



Spring 2021

## Perceptions of Bystander Intervention: Surveying Students' Relationship to Sexual Misconduct

Emma G. Padrick  
*Gettysburg College*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/student\\_scholarship](https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/student_scholarship)



Part of the [Domestic and Intimate Partner Violence Commons](#), [Gender and Sexuality Commons](#), [Law and Gender Commons](#), and the [Public Policy Commons](#)

**Share feedback** about the accessibility of this item.

---

### Recommended Citation

Padrick, Emma G., "Perceptions of Bystander Intervention: Surveying Students' Relationship to Sexual Misconduct" (2021). *Student Publications*. 945.  
[https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/student\\_scholarship/945](https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/student_scholarship/945)

This is the author's version of the work. This publication appears in Gettysburg College's institutional repository by permission of the copyright owner for personal use, not for redistribution. Cupola permanent link:  
[https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/student\\_scholarship/945](https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/student_scholarship/945)

This open access student research paper is brought to you by The Cupola: Scholarship at Gettysburg College. It has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator of The Cupola. For more information, please contact [cupola@gettysburg.edu](mailto:cupola@gettysburg.edu).

---

# Perceptions of Bystander Intervention: Surveying Students' Relationship to Sexual Misconduct

## Abstract

Bystander intervention education programs have become increasingly popular as a tool for the primary prevention of sexual violence at institutions of higher education (IHEs). Emerging research surrounding bystander intervention on college campuses reveals promising results, yet there is limited extant research exploring how students perceive bystander intervention as a tool to protect themselves and their peers. Students over the age of 18 at a small, private, liberal arts IHE in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States with approximately 2,600 students were surveyed to assess knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors related to bystander intervention. Students demonstrated a willingness to intervene and a sense of community and responsibility that proves promising for bystander intervention. Students also demonstrated a significant disparity in the level of knowledge, awareness, and behavior when it came to actual intervention. These mixed results reflect the variety of conclusions drawn in prior research regarding program effectiveness and changing actions of students in situations of potential sexual misconduct and contribute to a growing body of research surrounding primary prevention of sexual misconduct at IHEs.

## Keywords

sexual misconduct, primary prevention of sexual misconduct, sexual misconduct at institutions of higher education, bystander intervention education programs

## Disciplines

Domestic and Intimate Partner Violence | Gender and Sexuality | Law and Gender | Public Policy

## Comments

Written for PP 401: Public Policy Capstone

# **Perceptions of Bystander Intervention: Surveying Students' Relationship to Sexual Misconduct**

**Emma Padrick**

Bystander intervention education programs have become increasingly popular as a tool for the primary prevention of sexual violence at institutions of higher education (IHEs). Emerging research surrounding bystander intervention on college campuses reveals promising results, yet there is limited extant research exploring how students perceive bystander intervention as a tool to protect themselves and their peers. Students over the age of 18 at a small, private, liberal arts IHE in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States with approximately 2,600 students were surveyed to assess knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors related to bystander intervention. Students demonstrated a willingness to intervene and a sense of community and responsibility that proves promising for bystander intervention. Students also demonstrated a significant disparity in the level of knowledge, awareness, and behavior when it came to actual intervention. These mixed results reflect the variety of conclusions drawn in prior research regarding program effectiveness and changing actions of students in situations of potential sexual misconduct and contribute to a growing body of research surrounding primary prevention of sexual misconduct at IHEs.

## **I. Institutions of Higher Education: A Ripe Environment for Sexual Misconduct**

Sexual misconduct is a significant issue at institutions of higher education (IHEs). Particular aspects of college campuses result in a veritable Petri dish for sexual violence that indicates a clear need for a comprehensive policy response. These traits include early adulthood, alcohol use, multiple sexual partners, and strong peer socialization that contribute to high rates of perpetration and victimization (Lichty et al., 2008, p. 6). The data supports this; roughly 1 in 5 undergraduate women experience attempted or completed sexual assault during their time at IHEs, and 90% of victims know the perpetrator (Duncan, 2014). In contrast, 1 in 6 women of the same age will be victimized in the general population (Wade, 2014).

Victims of sexual assault are affected long after the incident, as they can experience a myriad of complications from shock, anxiety, and depression to substance abuse, suicidal thoughts, and loss of self-esteem, which may negatively affect academic performance, class attendance, and involvement on campus. In some cases, it may lead to withdrawing from school or transferring to another IHE (Duncan, 2014, p. 446). Further, women who have experienced sexual assault on average have a lower grade-point average than those who have not, reinforcing this negative correlation between victimization and academic performance (Moynan, 2017).

Men, too, experience sexual violence, but at statistically lower rates. Roughly 4% of men experience victimization, largely by other men (Wade, 2014). However, studies have discovered that multiple risk factors put women in IHEs in particular danger of sexual assault. Large concentrations of undergraduate women come into contact with undergraduate men in a variety of public and private places on college campuses. Specifically, social gatherings involving an abundance of alcohol and substances that lead to incapacitation are prevalent (Schroeder, 2013). A 2016 study revealed that between 78% and 88% of rape victims at IHEs were under the

influence of alcohol and 66% were so intoxicated that they did not have a clear memory of the incident. The majority of perpetrators were also under the influence (Moorman & Osborne, 2016). These conditions provide a ripe environment for sexual misconduct, revealing the need for preventative measures and appropriate policy responses (Padrick, 2020). Further, these statistics highlight the role of students at IHEs as stakeholders and the short- and long-term impacts on their wellbeing.

The U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights has attempted to address this need through federal legislation; the Jeanne Clery Disclosure of Campus Security Policy and Campus Crime Statistics Act and the Campus Sexual Violence Elimination (SaVE) Act both seek to ensure that college campuses are environments where students can focus on their studies instead of the mental and physical exhaustion from abuse (Schroeder, 2013). The intimate nature of the issue and tangible threats to student well-being demonstrate the need for preventative policy that impedes sexual violence from transpiring before it occurs.

