

Transforming the Campus Climate: Advancing Mixed-Methods Research on the Social and Cultural Roots of Sexual Assault on a College Campus

Jennifer S. Hirsch, PhD^{1*}, Leigh Reardon, MPH¹, Shamus Khan, PhD², John S. Santelli, MD, MPH³, Patrick A. Wilson, PhD¹, Louisa Gilbert, PhD⁴, Melanie Wall, PhD^{5,6}, Claude A. Mellins, PhD⁷

¹Department of Sociomedical Sciences, Mailman School of Public Health, Columbia University, New York, New York

²Department of Sociology, Columbia University, New York, New York

³Heilbrunn Department of Population and Family Health, Mailman School of Public Health, Columbia University, New York, New York

⁴Social Intervention Group, School of Social Work, Columbia University, New York, New York

⁵Division of Biostatistics, Department of Psychiatry, New York State Psychiatric Institute and Columbia University Medical Center, New York, New York

⁶Department of Biostatistics, Mailman School of Public Health, Columbia University, New York

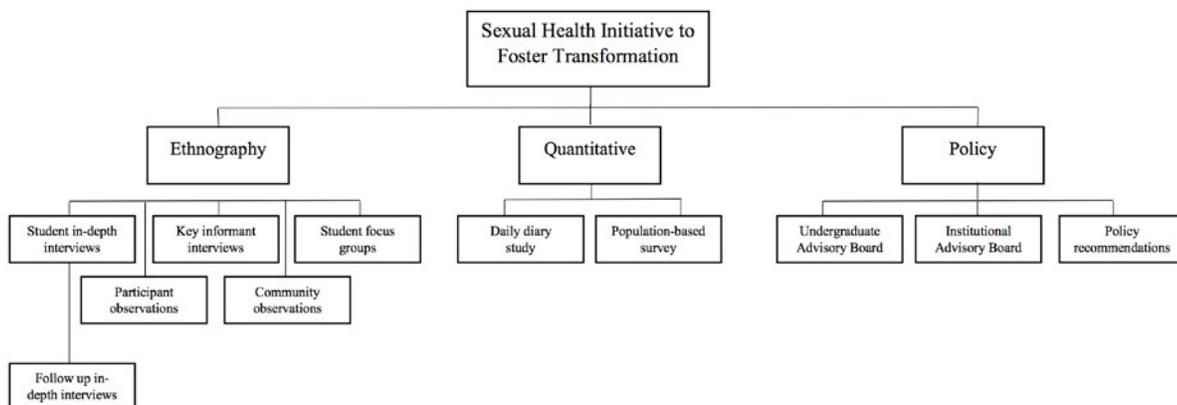
⁷Division of Gender, Sexuality and Health, Departments of Psychiatry and Sociomedical Sciences, New York State Psychiatric Institute and Columbia University Medical Center, New York, New York

*corresponding author – please address all correspondence to jsh2124@columbia.edu

Student advocates, the federal government, and institutions of higher education have recently focused considerable attention on the problem of sexual assault on college campuses. Much of the public conversation, however, has focused on processes of adjudication, rather than on the social roots of the problem itself. Moreover, beyond Sanday's classic work on fraternity gang rape (Sanday 2007) and Armstrong and Hamilton's more recent work on what they describe as 'party rape' (Armstrong, Hamilton, and Sweeney 2006), the preponderance of research on sexual assault among college students has consisted of survey research that assesses the prevalence and correlates of sexual assault, with substantial attention to interventions designed to modify individual behavioral factors and a limited number of social factors.

In the fall of 2014 we reached out to senior administrators at Columbia University with something different in mind. We proposed to combine a public health perspective – focused on the population-level drivers of behavior – with social and behavioral science theory and methods to capture a more rigorous and nuanced assessment of the social roots and risk environments in which sexual assault occurs among college students. Drawing on prior work that looked at the social production of sexual behavior (Hirsch et al. 2009), we initially conceptualized a purely ethnographic study of student social and sexual life. As we developed the proposal over the course of the fall, our vision grew in two ways. First, considering the potential to answer a broader swath of questions through a mix of methods and disciplinary perspectives, we (Hirsch and Mellins, the project’s principal investigators) proposed combining ethnography with two forms of quantitative data collection—a random sample survey and a daily diary study. This enabled us to take a more comprehensive approach to examining the individual, interpersonal, and structural (cultural, community, and institutional) factors that shape sexual health and sexual violence for undergraduates, while also obtaining estimates of the scope of the problem (see below, figure 1, for a schematic of SHIFT’s overall organization). Second, being aware of the ways our research could help shape the institution itself as well as advance the field more generally, we drew on a community-based participatory research approach (CBPR) (Wallerstein and Duran 2010; Minkler and Wallerstein 2011). To this end, we convened both Institutional and Undergraduate Advisory Boards, described in more detail below.

Figure 1. Sexual Health Initiative to Foster Transformation Organizational Chart



Early in the research planning process, one primary analytic choice was to narrow our focus to understanding undergraduate students' experiences of unwanted and non-consensual sexual contact with each other, rather than attempting to capture the very broad category of what the university calls "Gender-Based Misconduct". Gender-based misconduct encompasses sexual assault (including both attempted and penetrative sex and other forms of unwanted and non-consensual sexual contact) as well as other violations of Title IX's requirement regarding institutional responsibility to create a gender equitable learning environment. Instead of examining every type of gender-based misconduct, we chose to focus on sexual assault in order to generate a nuanced description of the breadth of student experiences and a deep understanding of how they are socially-produced. To ground future prevention and intervention work, as well as to provide broader insights into the social context, we also chose to examine what we initially glossed as sexual health: students' expectations about the kind of sex that they desired and their positive sexual encounters.

