Counseling and Psychiatric Services (CAPS), and the Rutgers University Police Department (RUPD). When asked where students might go to access resources for sexual violence, a female athlete stated, “If something like this happened to me I feel like I'd be most comfortable going to CAPS or VPVA just because I know they're not gonna go and tell someone, they're just gonna help me find the best option for the situation that I'm in.”

On the campus climate survey, students were most aware of Rutgers—New Brunswick Health Services and CAPS. Fewer students reported being aware of VPVA and SCREAM; RUPD was not asked about within the survey. These similar yet different findings from the focus groups and survey might be in part due to how the question was asked. The survey asked about awareness of specific services, while in the focus groups, students were asked open-ended questions about sexual violence services.

5. Many students discussed bystander intervention as a form of promising sexual violence prevention. When asked how Rutgers University—New Brunswick can prevent sexual violence, students cited existing efforts through VPVA, including SCREAM’s bystander intervention training
as a starting point. Perhaps as a result of this bystander intervention training, some students reported acting as a helpful bystander during their time at Rutgers University—New Brunswick. Many of the students who did act as a bystander reported doing so in situations that involved alcohol. In these situations, often students simply asked “are you okay?” or pulled their friends aside to check in with them. For example, a female athlete stated, “Whenever I see someone that I know leaving with someone else that I don't know who the person is, I always ask them, are you sure that’s where you want to go?” Other students reported witnessing events on campus where they could have stepped in as bystanders, but did not for a variety of reasons. Barriers to acting as a prosocial bystander identified by students included concerns about physical safety; feeling uncomfortable if they did not personally know the student(s); and/or feeling unsure about the situation at hand if, for example, the parties are a couple or are both interested in each other. For example, a male undergraduate said “One barrier [to acting as a bystander] would be that or it could be that they are, you know, in a relationship and or you're not sure . . . . You don't [want to] create [an] extra scene in that the guy will feel insulted and try to attack you for interfering.” During the survey, only 35% of students reported intervening in a situation when presented with the opportunity to do so. However, a majority of students were willing to intervene, prevent, or respond to sexual violence in the future as seen on the Bystander Attitude scale of the survey.

**Conclusions**

The focus groups conducted by researchers at Rutgers University—New Brunswick were part of a larger campus climate assessment. The findings reported here are a summary only. Additional information about the larger campus climate study, including how these focus group results fit into the larger Campus Climate Survey results can be found on our website [https://socialwork.rutgers.edu/centers/center-violence-against-women-and-children/research-and-evaluation/understanding-and](https://socialwork.rutgers.edu/centers/center-violence-against-women-and-children/research-and-evaluation/understanding-and). Overall, the findings reported from the focus groups reflect what was found in the Campus Climate Survey. However, additional insight and nuance is added to the study results through these small group discussions with students.

In conjunction with the campus climate survey administered at Rutgers University—New Brunswick, the results from the focus groups present an integrated description of how students perceive sexual violence on their campus. The major findings from the focus groups are supported by the campus climate survey results as summarized in the findings section of this report. Taken together, the focus group and survey data indicate that students perceive sexual violence as a problem on campus and might be lacking a complete understanding of what sexual violence entails and of the full range of resources available on campus in relation to sexual
violence. This presents an opportunity to capitalize on students’ awareness of the issue of sexual violence to further educate the student body on the resources available on campus.
For More Information

Details about the campus climate assessment can be found on the website of the Rutgers’ Center on Violence Against Women and Children, at http://vawc.rutgers.edu.

Email the research team (Principal Investigator Sarah McMahon and research team members Julia O’Connor and Julia Cusano) at campusclimatestudy@ssw.rutgers.edu.

The research team at the Center on Violence Against Women and Children is compiling a resource for higher education institutions embarking on campus climate assessments. Understanding and Responding to Campus Sexual Assault: A Guide for Colleges and Universities (https://socialwork.rutgers.edu/node/963) documents methodological issues for consideration, lessons learned, and recommendations across dimensions of the campus climate assessment process, including: fostering campus collaborations, conducting a resource audit, conducting a student survey, collecting qualitative data, and developing an action plan.

To speak confidentially with a trained advocate or counselor, contact Rutgers’ Office for Violence Prevention and Victim Assistance 24 hours a day, 7 days a week at 848-932-1181. Services are free and confidential to all members of the Rutgers community.

For assistance outside of Rutgers, please visit the New Jersey Coalition Against Sexual Assault (http://njcasa.org) or the Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network (https://rainn.org).