Bystander intervention approaches have become increasingly popular as a tool for doing just this (McMahon and Banyard, 2012). The Campus SaVE Act requires the implementation of campus-wide sexual violence prevention education and awareness programs; bystander intervention education is included in this (Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network, 2019). This education strategy frames sexual misconduct as a community-wide issue that can be prevented by community members prior to occurrence. Education programs seek to increase student awareness of bystander intervention opportunities, develop skills to intervene, and increase self-awareness about situations of sexual misconduct (McMahon, 2015).

Emerging research surrounding bystander intervention on college campuses reveals promising results; reports of increased participation in prevention and increased willingness to

intervene in situations of misconduct suggest that this strategy is effective and well-received. However, there is limited extant research exploring how students perceive bystander intervention as a tool to protect themselves and their peers (McMahon et al., 2018). Subsequently, this research seeks to answer the following question: *what are student perceptions of bystander intervention in situations of potential sexual misconduct?*

## **II. Bystander Intervention Education Programs**

### What are Bystander Intervention Education Programs?

Bystander intervention education (also referred to as training) programs train potential bystanders to intervene in situations where sexual misconduct could occur (Bennett et al., 2014). The goal is to help students recognize situations that lead to sexual violence and teach them how to intervene safely and effectively (Coker et al., 2011). Lynch and Fleming (2005) articulate that to effectively intervene, bystanders must be able to recognize that an issue is occurring, understand the potential negative outcomes, and identify tools to intervene. The goal of bystander training is to help students feel comfortable with these steps; Lynch and Fleming (2005) assert that students must also understand that they are part of a system that contributes to perpetration in order to take responsibility and initiate change (p. 29).

*Bystander intervention and theory.* Primary prevention methods aim to prevent sexual misconduct from occurring before it transpires; this contrasts with secondary and tertiary methods, which react to sexual violence during or after its occurrence (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2004). Bystander intervention can present in many forms, including preventing a situation from escalating, supporting a victim, or calling for help (Bennett et al., 2014, p. 477). Although bystanders can intervene in secondary and tertiary prevention, the primary goal is to prevent a situation before it arises or escalates.

Bystander intervention is further rooted in theory. The socioecological framework is an integrated, comprehensive framework with which to guide primary prevention efforts and address the systemic, social roots of sexual violence. The model is comprised of four levels: individual, relationship, community, and society (Casey and Lindhorst, 2009; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2004). Bystander intervention focuses on the community level to engage members of a community – for example, an IHE – to prevent sexual violence (McMahon et al., 2017).

In theory, empowering students to safely intervene in situations of sexual misconduct encourages community-building and critical thinking about social norms that contribute to perpetration and victimization (McMahon and Banyard, 2012). Research suggests that bystander models of intervention increase community receptivity and support for prevention, which in turn reduces implicit societal structures that support perpetration (Banyard et al., 2004). Bystander intervention training also engages students on the individual level by addressing personal attitudes and behaviors; the goal of increasing student awareness of bystander opportunities and developing skills to intervene safely and effectively empowers individuals to engage at the community level (McMahon et al., 2015)

*Program format and content.* Bystander training programs can take shape in different ways and vary in terms of length, format, and targeted demographic. Content varies between different programs but largely centers around educating students on rape myths, what intervening as a bystander means, how to overcome barriers to intervention, and examples of when and how it is appropriate to intervene (McMahon et al., 2018, p. 3). Bystander intervention diverges from other forms of sexual misconduct education programs directed at students, which approach students as either “potential perpetrators or victims of sexual violence” (Kettrey and Marx, 2020,

p. 3). Instead of treating students as part of the problem, these programs empower students to be a part of the solution; this in turn serves to prevent defensive responses or backlash from participants (Kettrey and Marx, 2020, p. 3).

*Timing.* Implementation of these programs varies across institutions with varying results. Some IHEs train all students, while other IHEs target particular demographics such as student athletes, members of Greek Life, or first-year students (Coker et al., 2011). The most common time to employ training is during new student orientation as studies show that students are most vulnerable to sexual misconduct in their first few weeks at IHEs; however, this presents several challenges (Franklin et al., 2017). New students are inundated with information during orientation and therefore it is difficult for them to retain the tools provided by bystander training. Further, new students are not familiar with the campus culture and are less able to apply their knowledge to the campus community (Amar et al., 2014). Research has also indicated that repeated exposure to bystander training leads to higher retention rates (McMahon et al., 2018). Subsequently, IHEs that provide information to students repeatedly throughout their time on campus see an increase in student awareness (Amar et al., 2014).

*Who intervenes?* There is evidence that certain characteristics lead individuals to be more likely to intervene in situations of sexual misconduct. Franklin et al. (2017) assert that individuals with extroverted personalities are more likely to intervene. Similarly, those who have experienced prior victimization are more willing to step in (Franklin et al., 2017). Gender is also believed to be related to intervention, as research indicates that women are more likely to intervene in situations of sexual misconduct than men (Bennett et al., 2014). Similarly, Brown et al. (2014) find that women are more likely to intervene in subtle, non-confrontational ways, while men are more likely to respond assertively or aggressively. Peer and social norms are also



important indicators of intervention; studies have found that perceptions of peer support for intervention and prevention of sexual violence are strongly correlated to student willingness to intervene (Brown et al., 2014).

*Barriers to intervention.* In a study of 242 first-year college students, Bennett et al. (2014) find that certain characteristics present as barriers for students to intervene. In their study, shyness, fear of being perceived negatively by peers, failure to notice a situation in need of intervention, and lack of skills to intervene are the most commonly cited barriers to intervention (Bennett et al., 2014). Another challenge is the diffusion of responsibility. Known as the “bystander effect”, this concept articulates that individuals are less likely to respond to a situation when others are present because each individual assumes someone else will take action (Coker et al., 2011).

How a student perceives their role in the situation is also key to indicating who will intervene. Katz et al. (2018) find that bystanders who feel a low level of personal responsibility to intervene are less likely to do so. Subsequently, Katz et al. argue that education programs must normalize intervention in order to overcome this barrier (2018). Identity matters as well; McMahon et al. (2020) consulted the perspectives of approximately 100 students who identified as a race other than white and those who identified as a member of the LGBTQ+ community. Respondents articulated that a significant barrier to intervening in situations of potential sexual misconduct was fear of experiencing racism, homophobia, transphobia, and microaggressions (2020).

