

Canadian universities tackle campus rape culture after Frosh Week

McGill University and University of Windsor focus on student-led initiatives

By Aleksandra Sagan, CBC News | Posted: Sep 05, 2014 5:00 AM ET | Last Updated: Sep 05, 2014 10:17 AM ET



A still image from a video posted on Instagram last year shows students at Saint Mary's University in Halifax participating in a chant that promoted non-consensual sex with underage girls. (Instagram)

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The pressure is on Canadian universities for a scandal-free year after a string of high-profile sexual assault cases and orientation week faux pas over the past academic year spotlighted what some say is a pervasive campus rape culture.

"Things don't change overnight. It's a slow progress," said Bianca Tétraut, officially McGill University's new "liaison officer (harm reduction)" and informally the person tasked with combating sexual assault on campus. "But that doesn't mean we should be deterred from it or that we should stop."

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She was hired in April for a one-year contract after McGill students felt the university's response to [three Redman football players being charged with sexual assault](#) was lacklustre.

"Universities are a bastion of education and trying to create communities,

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but are also very much involved in creating and perpetuating rape culture, and it continues to be something that's very much ignored," said Kai O'Doherty, a fourth-year student at McGill University.

O'Doherty and some other students banded together shortly after the incident became public knowledge to attempt to create the university's first sexual assault policy. They demanded McGill create a pro-survivor policy that provides clear channels for reporting assault and receiving support.

'Universities... are also very much involved in creating and perpetuating rape culture, and it continues to be very much ignored.'

- Kai O'Doherty, 4th-year student at McGill University

They're now working closely with Tétrault to write the policy and have it approved by the university's senate — a process O'Doherty estimates could take anywhere from six months to a couple years.

The new policy seeks to inject sexual assault information and training into all of McGill's departments and operations.

Frosh Week response alone is not enough

Tétrault believes the student-led initiative is on the right track with its focus on institutionalization.

"We're not letting it be just like a one-time, a one-size-fits-all [solution]," she said, referencing the need to expand education efforts past orientation week for incoming students.

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Many universities altered their Frosh Week programming this year after two universities made national headlines for mishaps in 2013. At Saint Mary's University in Halifax and the University of British Columbia's Vancouver campus, student leaders faced criticism after incoming frosh participated in chants that promoted non-consensual sex with underage girls.

This year, both universities provided student leaders with training on consent, and Saint Mary's provided more adult supervision for orientation activities. Other institutions, including McGill, also made changes, increasing information on consent and sexual assault available to incoming students and providing extra training to Frosh Week leaders.

Seemingly fewer issues arose, but Tétrault argues it's key for those campaigns to extend beyond the start of the school year. She's already planning an October consent campaign and hoping to launch an accompanying website, which will be a one-stop shop for students to get informed on sexual violence.

In the winter, she plans to implement a peer-led bystander initiative program, which has seen some success at the University of Windsor.

U of Windsor 'ahead of the curve'

The University of Windsor is "a bit ahead of the curve," said Dusty Johnstone, who works for the school's Bystander Initiative to Mitigate Sexual Assault program.

It was the brainchild of Anne Forrest, the director of women's studies, and professor Charlene Senn when Johnstone was a graduate student. It's a three-hour workshop based on [a model from the University of New Hampshire](#) that focuses on enabling students to recognize the spectrum



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of sexual assaults and intervene safely.

Windsor's program is unique because of its "focus on institutionalization," Johnstone explained.

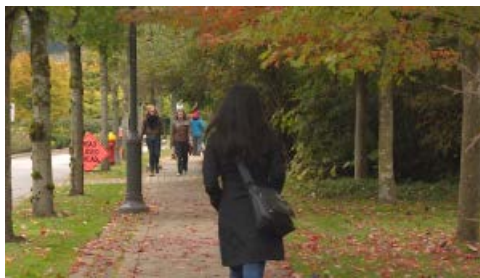
Students can take two classes for academic credit as part of the initiative. In the third-year class, students learn theory, while the fourth-year course is a practicum, and students conduct Bystander Initiative workshops during lectures for other classes.

Johnstone said 800 students have seen the workshop over the past three years, but estimates another 1,500 will see it over the next two semesters. For the first time this year, the third- and fourth-year courses are being offered in both semesters, meaning more peer facilitators will be trained to deliver the workshop, Johnstone explained. About 75 students total take the two classes each semester.

McGill's program will be even smaller and won't have the academic component yet. Tétrault will train the coaches and staff in McGill's athletics and recreation unit, who volunteered to undertake the workshop first.

Despite recognizing that she can't change people's long-held beliefs overnight, Tétrault is excited at the prospect of starting to get more students involved in educating their peers.

"The more people that are involved, the longer the duration and the more it will remain implemented in our community," she said.



A string of sexual assaults by strangers occurred last year at Vancouver's University of British Columbia. (CBC)

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Corrections

- ▢ A photo caption on an earlier version of this story incorrectly credited a photo of the chanting incident to CBC. In fact, the photo was a still image taken from a video posted on Instagram at the time of the incident.

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