The Sexual Health Initiative to Foster Transformation (SHIFT) thus developed three primary scientific goals:

- To estimate the prevalence of different types of sexual assault on campus;
- To understand the ecology of sexual assault by examining key individual, interpersonal/social, and contextual and institutional risk and protective factors associated with sexual violence *and* sexual health, and
- To work with stakeholders to translate findings into interventions and policy.

SHIFT's co-PIs assembled an interdisciplinary team which included researchers trained in adolescent health, anthropology, sociology, intimate partner violence, clinical and community psychology, research ethics, biostatistics, and quantitative and qualitative methods. SHIFT was formally launched in early 2015, with an email from the President of Columbia University, Lee Bollinger, to the entire student and faculty community. Ethnographic data collection (in-depth interviews with students, administrators and community stakeholders, student focus groups, and participant observations) began in August of 2015 and concluded in January of 2017. The quantitative daily diary study during which students took the same short questionnaire online every day for 60 days, took place from October 2015 to December 2015, and the one-time population-based online survey was administered to a random sample of students from March 2016 to May 2016. The ethnography and the population-based survey included Columbia's three undergraduate schools (Columbia College, the School of Engineering and Applied Sciences, and General Studies) and Barnard College. The daily diary study only included students at Columbia's three undergraduate schools. Currently, the SHIFT team continues to analyze data and, in collaboration with the university community, to develop policy recommendations.

Development

SHIFT's history reflects how institutional context facilitates research. Supported by the Provost, Columbia's Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Council (WGSSC) brings together

leaders of relevant units across the campus for regular bi-annual meetings. Jennifer Hirsch's initial conversation with Suzanne Goldberg, Executive Vice President for University Life about what eventually became SHIFT took place at the fall 2014 WGSSC meeting. High-level administrative support helped secure generous internal financial support, but also extended far beyond material resources. From the beginning, it was clear that securing an exemption from the mandated reporting required by Title IX legislation and reiterated in the Dear Colleague letter (Russlynn 2011) would be necessary. This legislation requires all university employees to be mandated reporters of Gender Based Misconduct, including instances of sexual assault. A SHIFT-related Title IX mandated reporting exemption would enable us to guarantee confidentiality to students with whom we interacted in our capacity as SHIFT researchers, and so we worked closely with Columbia's Office of the General Counsel to secure that exemption for the investigators in their roles as researchers (although not in roles of teaching or administration). Our justification was very much in the spirit of Title IX compliance—the research provided a means for the university to learn about a range of student sexual assault experiences about which they would otherwise know very little, since such a small proportion of incidents of sexual assault result in formal reports (Fisher, Cullen, and Turner 2000; Koss, Gidycz, and Wisniewski 1987). We use the iceberg metaphor: only a small proportion of sexual assault are reported, and the exemption was critical for doing a deep dive, going beneath the water's surface to describe and understand students' otherwise hidden experiences of sexual assault.

Title IX mandated reporting is also intended to ensure that institutions identify students in need of help, and so addressing the institutional concerns regarding a mandated reporting exemption also required having a process to identify students in crisis and refer them to services. Another key to securing the exemption was an emergency protocol, based in part on work in

other areas in which the impact of reporting can be of concern (e.g. adolescent sexual risk behavior); one of our team's two clinicians (a clinical psychologist (Mellins) and an adolescent medicine physician (Santelli)) was always on call and team members were trained in procedures to assess and appropriately refer students in crisis.

Community engagement and policy translation

From the beginning the SHIFT team engaged diverse student, faculty, and administrative stakeholders in study design and instrument development. In addition, this stakeholder engagement was intended to help us develop recommendations for cutting-edge, institutionally-appropriate, evidence-based strategies to reduce sexual violence and promote sexual health at Columbia. This meant developing relationships with community members to help with the design, implementation, interpretation, and policy consequences of our research.

Our Institutional Advisory Board (IAB) consisted of a group of administrators from Columbia and Barnard responsible for undergraduate safety and well-being. Those invited to join the IAB included senior administrators and faculty members from departments including athletics, deans' offices, health services, and facilities. Meetings with the IAB started with individual meetings to assess diverse perspectives on sexual assault on Columbia's and Barnard's campus, followed by several large group discussions on topics, such as research design and student recruitment. Since finishing data collection, we have convened smaller topic-specific conversations on policy recommendations with key stakeholders. The IAB has helped us better understand the institutional context and priorities, reviewed research findings as they emerge, and discussed policy and programmatic implications from the research.

To ensure our research resonated with students, SHIFT also convened an Undergraduate Advisory Board (UAB). The UAB was comprised of approximately 13-18 undergraduates from

Columbia and Barnard (the number fluctuated as students graduated, or were away for semesters abroad). Students were selected through an application process in the spring of 2015, with the goal of assembling a group who represented the diversity of perspectives and social experiences in the undergraduate student body. The UAB provided input on study design, participant recruitment, and data collection methods, and served as liaisons to campus life. The UAB provided feedback on wording for instruments and recruitment materials, developed strategies to recruit students for the different components of the research, and provided insight into life at Columbia and Barnard. They also contributed in important ways to our branding and campus presence as a student-friendly organization that could be trusted. The UAB helped create a campus-wide “buzz” about the project with activities such as posting fliers, sponsoring study breaks, advertising on Facebook and sending creative emails. As we began to analyze our findings, our work with them pivoted. They served as “member checks” (Creswell and Miller 2000)—giving us a sense of whether we’d accurately characterized students’ experiences, discussing possible policy responses, and serving as a sounding board for interpretations of both the ethnographic and quantitative data. Because our UAB was composed of current students, we set clear guidelines about their work. Each member signed collectively-developed and mutually-agreed upon rules that outlined confidentiality of information shared in our meetings as well as respect for group members’ opinions. Because of their deep involvement in the project, UAB members were excluded as research subjects.