*Program limitations.* Just because an individual is willing to intervene does not mean they do so; this can be attributed to many different factors including not knowing how to respond or fear of escalating a situation (McMahon et al., 2017). According to Murphy (2017), bystander

intervention programs are limited in that they perpetuate the idea that victims need to be saved, fail to address underlying and societal issues that lead to victimization and perpetration, and shift responsibility from offending students to non-offending students. Another critique is that bystander programs are limited in their inclusion of diverse perspectives and focus on a largely white, cisgender, and heterosexual experience (McMahon et al., 2020).

### Are Bystander Intervention Programs Effective?

*Bystander intervention programs change attitudes.* Extant literature agrees that bystander intervention education programs increase positive attitudes related to sexual violence and increase willingness to intervene (McMahon, 2015; McMahon et al., 2017). Lynch and Fleming (2005) studied 1104 students participating in a bystander program and found that training was effective at increasing student awareness, understanding of content, and confidence in engaging in bystander intervention. In a qualitative study of 498 students, McMahon et al. (2018) found similar results; program participants demonstrated increased awareness of situations of sexual misconduct and changes in attitude about appropriate behaviors and the perpetuation of rape myths or sexually aggressive comments. The authors also discovered that although students expressed increased awareness of situations of potential misconduct, few expressed that they would feel comfortable intervening (McMahon et al., 2018).

Banyard et al. (2007) conducted a quantitative experiment of 389 undergraduate students to determine effectiveness; the authors randomly assigned students to a treatment group that participated in a bystander training program and a control group that did not. Participants in the treatment group demonstrated an increase in knowledge of sexual misconduct, a decrease in rape myth-supportive attitudes, and an increased awareness of bystander intervention opportunities. In contrast, the control group did not (Banyard et al., 2007). A cross-sectional survey of

approximately 2,500 undergraduate students conducted by Coker et al. (2011) found similar results. Students who had engaged in bystander training demonstrated a significantly lower rate of rape myth acceptance than students who did not participate in training. Elias-Lambert and Black (2015) focused specifically on fraternity men; in a small, quantitative study the authors administered a pre- and post-test among 142 participants and found that there was a significant decrease in acceptance of rape myths among program participants after they had participated in bystander training.

*There are mixed results about changing actions.* Extant literature has not reached a consensus regarding the effectiveness of bystander intervention training in changing student actions. Banyard et al.'s (2007) quantitative study presents promising data, as their results found that participants in the treatment group demonstrated an increase in self-reported bystander intervention over the following 12 months. It is important to note the limitation of self-reported data, however, as there is no way to verify its validity.

Three studies by Coker et al. (2011; 2015; 2016) found similar results regarding decreasing rates of sexual misconduct. Their 2011 survey study, referenced previously, found that students who had participated in training reported engaging in more bystander intervention activity than those who did not. Coker et al. (2016) surveyed over 8,000 students across three campuses, one of which implemented a bystander intervention program and two of which did not, and found that the campus with the program exhibited lower rates of sexual violence than the others. Although encouraging, this study is a reminder that correlation does not imply causation; myriad reasons for this comparison exist.

In a study that focused on first-year students at these three IHEs, Coker et al. (2016) compared rates of sexual violence between the campus with the program and the two without.

Similar results were reported; rates of sexual misconduct were 36% lower on the campus with the bystander program. The same issue is presented here; campuses were not randomized due to the nature of the study and there was no discussion of additional factors that contribute to lower rates of perpetration. Evans et al. (2019) present a compelling critique for Coker et al.'s studies, articulating that “none of the studies controlled for confounding variables that could interfere with the results” – for example, misconduct reporting processes, rates of alcohol consumption, and/or campus culture surrounding sexual misconduct (p. 81).

Gidycz et al. (2011), found contrasting results with Banyard et al. (2007) and Coker et al. (2011; 2015; 2016) in a study of 635 male students in their first year of undergraduate studies. The authors found that participants did not express a higher intention of intervention after participating in the bystander training program. Similarly, Kettrey and Marx (2020) conducted a systematic review of existing program evaluations to draw conclusions regarding bystander intervention at the systemic level. After conducting a meta-analysis of 19 studies, the authors found several significant patterns. Bystander training did not produce significant increases in the ability of participants to notice sexual misconduct occurring. Participants were able to identify a situation as in need of intervention directly after the program, but this decreased in the long term. Intervention itself was also insignificant, as participants did not demonstrate a statistically significant increase in intervention behavior after participation. Overall, Kettrey and Marx (2020) found that bystander programs had promising effects on bystander intervention behavior in the short term after participation, but this decreased in the long term.

### Where Do We Go from Here?

It is clear that bystander intervention training programs are promising methods for preventing sexual misconduct at IHEs. Drawing on a sense of community and personal

responsibility, these programs seek to empower individuals by training them to recognize situations of potential misconduct and helping them develop the tools to intervene and protect members of their community. Although content, format, and timing of programs vary across institutions, the overall goal remains the same. Bystander intervention training programs are not without their limitations; lack of representation of diverse perspectives, failure to address underlying issues that lead to sexual misconduct, and mixed results in evaluations of program effectiveness demonstrate areas for improvement.

Although existing research has produced a robust understanding of program effectiveness, characteristics, and limitations, there is a dearth of research exploring the perspectives of students themselves. This research seeks to contribute to this need in an exploration of student perceptions of bystander intervention as a form of preventing sexual misconduct.

### **III. Methodology**

Students over the age of 18 at a small, private, liberal arts IHE in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States with approximately 2,600 students were surveyed to assess knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors related to bystander intervention. All incoming students receive bystander intervention education and training as a part of new student orientation at this IHE; as a part of extended orientation, approximately one-third of students choose to participate in extended bystander intervention training (A. Blaugher, personal communication, April 13, 2021).

Participants were asked about the following: (1) whether they had been in a situation where they had perceived that there was the potential for sexual misconduct; (2) how that experience made them feel and what, if anything, they did about it; (3) what kind, if any, of bystander intervention trainings that they have had and (4) how they think bystander intervention training could be

improved. All procedures were approved by the Institutional Review Board at the institution where data collection occurred.

