

The Gendered Sewanee Experience:  
The State of Relationships and Sexuality at Sewanee

Three years of observation and reflection as a Sewanee student preceded my research this summer and served as the basis of its content. I started my internship with the goals of understanding sexual assault at Sewanee and creating an agenda of educational programming and campus campaigns to improve prevention and response efforts on campus. I executed a project plan that consisted of four different stages. I first made sense of my “gendered Sewanee experience,” a collection of stories, observations, and reflections gathered from my own experiences of going through freshmen year, responding to sexual assault, participating in the Greek pledge process, engaging with the Sewanee Outing Program and Outreach Office, as well as through my specific roles as an assistant proctor, sorority officer, Health Services work-study student, and resident of the Women’s Center. The second part of my work was an in depth literature review. Rather than the ease of a typical summer reading list, I read a large collection of books on both male and female rape, sexual violence, and sexual assault in relation to college campuses and Greek life. The third piece of my research involved more anthropological methodology where I conducted interviews with a total of sixteen students who shared details of sexual experiences, often including sexual assault, as well as countless others who shared opinions on this subject. While I did meet with several faculty and staff for official interviews, my findings and research would best be strengthened by interviews with many more professors. The final piece of this summer was the resulting agenda of initiatives that is now being executed by the Executive Board of the Women’s Center.

Through the third stage of my research – my interviews with Sewanee students – it became apparent that the conversation of coercive, manipulated, incapacitated, or forced sexual experiences could not be framed in terms of “sexual assault.” Most people who described this type of encounter did not consider it sexual assault. At Sewanee, men and

women who have experienced sexual assault do not want to be called a “victim.” They also they do not want to call the other a “perpetrator,” since most sexual assaults follow the “date-rape” scenario (although the word *date* can be misleading since this situation does not look like the traditional concept of a date), meaning it happened with a non-stranger and the element of consent seems more ambiguous than violent or gang-rape scenarios. It became clear that when presented with a hypothetical situation that meets the University policy’s and Tennessee’s definition of sexual assault, students were less likely to consider it sexual assault if one detail was included than when it was left out: the presence of alcohol.

When presented with a scenario built around the situation, “person A had sexual intercourse with person B, consent was not explicitly given,” most students, male and female identified this as sexual assault. On the other hand, those students whose situation also included “...and both people had been drinking,” did not identify this as sexual assault, and said it would be unfair for a woman to report it as sexual assault. This shows that for Sewanee students, and I would argue most young people as a product of our sexually silent culture, there exists a huge disconnect in communication, alcohol use, and sexual relationships. Their response shows that they believe it is not okay to have sex unless consent is communicated – with the exception of both being intoxicated, at which point explicit consent should not be expected. Their thinking is that one can label that experience “regrettable sex,” but not sexual assault. One can deduce many further ramifications of this, such as a culture of blaming that would lead those reporting to feel unsupported by their peers and that men are just as likely to be victims in this set up. However, for me, the most telling finding was that when alcohol is involved, students do not feel the same responsibility for communicating during sex; they remove the expectation of consent from the equation, and therefore are less likely to perceive the situation in terms of sexual assault. At the same time, the lack of communication is exactly what is causing unhealthy situations altogether.

Many people ask, *if a woman (or man) does not consider it sexual assault, then it is not, so why does that matter?* There are many responses. It allows coercive sex to be interpreted and understood as the norm and the only option, rather than unfulfilling, inappropriate, harmful, and having of serious medical consequences. Students are learning behaviors that will translate into unhealthy patterns for the rest of their life. I later realized that this resistance created an obstacle to recovery: if they did not label their experience as such, they could not access the systems of help or support. In other words, it became clear that our goal should not be focused on getting someone to consider an encounter “sexual assault” when they would not have otherwise, but rather to hold a different standard or understanding of sex. This proves to be an even more difficult goal as it suggests an entire shift in the “hook up culture” on college campuses, not to mention in the media and society as a whole.

An example of this type of shift is moving away from the anti-rape slogan of “no means not” to one of “yes means yes.” The former suggests that it is the man’s role to pursue sex and the female’s role to be gatekeeper. Not only is this a double standard well critiqued by feminist works, it does not work, especially in the scenarios described at Sewanee. While most people would stop if directly told *no*, for many reasons (extreme intoxication, perceived social norms expectations, etc.) they never are. The thinking, the norm, must become that consent should be confirmed at every progression of hooking up. However, giving and receiving consent in this way requires communication during the encounter to occur, something which is discouraged by our society and culture.

Sexual assault is directly related, if not a manifestation of the way our culture and campus understands sexuality. Every person has sexuality, and yet we treat the subject as taboo, sinful, even dirty. Young people in America are told the discussion of sexuality, particularly anything other than heterosexuality, is off limits, but the physical playing out of sexuality is not. Rather than being able to learn about sexual relationships from role models, parents, educators, young people are told discussions of sex and sexuality are off limits and

thus turn to pornography, media, and locker room stories. This causes countless problems, but the bottom line is that at Sewanee, students engage in situations where the terms are unwritten and the rules, when defined at all, are based on horribly misconstrued standards. In other words, sex at Sewanee is like playing a game where no one knows the rules – some write their own, some feel cheated, others are shocked when accused of not playing fair - but it seems like everyone is losing.

Another aspect of our society that fosters an unhealthy environment is the perpetuation of homophobia. This point recurred in conversations with men at Sewanee. For men, the insistence on and need for proving your heterosexuality causes men to avoid non-sexual relationships with women. This leads to a devaluing of non-sexual relationships with females and perpetuates the sexual objectification of women. Since men get policed for being “just friends” with a woman, most men at Sewanee describe limited prolonged interaction with women outside of alcohol and hooking up.

Much more can be said about the findings from this summer’s internship, but what is most exciting is the practical and immediate agenda of programming that has been developed from them. It will be implemented through the Women’s Center. In line with other changes in the vernacular we use to educate about sexual assault, we have changed the name of our fall conference from “USAW: Understanding Sexual Assault Week,” to “Conference on Relationships and Sexuality.” We have also developed a student-led resource line available 24 hours a day for students to receive peer support during crisis, namely sexual assault. Other projects, many of which were suggestions from conversations with other comparable institutions, will be implemented during the Spring semester.

While many other educational, prevention, and response programs are in the works, this summer has provided valuable insight into ways to be most successful in addressing sexual assault. This internship confirmed my interest in legal and university policies about sexual assault, but more broadly, my interest in human rights law, particularly as they relate to gender.