Ethnography

For Professors Jennifer S. Hirsch and Shamus Khan, the senior scientists leading the ethnography, the first challenge was to build a team of research staff already trained to conduct interviews and participant observation. We hired a diverse staff with Master’s and Doctoral-level

training, and provided them with extensive additional training in study goals and methods as well as procedures for human subjects' protection and the emergency protocol in case a research participant became distressed. An essential element of the participant observation was the clearly articulated protocol for identifying ourselves as researchers when interacting with students. Team members always identified themselves as researchers, told students what the study was about, advised them that interacting with the researcher was optional, secured permission from hosts to enter any private student space such as a dorm room or party, and provided information about who students could contact if they had further questions. Professors Hirsch and Khan conducted some participant observation in public spaces (athletic events, open spaces on campus), but all of the participant observation with students in student-controlled spaces was conducted by research staff closer in age to the students.

As noted above, the ethnographic research consisted of in-depth interviews with students, administrators and community stakeholders, student focus groups, and participant observations. Interviews began in late summer 2015 and over the course of the 16 month ethnography the team completed 151 in-depth student interviews, 25 student follow-up interviews, 18 key informant interviews, 17 focus groups, and more than 500 hours of community and participant observations (see Tables 1-3 for sample characteristics).

The in-depth interviews collected data on each participant's life as an undergraduate; current and past sexual and intimate relationships, with an emphasis on college experiences; how consent works within sexual interactions; non-consensual sexual experiences, and how institutional arrangements at Columbia or Barnard shape students' lives. Students were recruited for interviews via a number of different methods. About half were recruited by research staff in the course of participant observation. There were five primary ways that students came to our

researchers: (1) respond to an email sent to all students about participating in the ethnographic research; (2) through our UAB connecting us to student interest groups we wanted to reach, and where we made in-person presentations about our project; (3) a snowball sample where some interviewees recommended to their friends that they contact the research team; (4) targeted recruitment of survivors through email that asked students to contact us if they had “a story to tell”; and (5) on-campus presence in the form of articles in the student paper, flyers, signs and electronic bulletin boards; and institutional connections. The team tracked various axes of diversity to ensure that the many voices and perspectives of the student population were represented. Students, who were screened to ensure that they were currently enrolled undergraduates at either Columbia or Barnard, received \$35 for participating in the initial in-depth interview and, for those for whom subsequent interviews were required to capture the breadth of their experiences, \$40 for each follow up interview. Interviews averaged approximately 1.5 hours.

Professor Hirsch and the research staff also conducted key informant interviews with administrators and a small number of students (including student leaders and resident advisors (RAs)). The goals of the interviews were to understand what administrative actors know/perceive regarding student experiences socially, academically, and interpersonally; how administrative actors perceive and describe sexual assault; and what the institutional terrain is, including relevant policies related to alcohol and substance use, and sexual assault. Students received \$35 for the key informant interviews; administrators were not compensated. The focus groups, moderated by Professor Khan, touched on topics similar to those of the in-depth interviews, but emphasized how groups of students think about those issues and general patterns of behavior and shared ideas. Focus groups lasted approximately 2 hours and participants received \$30.

Finally, over a 16-month period the team engaged in participant and community observation—by invitation from a student for non-public spaces—at various locations both on and off campus. On campus, this included Columbia and Barnard dorms, academic buildings, campus community space, athletics spaces, fraternity/sorority life spaces, and dining halls. Off-campus this included bars, restaurants, coffee shops, and public/community spaces around New York City. See Table 3 for more information regarding the locations and time allocation of the participant observation.

Quantitative

The two quantitative components of SHIFT also examined individual, social, and structural risk and protective factors associated with sexual health and sexual violence to inform sexual assault prevention at Columbia. Drs. Claude A. Mellins, and John S. Santelli led a multidisciplinary team with expertise in sexual assault, research methods and statistics including Drs. Louisa Gilbert (social work), Patrick Wilson (community psychology), and Melanie Wall (biostatistics). We also had two faculty members from outside the institution with significant expertise in sexual assault research. Dr. Martie Thompson from Clemson University was our consultant from the study's inception, and Dr. Kate Walsh from Yeshiva University was invited to join the team once data collection was complete to help with analysis and interpretation.

Daily diary study

The daily diary component of SHIFT, which drew on a research method that Dr. Wilson had previously used to study the temporal relations among mood, interpersonal interactions, and health behaviors, focused on examining factors associated with sexual assault and sexual health. These variables were conceptualized as daily process variables that may change from day to day,

including mood, stress, substance use, positive and negative experiences, sleep, and sexual behavior among undergraduates at Columbia.

The diary used a convenience sample recruited via an email sent to all undergraduate students at Columbia's three undergraduate colleges, asking if they were interested in participating in the daily diary study of SHIFT, and, if so, to complete a screener survey. 1,152 students completed the screener survey, and from that group just over 500 were randomly selected to participate in the diary, stratifying for gender, international student status, and selecting all gender non-conforming students. Of the 506 students invited to participate, 420 consented to participate, registered to enroll, and completed at least one diary assessment.

On the first day of the diary study, students were asked to complete an online consent form and a baseline survey which included questions on demographics, mental health, substance use, sexual behaviors and experiences, sexual assault and consent. This baseline provided an initial measure of primary factors against which the daily assessments could be compared. After completing the baseline survey, students were directed to complete their first daily diary questionnaire. Each day for the next 60 days from October to December 2015, students accessed the diary between 4pm-4am via any web-enabled device (i.e., computer, tablet, or smartphone). Students were sent at least 1 daily text message reminder to complete the diary. Approximately 70% of all daily diary assessments were completed over the assessment period.