*Survey Format.* Due to the sensitive nature of the subject, a survey format was selected to ensure complete anonymity of participants. No identifying data was collected in the process. This was intended to allow participants to respond honestly without fear of identification or repercussion. To ensure voluntary participation, answers were not required on any questions and participants were able to skip any questions they did not feel comfortable answering. Participants were asked 22 questions — a combination of multiple choice and short answer — through JotForm, a web-based survey platform. Participants were asked demographic questions about age, year in school, gender identity, involvement in Greek Life, campus extracurricular activities, and frequency of attendance at parties or gatherings where alcohol was present before the COVID-19 pandemic.

The survey then solicited reactions to 5 situations of sexual misconduct:

- (1) Has anyone ever told you that they plan to get someone drunk to take advantage of them sexually?
- (2) Have you ever seen someone who is unconscious or incapacitated due to alcohol consumption or drug use being touched, mocked, or mistreated in any way?
- (3) Have you ever felt the need to check in with someone who appears intoxicated and is being taken somewhere else by another individual?
- (4) Have you ever encountered (walked in on or become aware that) an individual who appears to be forcing another individual to participate in sexual activities?
- (5) Have you ever encountered (walked in on or become aware that) an individual that is engaging in sexual activities with an individual who appears intoxicated?

The questions were intentionally gender-neutral. Open-ended responses were solicited for these five questions, allowing respondents to express their reactions without suggestion or constraint.

Students were asked to respond to each situation in one of two ways: if they had been in a similar situation, by describing how they felt and how they responded. If they had not experienced the situation, they were asked how they thought they *would* feel and how they

thought they *would* respond. Finally, the survey asked if respondents had participated in bystander intervention training and, if so, solicited open-ended reactions to their experience with and perceived strengths and weaknesses of said training (See Appendix A for full list of questions).

*Participants.* Data was collected from 89 students. Participants were recruited via word of mouth and through an email invitation included in a daily student digest email distributed through the institution's internal server. Answers were collected from March 23, 2021, through April 6, 2021. Of the 89 responses that were received, 62 identified as female (68.1%), 26 as male (30.7%), and 1 as gender-neutral (0.1%). 46 respondents were seniors (51%), 26 were juniors (29%), 15 were sophomores (17%), and 2 were first-year students (3%).

52 respondents stated that they were a member of a Greek organization (58%), while 37 said they were not (42%); only 19 were affiliated with an official institutional athletics team (21%), as opposed to 70 who were not (79%). The majority of respondents (61; 69%) were involved with institution-sponsored clubs, programs, and other extracurricular activities in some manner, while 28 (31%) were not. Of the respondents, all but 4 (4%) attended gatherings where alcohol was present prior to COVID-19; 23 (26%) more than 10 times a month, 37 (42%) 6-10 times a month, and 25 (28%) 1-5 times a month.

*Data Analysis.* The researcher used qualitative analysis methods to analyze participant responses to the open-ended survey questions. Specifically, open and axial coding was used to analyze results. Responses were read through by the researcher to identify patterns in participant responses. From these patterns, twenty-five open codes were identified ( $n = 25$ ). After these codes were identified, the researcher identified twelve axial codes ( $n = 12$ ) that spoke to emergent themes from responses.

#### IV. Results and Discussion

Qualitative analysis resulted in the identification of 6 overall themes regarding student perceptions of bystander intervention. These included (1) willingness to intervene; (2) difficulty identifying the need for intervention; (3) lack of concrete intervention knowledge; (4) influence of gender identity on knowledge and behavior; (5) hetero- and cis-normative perceptions of sexual misconduct; and (6) critical reflection of bystander training. Tables 1 and 2, featured below, report the results of open and axial coding and the frequency with which the axial codes present themselves in respondents' answers. It is important to note that due to the nature of open-ended responses, participants' answers may fall into multiple categories.

Table 1: How Do Students Feel/How Do They Think They Would Feel as Bystanders in Situations of Potential Sexual Misconduct?

Open Code (n = 13)	Axial Codes (n = 5)	Frequency (T = 432)	Examples
Uncomfortable	Uncomfortable	24.6%	<p>"I would feel very uncomfortable."</p> <p>"I felt incredibly uncomfortable."</p>
Angry	Angry	16.6%	<p>"I would be so mad."</p> <p>"I would feel angry."</p>
Upset Disgusted Bad Shocked Horrified	Upset	29.8%	<p>"My immediate reaction would be shock and horror."</p> <p>"I felt sick to my stomach and wanted to cry."</p>
Scared Unsafe Worried	Scared	22.3%	<p>"I wanted to make sure my friend was okay and felt comfortable in the situation. I also wanted to make sure she could consent."</p> <p>"I would be very scared for the safety of the individual and myself."</p>



Unsure Oblivious Fine	Unsure	6.6%	<p>“I unfortunately think I would be oblivious to it. With the prevalence of “hook up” and dating culture on this campus, I can’t say the line is really clear for me.”</p> <p>“I didn’t feel like I knew the right thing to do in that situation.”</p>
-----------------------------	--------	------	---

Table 2: What Do Students Do/What Do They Think They Would Do as Bystanders in Situations of Potential Sexual Misconduct?

Open Code (n = 14)	Axial Codes (n = 7)	Frequency (T = 416)	Examples
Report incident	Report incident	6.3%	<p>“I would report it.”</p> <p>“I would report them.”</p>
Get help	Get help	20.4%	<p>“I talked to my friends and we all confronted the situation together.”</p> <p>“I would probably get someone to help me stop what was happening.”</p>
Intervene Stop misconduct	Intervene	24.5%	<p>“I would stop the activity immediately.”</p> <p>“I would intervene.”</p>
Check in with parties Offer support	Check in with parties	18%	<p>“I asked the girl 5x [sic] if she was okay while the guy was dancing with her.”</p> <p>“I would check in and make sure they were okay or ask if they needed help.”</p>
Tell perpetrator to stop Monitor perpetrator	Tell perpetrator to stop	10.1%	<p>“I would immediately tell them that behavior is unacceptable.”</p> <p>“I would hope that I could keep an eye on both parties. I would let the perpetrator know that maybe they've had a drink too many and that it's time to head home or find a way to keep them close by so they don't take advantage of the other student.”</p>

Distract parties Act as friend to potential victim Tell victim Remove parties from situation	Remove parties from situation	13.7%	“I would help the potential victim by distracting or getting them out of there”  “Find a safe place for the person being taken advantage of and escort the perpetrator to the door.”
Nothing Don't know/unsure	Nothing	7%	“I didn't do anything although I should have.”  “Unsure of whether to intervene.”