Several strategies were employed to encourage students to complete each day's diary entry. Drawing on behavioral economics work on the effectiveness of loss aversion tactics (i.e., small penalties for non-compliance) and variable reinforcement, there were escalating daily payments (\$1 for each day they completed a diary questionnaire on days 1-20; \$2 for each completed diary on days 21-40; and \$3 for each completed diary day for days 41-60), as well as

a \$1 bonus for completing weekend diary days (Friday and Saturday). Additionally, 50 cents were deducted from each students' \$5 registration bonus for each day the diary was not filled out (up to a maximum of \$5, so students' accounts never had a negative balance). Students were also paid \$10 for completing the baseline survey. Lastly, daily, weekly, and monthly lotteries (i.e., offering prizes to randomly selected students who complied with the assessment timeline) were employed.

Population-based survey

The SHIFT survey measured various factors related to sexual assault, overall student health and wellbeing, and students' social life on campus, well-validated measures, with some questions adapted to be University-specific, including some that reflected early insights from the first several months of ethnographic fieldwork. Questions on the survey covered demographic information, mental health, substance use, consensual sexual experiences, non-consensual sexual experiences (victimization and perpetration), consent attitudes, gender stereotypes and rape myths, and institutional support, among other topics.

In early 2016, an email was sent to all undergraduates at Columbia and Barnard introducing the survey and notifying them that selected students would receive an invitation to participate in March. Survey participants were selected in March 2016 via simple random sampling of students ages 18-29 from the full population of 9,616 undergraduate students as of January 2017. Using administrative records of the enrolled students, 2,500 students were invited via email to participate in a web-based survey. The demographic characteristics, available from university/college administrative databases (i.e. gender [male, female], age, race/ethnicity, year in school, international status, and financial aid status) showed a high degree of similarity in

these characteristics between the 2,500 randomly sampled students and the full undergraduate population.

The email invitation to the 2,500 students selected for the survey included information about SHIFT and survey procedures, as well as a secure participant-specific link for students to take the survey. Before beginning, participants were asked to provide informed consent on an electronic form describing the study, confidentiality, compensation for time and effort, and data handling procedures. The survey was administered online, and students could choose to take it either at a location of their choosing or at SHIFT's on-campus research office with the choice to use study or personal computers. The majority of students (84%) took the survey in a space of their choosing. On average, students completed the survey in 35-40 minutes.

The SHIFT team and UAB prioritized getting a response rate that was high enough to allow us to confidently describe our data as a representative sample of the student body, and the team implemented multiple activities to improve participation (Dillman 2014), including those previously described for branding and creating a positive "buzz". The survey launched at the beginning of spring break, and a second round of introductory emails was sent to all students selected on the Monday they returned to school. Students had approximately 7 weeks to complete the survey, though the end of the spring semester. Students who completed the survey in our on-campus office received the \$40 in cash as compensation, as well as snacks. Students who completed the survey at another location received the compensation as an electronic gift card (also \$40). In addition, all students who completed the survey were entered into a lottery to win an additional electronic gift card of \$200 (drawn for every 300 students that completed the survey). Multiple methods were used to advertise and encourage students to participate including several rounds of emails to generate interest and encourage student participation, written to

resonate with the range of possible student motives for participation (e.g., financial compensation, community spirit, achieving a higher response rate than similar surveys at peer institutions, and an interest in the issues of sexual assault and sexual health), posting flyers on campus, holding project-sponsored “study break events,” and tabling in public areas on campus.. Among the 2,500 students invited to participate, 1,671 (67%) enrolled, a very high percentage for studies on college campuses, particularly sexual assault studies (Fedina, Holmes, and Backes 2016; Cantor, Fisher, Chibnall, Townsend, Lee, et al. 2015).

Preliminary recommendations based on initial findings

Our specific empirical findings will be outlined in a series of papers, but both the population-based survey (Mellins et al. in press) and the ethnography showed that the term “sexual assault” lumps together a very diverse set of behaviors and experiences, and highlighted the importance of disaggregating them to increase the impact of prevention programming. The social drivers of unwanted/non-consensual sexual touching by strangers might differ from those that lead to rape in the context of an ongoing hookup. To be effective with prevention, it is important to focus in a more targeted way on what we are trying to prevent. Our findings also argue for the importance of population-specific approaches to prevention. While the greatest absolute numbers of sexual assaults are experienced by heterosexual cisgender women, both national research and our survey found rates to be sharply higher for students who are lesbian, gay and bisexual, or for non-cisgender students. In smaller number, heterosexual cisgender men also experience assault. Future publications will examine population- and type of event-specific drivers of vulnerability.

Based on our research, it is clear that prevention efforts need to 1) integrate multiple outcomes; 2) use a multi-level and multi-sectoral approach, and 3) extend beyond institutions of

higher education. Regarding the first, the analytic work we've done underlines the many interconnections among mental health problems, sexual assault, and problematic drinking behaviors, and so one major theme is the importance of holistic prevention to complement existing targeted prevention programs. This will take different forms depending on institutional context, but at minimum it means creating internal structures for communication and collaboration between the staff teams and administrative units tasked with the preventing and responding to alcohol, mental health, and sexual assault.