*Summary of Coding Results.* In response to the five situations of potential sexual misconduct, students reported feeling upset or a similar emotion (disgusted, bad, shocked, horrified) in 29.8% of responses. However, the feeling articulated with most frequency was “uncomfortable”, appearing 122 times across responses. Students also reported feeling scared or a similar emotion (unsafe, worried) in 22.3% of responses and unsure (oblivious, fine) in 6.6% of responses. In terms of what students would do or had done in situations similar to the five presented in the survey, the most frequent response was simply that the respondent would “intervene” or “stop it”, appearing in 24.5% of responses. Respondents also said they would get help in some form, whether from campus security, friends, or the police in 20.4% of responses. This was closely followed by checking in with one or both of the parties (18%), removing one or both of the parties from the situation through distraction, pretending to be a friend, or something similar (13.7%), telling the perpetrator to stop or monitoring them (10.1%), doing nothing (7%), and reporting the incident (6.3%).

*Willingness to intervene.* The vast majority of respondents demonstrated willingness to engage in bystander intervention either in the past or in hypothetical situations. One student exemplified bystander behavior in a past situation by describing their experience, stating “I went

up to the intoxicated person and asked if they were okay. They indicated to me that they were fine, but they did not appear fine. I watched them for the rest of the night and when they attempted to go to a secondary location with the perpetrator, I stopped them from leaving and walked the intoxicated person home.” Another student remarked that “it never hurts to ask the question” of whether or not a person requires intervention, while another articulated that it is “better to be safe than sorry”.

Students also demonstrated a feeling of responsibility for others, in comments such as “I would feel responsibility for the safety of the person” and “I would feel responsible to make sure that person was okay”. This willingness to intervene and sense of responsibility among peers suggests that there is a strong sense of community at this particular IHE that is ripe for engagement. This is an important aspect of bystander intervention training, as students must understand their place in a community and responsibility for other community members to act (Lunch and Fleming 2005). As articulated by Katz et al. (2018), bystanders with a sense of personal responsibility for intervention are more likely to do so; future programming at this IHE should capitalize on this sense of community to empower students to protect their peers.

*Difficulty identifying the need for intervention.* In terms of how students would feel in a bystander situation, the most common phrase used was “uncomfortable”, appearing in 122 responses. The frequency of this expression suggests that although students are willing to intervene and feel a sense of responsibility for their community, they do not feel comfortable with the actual act of intervention. Students also expressed uncertainty regarding if a situation merited intervention; one student expressed that they were “unsure about the situation” and another remarked that although they “felt incredibly uneasy and confused” about the situation, they “didn’t feel like I knew the right thing to do...”

In this vein of not knowing whether or not it was appropriate to intervene, many students expressed hesitancy about intervening in situations where alcohol was present due to the nature of hook-up culture at this particular campus and not wanting to interfere in consensual activity. One student remarked that they did not think they would notice potential misconduct in its early stages because "...it is accepted as part of life and weekend behavior here". Another stated, "...most of the time it is normal to see drunk people hooking up"; this normalcy presents barriers to knowing what is consensual and what is not. A third student articulated that "I unfortunately think I would be oblivious to it. With the prevalence of hook-up and dating culture on this campus, I can't say the line is really clear for me."

This is troubling, as bystander training aims to assist students in recognizing situations that lead to sexual violence (Coker et al., 2011). Programs are also designed to ensure students feel comfortable intervening; this includes the ability to recognize that a situation is occurring (Coker et al., 2011; McMahon, 2015; Lynch and Fleming, 2005). The frequency of uncertainty in student responses (see Table 1 and 2) suggest that bystander training at this institution has failed in this aspect and should be further examined for ways to assist its students in identifying situations that lead to sexual misconduct and appropriate methods of intervention.

*Lack of concrete intervention knowledge.* Although students expressed willingness to intervene in bystander situations in their responses, when it came to describing how they would execute such intervention there was a clear disparity of knowledge about how to do so and what steps to take. This was especially evident along gender identity lines; the majority of female students were specific and detailed in how they would intervene, while male students were not. One female student stated,

I would get the incapacitated individual away from the person or group mistreating them. If I was alone, I might pretend to be their friend looking for them and I would get them back to their room/[campus security]/hospital (if need be)... If I was with a group, I would utilize the group to help get the person out of that situation and back to their room or to [campus security]/hospital if need be. In either situation, I would not leave until I knew that person was safe and I would carefully keep an eye on them while with them.

Other female students identified tangible steps that they would take to intervene, such as “Check in with the victim and try to distract and remove them and then check in later to see if they want to report the incident”. Another female stated they would “stand near the situation with a larger group of people to cause commotion/distraction”; another remarked that “I think I would say that it was my friend and I was taking her back to her dorm and bring her back to my room and if it was a guy I would try to find guy friends of his to help and bring him back to a friends [sic] or say it’s my friend and take him away”.

In contrast, male students largely responded with short, unspecific answers such as “I would do my best to stop the situation” or that they would “stop the activity immediately”. Several stated simply that they would “intervene”; the word “intervene” and phrase “stop it” appeared in 24.5% of responses. This division along gender lines suggests that there needs to be an intentional focus at this IHE on empowering men to intervene; as demonstrated in the survey results, men were less likely to identify tangible steps for intervention, which suggests that they would benefit from frequent programming to retain knowledge of intervention practices.