Our second recommendation – that prevention work be both multi-sectoral (e.g., space, dining, residential life, athletics, etc.) and multi-level (e.g. individual, interpersonal, institutional) – reflects findings from each research component and the work with our advisory boards about the complex drivers of sexual assault. We find the term 'rape culture', for example, to be useful perhaps as a cultural touchstone but inadequate in terms of identifying the modifiable social factors that produce vulnerability to sexual assault. More useful, as we discuss elsewhere (Hirsch, Khan, and Mellins 2017), is to focus on the intersection of individual factors, such as what we call 'sexual citizenship' – a person's own understanding of his or her right, and other people's equivalent right, to sexual self-determination – with interpersonal factors, such as two people's specific interactional history (expectancies for a new hookup differ, for example, from those for an established relationship), and social factors, such as gendered sexual scripts or control of particular social spaces. This understanding of the social production of sexual assault underlines the need for multi-level prevention that is also multi-sectoral. Students' drinking practices, for example, are shaped by administrative units across the university (health services, public safety, residential life, etc.) and by campus culture and traditions, the interpretation and implementation of many policies (where there may be substantial gaps between what is on paper

and actual practice) and students' diverse goals for college life. Any attempt to modify any of the distal drivers of sexual assault must take into account the complex ecology of behavior, with prevention that changes institutional policies, as well as interventions targeted at group dynamics and individual attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors.

An example of one of our policy recommendations is illustrative. In prior work, we have used the notion of sexual geographies to articulate the ways in which spaces facilitate certain sexual behaviors, both through location-specific cultural norms and by time and place-specific sexual opportunities (Hirsch et al. 2009). From the ethnography and the UAB meetings, we developed an understanding about three different categories of spaces that shape students' access to social support, patterns of sexual socializing, and alcohol consumption: identity-group specific spaces, party spaces, and open-access spaces for socializing across lines of year in school, gender, or belonging to any particular social group. At Columbia, our fieldwork coincided with campus-wide student-led advocacy for Latinx and LGBTQ lounge space in the student center. Simultaneously SHIFT researchers and members of the IAB discussed using repurposing existing spaces to promote unstructured socializing and opportunities for fun activities as an alternative to socializing organized around alcohol. SHIFT's findings, which were widely shared with senior administrators over the course of the year that these changes were being debated, may have been part of the conversation (which began long before our research) about the creation of newly-designated lounge spaces for LGBTQ students and students of color (Maines 2017). Our recommendations (which again, were just one element of longstanding conversations) for strategies to create community-building spatial opportunities targeted at freshmen during the early weeks of the fall semester may have contributed to the fall 2017

outdoor film screenings and the creation of a nighttime ‘carnival’, with games and a bouncy castle, held on a warm Thursday evening after dark on the main quad.

Third, campuses exist in a broader world. By the time students arrive on campus as freshmen or transfer students, they have grown up in families, attended schools, consumed media, developed peer networks, and participated in religious institutions, organized athletics, music and arts groups, and many other group or community activities – all of which shape who they are, what they think, and how they interact with other people. As the survey findings show (Mellins et al. in press), substantial numbers of students have experienced sexual assault even before arriving at college. One immediate recommendation is that effective prevention should take a life-course approach, starting with age-appropriate comprehensive education about gender and sexuality, which teaches about consent as well as about healthy relationships, sexual pleasure, sexual health, and a host of other topics that would be useful for students to know about before they start college. Middle-school or high-school curricula are beyond the control of institutions of higher education, but there is increasing discussion about higher education as a venue for remedial sex education (Yoganathan 2017; Ellis 2016; Paul 2015), and in fact both Mississippi and Arkansas have recently passed legislation requiring public colleges to provide sex education (Quinton 2016). Institutions of higher education, many of which play crucial roles in state economies and wield substantial intellectual prestige, might respond to state-level efforts to address campus sexual assault (such as legislation regarding affirmative consent (“Affirmative Consent Laws (Yes Means Yes) State by State” n.d.)) by advocating for legislation and resources to increase students’ pre-college sexual literacy.

Lessons learned

Despite our substantial collective experience in team-based science with multifaceted mixed methods research designs, the administrative, logistical, and communications challenges of conducting research on such a politically-charged topic in a complex institution proved challenging. In hindsight, there were a few decisions made or actions we took that significantly facilitated our progress, and a few things that we might do differently.

Institutional support

High-level institutional champions who assisted us in securing access to indispensable stakeholders and spaces on campus helped us overcome some very mundane logistical challenges. Strong relationships with the university's various communications offices helped us with tasks such as crafting bullet points for the UAB in case they were contacted by the student newspaper, responding to media queries, and in general thinking through and being strategic about how we explained our work both to the university community and the broader public.

Budgetary flexibility and research ethics expertise

Our carefully planned research strategy went through numerous adaptations, both in response to student and stakeholder recommendations and to take advantage of opportunities when they arose. Having the latitude to adjust our approach as the research unfolded was critical to our success. The UAB was emphatic that a study break with pizza and cookies would improve the "launch" our survey recruitment, and they were very enthusiastic about SHIFT-branded logo gear, which they designed and wore around campus to raise awareness of the project.



A series of events caused us to miss our first opportunity to conduct ethnographic observations at new student orientation—a period we were keen to examine. Fortunately, it turned out to be much more useful to observe orientation towards the end of our fieldwork; after eleven months of fieldwork, the knowledge gained and relationships developed with students and administrators enabled us to approach that moment with more understanding and deeper immersion. Similarly, as the ethnographic research proceeded, our attention to systematic sampling for the in-depth interviews suggested that we were not successfully engaging with enough men involved in athletics and fraternity life. Thus, we hired an ethnographer whose sole charge was to focus on those groups. These changes meant that we had to be flexible with our budget lines, cutting certain expenses in order to pay for others that we felt were of greater value.