Many respondents, regardless of gender identity, demonstrated a lack of concrete intervention knowledge, as demonstrated in responses such as “I honestly don’t know what I would do, I would hope I would try and stop it” and “I definitely would do something” but “I

don't know exactly what I'd do". Bystanders must be able to identify tools to intervene in a situation of misconduct; the goal of bystander training is to aid students in developing these skills to intervene safely and effectively (Coker et al., 2011; Lynch and Fleming, 2005; McMahon, 2015). If students are unable to identify specific steps for intervention, bystander training has not proven to be effective in this manner.

*Influence of gender identity on knowledge and behavior.* Participant responses diverged from research suggesting that women are more willing to act as bystanders, as both male and female respondents demonstrated willingness to intervene (Bennett et al., 2014). Survey results did correspond with Brown et al.'s research asserting that men are more likely to respond to sexual misconduct assertively while women are more likely to intervene in a non-confrontational manner (2014). Male respondents tended to describe their intervention in assertive terms, remarking that they would "smack the shit out of them", act "violently towards the offender", and confront the perpetrator or "demand them to stop". Female respondents were more likely to identify non-confrontational methods of intervention such as "warn the potential victim", "check in with the person", "ask the intoxicated person if they need some help", or "distract the parties involved".

Females were also more likely to assert that they would get help in a bystander situation. Answers ranged from getting a friend to "intervene together" and getting "assistance from others" to calling the police or the campus safety department. One respondent stated, "I would probably grab a friend to help figure out the best course of action that would keep us safe but also help the victim". This concern for safety was reflected in female respondents' descriptions of how they had felt or would feel in potential intervention scenarios; female students were more

likely than males to say that they were or would be “scared” or another emotion rooted in fear such as “terrified” or “unsafe”.

*Hetero- and cis- normative perceptions of sexual misconduct.* Respondents also demonstrated cis- and hetero-normative perspectives about sexual misconduct, frequently qualifying answers with a female victim and a male perpetrator even though the questions did not include gendered language. One respondent articulated that “I would have some friends help me distract the guy...”. Another remarked, “I think I would say that it was my friend and I was taking her back to her dorm...”. A third stated that they would take the victim to a safe place, citing the example, “her room by herself”.

Although these responses are a direct indicator of the campus culture at this particular IHE, it is also reflective of the criticism that bystander intervention training programs center around a cis- and hetero-normative perspective and are limited in discussing diverse experiences and identities (McMahon et al., 2020). As articulated by one participant, “...I automatically assume it would be a guy since I’m a female and the stereotypes and experiences/knowledge on behaviors like that make me imagine a guy...” Programming must acknowledge these experiences, but also include tools for a variety of needs.

*Critical reflection of bystander training.* Respondents were asked whether or not they had participated in bystander intervention education programming; although all students at this IHE receive training during new student orientation, only 75% of participants articulated that they had, suggesting that 25% of respondents did not recall the program at all. Of those who participated, attitudes towards programming were mixed. The majority of respondents found it somewhat informative and/or helpful at 68%, whereas only 16% found it very informative and/or

helpful. 11% of students did not find it informative and/or helpful, and 5% stated that they did not pay attention.

Respondents were then asked to identify strengths and weaknesses of the training they received. Strengths included that it was interactive, that it was mandatory, and that it was comprehensive. Other strengths identified included that it informed students of “all the resources on campus and what to do if you witness sexual assault”; it gave “good tips on how to intervene in uncomfortable situations”, and “gave real examples that [one] could potentially experience during college”. Another student remarked that because “all first years were required to take it” there was “at least some baseline knowledge” for everyone.

Participants were very articulate about the limitations of the training they received, which included the reaction that training did not adequately address nuance in situations of bystander intervention, especially when alcohol was involved. One student stated that “it was mostly about obvious or extreme cases, and I think it would be better to focus on more nuanced situations of sexual assault”. Other respondents articulated that it was “too long” and “boring” or “cliché”; one student suggested that “it failed to capture the emotions and difficulties of the situation...it was too oversimplified”.

Several respondents remarked that training was cis- and heteronormative, suggesting that it could have been “less cis-heteronormative and maybe less stereotypical in some areas” and was inaccessible to those who did not identify as such. One student stated that “it was incredibly unmemorable. I did not retain most of the information and it did not feel accessible to me”. Others articulated that it promoted reacting to situations of sexual misconduct rather than addressing factors that lead to deviance in the first place. One student suggested that it seemed “geared towards response as opposed to not sexually assaulting people”. This reflects the



criticism that bystander training programs shift the responsibility of preventing victimization from the perpetrator themselves to bystanders and subsequently fail to address the underlying issues that lead to sexual misconduct (Murphy 2017).

Timing was a key theme throughout responses, both in that it was administered during first-year orientation when students were inundated with lots of information, and that as it was so early in their college careers that older students didn't remember much, if anything, from the program. One student remarked, "it was freshman year, I don't remember anything, it was part of a long day of orientation stuff"; another stated, "...it's been so long since I received the training that I'm not sure what information that I know now was learned in one of these programs, or picked up over my years here". This reflects criticism by Amar et al. (2014) regarding timing and the amount of information students receive during new student orientation.

Further, when responses were examined by class year, it became evident that juniors and seniors were more likely to express that they did not remember specifics about programming, while first-years and sophomores were more likely to possess positive attitudes towards the training they received. Kettrey and Marx (2020) found that when programming is not repeatedly administered, students' intervention rates decrease in the long term. Repeated exposure to bystander training leads to higher retention rates; these results suggest that this IHE should prioritize engaging students frequently and repeatedly (McMahon et al., 2018).

## **V. Conclusions and Policy Recommendations**

These responses contribute to a robust area of literature surrounding bystander intervention training and education programs by bringing the student perspective into the conversation. Students demonstrated a willingness to intervene and a sense of community and responsibility that proves promising for bystander intervention. However, there was a significant disparity in

the level of knowledge, awareness, and behavior when it came to actual intervention. This was especially clear along gender identity lines; men were more likely to express aggressive and unspecific responses, while females expressed detailed and tangible examples of non-confrontational intervention methods. The lack of concrete skills across students regardless of identity is concerning, as the ability to identify a situation in need of intervention and recalling the skills to do so is imperative to successfully preventing sexual misconduct and the primary goal of bystander intervention training programs.