This flexibility also required an inordinately large number of modifications to our Institutional Review Board (IRB) protocol. Having both the staffing capacity to handle the modifications, and a senior investigative team with considerable experience in human subjects research on sensitive topics and adolescent research ethics, as well as an IRB that understood social science research and that was responsive to investigator concerns, made it possible to respond quickly to unanticipated situations presented by our research. In addition, building

redundancy into our research team enabled us to continue with team-based research despite staff departures.

The benefits and challenges of conducting research at a large research university in an urban context

Being situated within a large urban research university with a health sciences campus made possible an interdisciplinary collaboration that might be challenging at a liberal arts institution, a large research university without such strengths in the health and social sciences, or a location with a smaller labor pool. Having access to experienced biostatisticians, adolescent health specialist, clinical psychologists, as well as experts in trauma and substance use all at the same university made it relatively easy to assemble a strong interdisciplinary team.

Collaborations with research centers on campus provided access to data management staff, meeting space and an increased presence on campus.

Managing research with students on your own campus

In some cases (and particularly with the ethnography), students struggled to grasp the separation between some of our roles as both professor/class teacher and our role as a researcher. We stressed that all research would remain confidential and that data would be coded with research IDs and pseudonyms. However, students often missed this distinction. For example, a student remarked to a SHIFT investigator that her assignment would be late because of reasons discussed in her recent in-depth interview, which had been conducted by another team member. The faculty member had to reiterate that he did not know which of his students participated in the research. Similarly, we frequently had to clarify both with research participants and with the

UAB that our team members always identified themselves as researchers when doing observations in both public and private spaces.

Branding and campus presence

Columbia has numerous initiatives and programs related to sexual assault, consent training, and sexual health promotion that are not part of SHIFT. To further complicate matters there were other surveys that collected similar data to our own, and we had to work to help students distinguish our work both from other research as well as from service initiatives. This involved frequently clarifying that we were a research project, not an intervention. Our distinct institutional identity, including the professionally-designed SHIFT project logo featured on all project communications and documents, may have helped us navigate some of the complex campus politics about sexual assault.

Thinking intersectionally, both in terms of implementation and the research itself

In terms of absolute numbers, the preponderance of college sexual assaults are perpetrated by men towards women. However, given the higher rates of sexual assault experienced by sexual and gender minorities (Cantor, Fisher, Chibnall, Townsend, Lee, Hyunshik, et al. 2015) it was also critical to attend to the voices of non-hetero, non-cis students. As we made choices about who to invite to participate in the UAB, we considered these and other forms of diversity: racial and ethnic, international students, first generation, and those involved with a wide range of student activities. Moreover, at the suggestion of an early member of our research team who was herself a first-generation college student, it was necessary to make participation in the UAB a paid position, rather than a volunteer opportunity, so that we would not be advised only be students who could afford to donate their time. This same attention to

multiple dimensions of inequality shaped our strategy for the ethnographic team, for which we sought both prior research experience with diversity in relation to gender, sexuality, race and ethnicity and prior research experience studying hegemonic masculinity.

The challenges of team-based ethnographic research on sexual assault

The two faculty directing the ethnography, Professors Hirsch and Khan, did not do any participant observation with students in student-controlled private social spaces such as dorms, student apartments off-campus, and fraternity houses. Having the senior ethnographers' participant observation limited to large public events meant that the experiences and activities that were in some way the most essential to understanding students' lived experience were off limits to us, and thus we had to set up structures to transfer not just the field notes but the "headnotes" (Sanjek 1990) from our research staff to us. We required weekly submission of field notes and brief write ups of each week's in-depth interviews. Weekly meetings provided an opportunity to ask questions, discuss emerging themes, push the staff to follow specific lines of inquiry, and keep tabs on which groups were being included in the research and which were still not adequately covered.

Those practices, however, are generic to any team project in which the senior investigators are not the ones doing participant observation. We also adopted some practices specific to the topic. Chief among them was starting every meeting with a mental health check in; acknowledging and providing each other with support for students' frequently very painful stories was fundamental to being able to endure the work. The mental health check-in was also the time to share what was suppressed by research staff who strove to maintain a relatively neutral listening stance when students shared stories that generated strong feelings. Taking into

account how each member of our staff deliberately crafted a social self we asked the team members involved in participant observation to write up lengthy notes about who these social selves had been and how they had experienced inhabiting them. These created a written record of how each researcher made deliberate choices regarding his or her self-presentation, as well as lenses through which to read and consider the interviews that each member of the ethnography team produced. They will be discussed in the book presenting the ethnographic findings.

Mixed Methods

The combination of extended ethnography and quantitative work was powerful. The ethnography enabled us to do a deep dive into students' daily lives, revealing social processes, dimensions of experience, and shared assumptions that could never be captured by survey research. However, despite our persistent (and, we would argue, vital) attention to sampling in the in-depth interviews, at the end of the project we had only interviewed 151 of Columbia and Barnard's 9,500+ undergraduates, and so being able to situate the ethnographic findings in relation to social patterns revealed by the survey research enabled us to speak with much greater authority about the breadth of students' experiences. The combination of numbers and words has proved to be compelling as we share our findings with administrators and talk about what it might look like to reshape campus life.

Research on campus sexual assault and academic reward structures

There are at least three ways in which the team's institutional locations and career stage helped shape the project's development. First, the Columbia investigators involved in the project were all relatively senior, and with one exception were either Full Professors or already tenured, with none of us needing the fruits of this project to get over the bar of tenure, thus allowing us to

take on this complex project with fewer career-specific reservations. Second, a project of this magnitude requires substantial management experience. Finally, Columbia's unflagging and widespread support for our work created an ideal institutional context that we also understand may be hard to replicate elsewhere. For most researchers undertaking this sensitive research, we suspect the element without which it would be extremely hard to proceed would be the security of a tenured position – and, for those proposing ethnographic research, a project-specific exemption from Title IX mandated reporting.

If we could do it again

Though we had many successes, there are a few issues we would have handled differently if we could do it all over, and offer as advice to others pursuing sexual assault research on campuses.

1. Find a way to use social media data. SHIFT's IRB protocol for the ethnography was conservative in what we considered data. In retrospect, we regret not having been able to use social media as data about how students present themselves to others, how they implement their "college projects" and how they interact with one another.
2. Develop an outreach strategy with input from students. We initially planned to do all of the SHIFT-related outreach via email until cautioned by our UAB that students rarely read email from unknown senders. Our other outreach efforts proved critical to producing the survey's very good response rate.
3. Build a research team that includes investigators at a range of career points. If we were going to do this again, we would complement the intellectual leadership provided by senior faculty with at least two full-time post-doctoral fellows, who could have assisted

with the collection and a played a central role in manuscript production. Having additional hands available full time would have accelerated the pace of our scientific production.

4. Free researchers from all other substantial institutional obligations, including teaching and administration. Institutional support for a project of this complexity in such a condensed timeline means enabling faculty who are engaged to step back from other teaching, research, or institutional service commitments during the most intense phases of data collection and analysis.
5. Consider the particular kinds of knowledge that could be produced by other methodological innovations. For example, longitudinal mixed-methods research could examine the effects of multi-level factors and institutional changes over time.

Conclusion and next steps

What is missing, of course, is a richer sense of how the particular context of Columbia and Barnard— urban, integrated into the city, with nightlife and transportation opportunities very different from those in a more rural setting— shapes students experiences. We are unable to fully identify meaningful institutional factors such size, location, student body demographics, and various campus policies (alcohol, housing, etc.), because our work contains little institutional-level variation. For example, there is variation across campuses in how alcohol is regulated (some ban kegs, crack down heavily on drinking in public spaces, or have different disciplinary consequences for hard liquor than for beer and wine). The drinking ecology is also shaped by campus location; drunk driving was not a concern in New York’s urban context, but Armstrong and Hamilton note that in their research site, the question of a ride home from a party after a night of drinking was a source of vulnerability to sexual assault (2006:490). Our hope is that

findings from SHIFT are the starting point for a network of cross-campus studies. As those efforts move forward, it will be particularly critical to figure out how to include a broad diversity of types of college experiences in research. Given the burden of suffering associated with sexual assault, there is disproportionately little federal funding available for research in this area (Waechter and Ma 2015), and so if universities want to advance science in this area, either the universities themselves, or private funders, are going to have to support it. And yet, private support and the possible concentration of research at private or well-funded public universities runs the risk of reproducing, or even exacerbating, inequalities. Highly-selective universities are not representative of the experience of college students in the United States; according to the Department of Education, less than a third of U.S. undergraduates are full-time students at primarily residential four-year colleges (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics 2010b, 2010a; Deil-Amen 2011). The challenge is not just to reproduce projects similar to SHIFT at campuses across the country, or even around the world, but to do so in a way that most fully reflects the varied experiences of students in post-secondary education.

Acknowledgements

This research was funded by Columbia University through generous support from multiple donors. The authors thank our research participants; our Undergraduate Advisory Board; Columbia University, and the entire SHIFT team who contributed to the development and implementation of this ambitious effort.

[Correction added on 13 April, after first online publication: The Acknowledgment has been corrected in this article.]

Tables

Table 1. In-depth interview sample characteristics (N=151).

Characteristic	N	%
Year in school		
Freshman	26	18%
Sophomore	38	26%
Junior	54	37%
Senior	29	20%
College		
Columbia College	100	68%
Barnard	28	19%
Engineering	14	10%
General Studies	5	3%
Gender		
Female	85	58%
Male	55	37%
Trans Female	1	1%
Genderqueer/Other	6	4%
Race (not mutually exclusive)		
Am. Indian/Alaskan Native	8	5%
Asian	30	20%
Black/African American	28	19%
Hispanic or Latino only	11	7%
More than 1 race	22	15%
Nat. Hawaiian/Pacific Isl.	3	2%
Other	7	5%
White	73	50%
Sexual identity		
Straight/Heterosexual	107	73%
Gay/Lesbian	8	5%
Bisexual	12	8%
Queer/Asexual/Other	20	14%
How students pay for college		
Pell Grants for low-income students	16	11%
Parents/family only	80	54%
Other (combination of ways)	51	35%

Table 2. Focus group characteristics (N=17).

Group characteristic	N
Co-ed	3
Male only	2
Female only	3
Barnard only	1
First year (freshmen)	2
First year (freshmen) minority students	1
International students	1
Minority students	1
First generation college	1
Religiously engaged	1
LGBT identifying	1

Table 3. Participant observation summary.

Location type	Hours
Dorms	160.4
Special interest houses (residential)	9.5
Fraternity/sorority	18.75
Dining halls	8.5
Religious spaces	19
Ethnic and cultural spaces	27
Outdoor spaces	54.5
Campus spaces (including outdoor campus spaces)	185.5
Off-campus spaces	111.25

References cited

“Affirmative Consent Laws (Yes Means Yes) State by State.” n.d. AffirmativeConsent.com.

Accessed July 17, 2017. <http://affirmativeconsent.com/affirmative-consent-laws-state-by-state/>.

Armstrong, Elizabeth A., Laura Hamilton, and Brian Sweeney. 2006. “Sexual Assault on Campus: A Multilevel, Integrative Approach to Party Rape.” *Social Problems* 53 (4):483–99.

Cantor, David, Bonne Fisher, Susan Chibnall, Reanne Townsend, Hyunshik Lee, Carol Bruce, and Gail Thomas. 2015. “Report on the AAU Campus Climate Survey on Sexual Assault and Sexual Misconduct.” Rockville, MD: Westat.