These mixed results reflect the variety of conclusions drawn in prior research regarding program effectiveness and changing actions of students in situations of potential sexual misconduct. Subsequently, several policy recommendations arise from this research: to change student actions, programming needs to (1) be frequent and repetitive, and administered in some form each year; (2) target male students to help them retain tangible steps for intervention; (3) be more inclusive to different perspectives, identities, and orientations; (4) address nuance in situations of bystander intervention, especially when alcohol is present, and (5) be proactive rather than reactive. It also is important to note that these responses must be contextualized within the campus culture of this particular IHE; however, the conclusions drawn from this research are nevertheless crucial in building an understanding of the student perspective.

## **VI. Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

Although this study has contributed to extant literature it is not without limitations. The first and most obvious is human error; interpreting open-ended responses is subjective and therefore the researcher's coding may not be precise. Engaging in independent parallel coding to eliminate bias and human error in interpreting the content of responses would be a way to improve upon this limitation. Second, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the environment of IHEs that prove so

fertile for sexual misconduct has changed; fewer situations have existed for students to be exposed to bystander intervention opportunities in the past year. Third, although useful for providing honest and unique answers, the time commitment necessary to answer open-ended survey questions may have been discouraging for potential respondents. Fourth, due to the nature of word of mouth, the majority of respondents were female upperclassmen and not necessarily representative of the entire student body. The lack of respondents with diverse lived experiences presents a challenge to making policy recommendations that reflect the needs of the entire campus community.

Subsequently, with more time and funding, these issues could be addressed in a large-scale survey that incentivizes a larger sample of the student body to participate and intentional solicitation of a representative sample at this IHE. This study presented an overview of perspectives of bystander intervention; it would be beneficial for future research to examine the perspectives of specific demographics, such as members of Greek Life, those with higher rates of alcohol consumption, and students who do not identify as cisgender and/or heterosexual. These studies will contribute to understanding how to address the needs of all students and make the campus community a safe, healthy, and proactive environment that works together to prevent sexual misconduct from occurring before it transpires. Future directions for research should prioritize student perspectives of bystander intervention as a form of preventing sexual misconduct on college campuses. After all, students are the primary stakeholders, and it is their experience and well-being that is on the line.

## **VII. References**

Amar, A. F., Strout, T. D., Simpson, S., Cardiello, M., & Beckford, S. (2014). Administrators' perceptions of college campus protocols, response, and student prevention efforts for sexual assault. *Violence and Victims, 29*(4), 579-593.

- Banyard, V. L., Moynihan, M. M., & Plante, E. G. (2007). Sexual violence prevention through bystander education: An experimental evaluation. *Journal of Community Psychology, 35*(4), 463-481.
- Banyard, V. L., Plante, E. G., & Moynihan, M. M. (2004). Bystander education: Bringing a broader community perspective to sexual violence prevention. *Journal of Community Psychology, 32*(1), 61-79.
- Bennett, S., Banyard, V. L., & Garnhart, L. (2014). To act or not to act, that is the question? Barriers and facilitators of bystander intervention. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 29*(3), 476-496.
- Brown, A. L., Banyard, V. L., & Moynihan, M. M. (2014). College students as helpful bystanders against sexual violence: Gender, race, and year in college moderate the impact of perceived peer norms. *Psychology of women quarterly, 38*(3), 350-362.
- “Campus SaVE Act.” (2019). *Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network*. Retrieved from <https://www.rainn.org/articles/campus-save-act>
- Casey, E. A., & Lindhorst, T. P. (2009). Toward a multi-level, ecological approach to the primary prevention of sexual assault: Prevention in peer and community contexts. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse, 10*(2), 91-114.
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2004). Sexual violence prevention: Beginning the dialogue. Atlanta, GA: *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*.
- Coker, A. L., Bush, H. M., Fisher, B. S., Swan, S. C., Williams, C. M., Clear, E. R., & DeGue, S. (2016). Multi-college bystander intervention evaluation for violence prevention. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine, 50*(3), 295-302.
- Coker, A. L., Cook-Craig, P. G., Williams, C. M., Fisher, B. S., Clear, E. R., Garcia, L. S., & Hegge, L. M. (2011). Evaluation of Green Dot: An active bystander intervention to reduce sexual violence on college campuses. *Violence Against Women, 17*(6), 777-796.
- Coker, A. L., Fisher, B. S., Bush, H. M., Swan, S. C., Williams, C. M., Clear, E. R., & DeGue, S. (2015). Evaluation of the Green Dot bystander intervention to reduce interpersonal violence among college students across three campuses. *Violence Against Women, 21*(12), 1507-1527.
- Duncan, S. H. (2014). The devil is in the details: Will the campus save act provide more or less protection to victims of campus assaults. *JC & UL, 40*, 443.
- Elias-Lambert, N., & Black, B. M. (2016). Bystander sexual violence prevention program: Outcomes for high-and low-risk university men. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 31*(19), 3211-3235.