Cantor, David, Bonnie Fisher, Susan Chibnall, Reanne Townsend, Lee, Hyunshik, Carol Bruce, and Gail Thomas. 2015. “Report on the AAU Campus Climate Survey on Sexual Assault and Sexual Misconduct: Columbia University.” The American Association of Universities.

Creswell, John W., and Dana L. Miller. 2000. “Determining Validity in Qualitative Inquiry.” *Theory Into Practice* 39 (3):124–30.

Deil-Amen, Regina. 2011. “The ‘Traditional’ College Student: A Smaller and Smaller Minority and Its Implications for Diversity and Access Institutions.” Mapping Broad---Access Higher Education conference, Stanford University.

https://cepa.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/2011%20Deil-Amen%2011_11_11.pdf.

Dillman, Don A. 2014. *Internet, Phone, Mail, and Mixed-Mode Surveys: The Tailored Design Method*. 4th ed. Wiley.

Ellis, Lindsay. 2016. “Rice University Unveiling Required Sexuality Course as Preventive Step to Curb Assaults, Harassment.” *Houston Chronicle*. December 26, 2016.

<http://www.houstonchronicle.com/news/houston-texas/houston/article/Rice-University-unveiling-required-sexuality-10815485.php>.

Fedina, Lisa, Jennifer Lynne Holmes, and Bethany L. Backes. 2016. "Campus Sexual Assault: A Systematic Review of Prevalence Research From 2000 to 2015." *Trauma Violence & Abuse* Epub ahead of print:1–18.

Fisher, Bonnie S., Francis T. Cullen, and Michael G. Turner. 2000. "The Sexual Victimization of College Women. Research Report." NCJ-182369. Washington, DC: Department of Justice, National Inst. of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics.

Hirsch, Jennifer, Shamus Khan, and Claude A. Mellins. 2017. "The Lived Experience of Consent: Findings from the Columbia Sexual Assault and Sexual Health Study." Presented at Sexual Assault and Sexual Health Among Undergraduates: Findings, Policy Implications, and Key Directions for Future Research. Mailman School of Public Health, Columbia University, New York, NY. May 23, 2017.

Hirsch, Jennifer S., Holly Wardlow, Daniel Smith, Harriet Phinney, Shanti Parikh, and Constance Nathanson, eds. 2009. *The Secret: Love, Marriage, and HIV*. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press.

Koss, Mary P., Christine A. Gidycz, and Nadine Wisniewski. 1987. "The Scope of Rape: Incidence and Prevalence of Sexual Aggression and Victimization in a National Sample of Higher Education Students." *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 55 (2):162–70.

Maines, Cara. 2017. "New Space in Lerner Will Go to LGBTQ Students, Students of Color." *Columbia Daily Spectator*. March 31, 2017.

columbiaspectator.com/news/2017/03/31/new-space-in-lerner-will-go-to-lgbtq-students-students-of-color/.

Mellins, Claude A., Kate Walsh, Aaron L. Sarvet, Melanie Wall, Louisa Gilbert, John S. Santelli, Martie Thompson, et al. in press. "Sexual Assault Incidents among College Undergraduates: Prevalence and Factors Associated with Risk." *Plos One*.

Minkler, Meredith, and Nina Wallerstein. 2011. *Community-Based Participatory Research for Health: From Process to Outcomes*. John Wiley & Sons.

Paul, Marla. 2015. "'Sex 101' Greets First-Year Students at Northwestern." *Northwestern Now*. September 22, 2015. <https://news.northwestern.edu/stories/2015/09/woodruff-sex-101-freshmen-mooc/>.

Quinton, Sophie. 2016. "To Reduce Teen Pregnancy, Some States Ask Colleges To Provide Sex Ed." *Side Effects Public Media*. February 2, 2016. <http://sideeffectspublicmedia.org/post/reduce-teen-pregnancy-some-states-ask-colleges-provide-sex-ed>.

Russlynn, A. 2011. "Dear Colleague Letter." U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights.

Sanday, Peggy. 2007. *Fraternity Gang Rape: Sex, Brotherhood, and Privilege on Campus*. NYU Press.

Sanjek, Roger. 1990. *Fieldnotes: The Makings of Anthropology*. Cornell University Press.

U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. 2010a. "Table 197: Total Fall Enrollment in Degree-Granting Institutions, by Attendance Status, Sex of Student, and Control of Institution: Selected Years, 1947 through 2009." U.S.

- Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. Retrieved from http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d10/tables/dt10_197.asp?referrer=list.
- . 2010b. “Table 240: Number and Percentage Distribution of Students Enrolled in Postsecondary Institutions, by Level, Disability Status, and Selected Student Characteristics: 2003-04 and 2007-08.” U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. Retrieved from http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d10/tables/dt10_240.asp.
- Waechter, Randall, and Van Ma. 2015. “Sexual Violence in America: Public Funding and Social Priority.” *American Journal of Public Health* 105 (12):2430–37.
- Wallerstein, Nina, and Bonnie Duran. 2010. “Community-Based Participatory Research Contributions to Intervention Research: The Intersection of Science and Practice to Improve Health Equity.” *American Journal of Public Health* 100 (S1):S40–S46.
- Yoganathan, Anila. 2017. “OPINION: UGA Should Require a Sex Education Course to Compete with High School ‘abstinence Only’ policies.” *The Red and Black*, August 26, 2017. http://www.redandblack.com/opinion/opinion-uga-should-require-a-sex-education-course-to-compete/article_b93b7b36-89d7-11e7-bbab-036ba1b4ced2.html.