- Evans, J. L., Burroughs, M. E., & Knowlden, A. P. (2019). Examining the efficacy of bystander sexual violence interventions for first-year college students: A systematic review. *Aggression and Violent Behavior, 48*, 72-82.
- Franklin, C. A., Brady, P. Q., & Jurek, A. L. (2017). Responding to gendered violence among college students: The impact of participant characteristics on direct bystander intervention behavior. *Journal of School Violence, 16*(2), 189-206.
- Gidycz, C. A., Orchowski, L. M., & Berkowitz, A. D. (2011). Preventing sexual aggression among college men: An evaluation of a social norms and bystander intervention program. *Violence Against Women, 17*(6), 720-742.
- Kettrey, H. H., & Marx, R. A. (2020). Effects of bystander sexual assault prevention programs on promoting intervention skills and combatting the bystander effect: a systematic review and meta-analysis. *Journal of Experimental Criminology, 1-25*.
- Lichty, L. F., Campbell, R., & Schuiteman, J. (2008). Developing a university-wide institutional response to sexual assault and relationship violence. *Journal of Prevention & Intervention in the Community, 36*(1-2), 5-22.
- Lynch, A., & Fleming, W. M. (2005). Bystander approaches: Empowering students to model ethical sexual behavior. *Journal of Family and Consumer Sciences, 97*(3), 27.
- McMahon, S. (2015). Call for research on bystander intervention to prevent sexual violence: The role of campus environments. *American Journal of Community Psychology, 55*(3), 472-489.
- McMahon, S. M., Hoge, G. L., Johnson, L., & McMahon, S. (2021). "Stand up and do something": Exploring students' perspectives on bystander intervention. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 36*(7-8), NP3869-NP3888.
- McMahon, S., & Banyard, V. L. (2012). When can I help? A conceptual framework for the prevention of sexual violence through bystander intervention. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse, 13*(1), 3-14.
- McMahon, S., Burnham, J., & Banyard, V. L. (2020). Bystander intervention as a prevention strategy for campus sexual violence: perceptions of historically minoritized college students. *Prevention Science, 21*(6), 795-806.
- McMahon, S., Palmer, J. E., Banyard, V., Murphy, M., & Gidycz, C. A. (2017). Measuring bystander behavior in the context of sexual violence prevention: Lessons learned and new directions. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 32*(16), 2396-2418.
- Moorman, A. M.; Osborne, B. (2016). Are institutions of higher education failing to protect students: An analysis of Title IX's sexual violence protections and college athletics. *Marquette Sports Law Review, 26*(2), 545-582.

- Moylan, C. A. (2017). "I fear I'm a checkbox": College and university victim advocates' perspectives of campus rape reforms. *Violence Against Women*, 23(9), 1122-1139.
- Murphy, W. J. (2017). Bystander intervention policies for campus sexual assault should be framed as civil rights programs, and made broadly applicable to all protected class offenses. *Utah Law Review*, 2017(4), 801-814.
- Padrick, E. (2020). Evaluation of the Campus Sexual Violence Elimination Act: Far reaching but far from enough [Unpublished]. Gettysburg College.
- Schroeder, L. P. (2013). Cracks in the ivory tower: How the Campus Sexual Violence Elimination Act can protect students from sexual assault. *Loy. U. Chi. LJ*, 45, 1195.
- Wade, L., Sweeney, B., Derr, A. S., Messner, M. A., & Burke, C. (2014). Ruling out rape. *Contexts*, 13(2), 16.

## **Appendix A: Survey Questions**

### Introduction

This survey will ask you questions about four things:

1. Whether you have been in a situation where you have perceived that there was the potential for sexual misconduct;
2. How that experience made you feel and what, if anything, you did about it;
3. What kind, if any, of bystander intervention trainings that you have had and
4. How you think bystander intervention training could be improved

*Please review the following definitions:*

1. Bystander: an individual who is present before, during, or after an incident of sexual misconduct (McMahon et al. 2018).
2. Bystander intervention: Preventing an incident from occurring or escalating (McMahon et al. 2018).
3. Bystander intervention education: programs that provide individuals with skills and tools to intervene in a variety of situations before, during, and after an incident of sexual misconduct (McMahon et al. 2018, 3).

This section asks about demographics.

1. What is your age?
2. What is your gender identity?
3. What is your year in school?
4. Are you a member of a Greek organization at [this institution]?
5. Are you affiliated with an official sports team at Gettysburg College?
6. Do you participate in [institution]-sponsored clubs, programs, intramural sports, etc.?
7. Pre-COVID, how frequently did you attend parties or gatherings where alcohol was present?
  - a. Never
  - b. 1-5 times a month

- c. 6-10 times a month
- d. More than 10 times a month

This section asks questions about 5 situations. Please respond to the questions that correspond to your experience. Respond N/A to those that do not.

8. Situation 1: Has anyone ever told you that they plan to get someone drunk to take advantage of them sexually?
  - a. If yes, how did that experience make you feel?
  - b. If yes, what, if anything, did you do about it? How did you react?
  - c. If no, how do you think you would feel?
  - d. If no, what, if anything, would you do? How would you react?
9. Situation 2: Have you ever seen someone who is unconscious or incapacitated due to alcohol consumption or drug use? If yes, have you ever seen someone who is unconscious or incapacitated to alcohol consumption or drug use being touched, mocked, or mistreated in any way?
  - a. If yes, how did that experience make you feel?
  - b. If yes, what, if anything, did you do about it? How did you react?
  - c. If no, how do you think you would feel?
  - d. If no, what, if anything, would you do? How would you react?
10. Situation 3: Have you ever felt the need to check in with someone who appears intoxicated and is being taken somewhere else by another individual?
  - a. If yes, how did that experience make you feel?
  - b. If yes, what, if anything, did you do about it? How did you react?
  - c. If no, how do you think you would feel?
  - d. If no, what, if anything, would you do? How would you react?
11. Situation 4: Have you ever encountered (walked in on or become aware that) an individual who appears to be forcing another individual to participate in sexual activities?
  - a. If yes, how did that experience make you feel?
  - b. If yes, what, if anything, did you do about it? How did you react?
  - c. If no, how do you think you would feel?
  - d. If no, what, if anything, would you do? How would you react?
12. Situation 5: Have you ever encountered (walked in on or become aware that) an individual that is engaging in sexual activities with an individual who appears intoxicated?
  - a. If yes, how did that experience make you feel?
  - b. If yes, what, if anything, did you do about it? How did you react?
  - c. If no, how do you think you would feel?
  - d. If no, what, if anything, would you do? How would you react?

This section asks about your experience with bystander intervention programming.

13. Have you received information from [this institution] on sexual misconduct prevention?
14. Have you participated in sexual misconduct prevention training at [this institution]?
15. Have you participated in a bystander intervention education program?
16. If yes, was this program sponsored by [this institution]?
17. If no, who sponsored this program?
18. In what year did you participate in this program?

19. What was your reaction to the program at the time?
  - a. I found it very informative and/or helpful
  - b. I found it somewhat informative and/or helpful
  - c. I did not find it informative and/or helpful
  - d. I did not pay attention
20. What were the strengths of the program?
21. What were the weaknesses of the program?
22. Is there any programming related to sexual misconduct that you would like to see [this institution] offer?