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Understanding Sexual Consent: Examining Affirmative Sexual Consent and Affirmative Sexual Consent Policies in the College Context

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Reflection

I chose to examine the idea of sexual consent as prevention because it seemed both highly relevant to today's climate and because the reasoning given and answers provided to students surrounding the use of sexual consent never sufficiently covered the topic. That is to say, as both a general student and as a Peer Sexual Health Educator (PSHE), I was taught the basic definition of affirmative sexual consent, but in reality, the definition only scratches the surface and within the confines of the PSHE program, my peers and I were unable to tackle and address its insufficiencies in ways that allowed us to help others (and ourselves) come to terms with questions about consent. What I found over the course of my research, however, was that there is not a lot that is definitive when it comes to sexual consent. Yes, there is an ethical foundation to consent which provides a logical framework for sexual consent, but each tenet comes with plenty of room for "What if" or "Yeah, but". This is because sexual relationships are highly nuanced and each person brings to the table their own values, experiences, and expectations.

At the beginning of this project, I was pretty convinced that affirmative sexual consent was a great educational tool and that it was what we, as a society, needed to both prevent sexual assaults and improve students' communication in sexual relationships. Yet I found that affirmative sexual consent, outside of a theoretical model, may not be as effective as it's touted to be. Despite the reason for its implementation being clear, when we take more than a quick moment to look at what actually causes incidents of sexual assault on campuses, a lack of clear consent is only the beginning. Alcohol, the Greek/ party system, and culturally ingrained sexual stereotypes are just three factors that have an enormous impact on rates of sexual assault, but, at least at Western, these don't seem like they are being meaningfully addressed in repetitive, campus-wide initiatives.

Secondly, I found that not only do we need to more closely examine research on consent behaviors, we need to conduct that research to begin with. Almost all the data I found was conducted on heterosexual, white college student, and while at a predominantly white school like Western that data can be used, it limits our understanding of consent for people of different ethnicities and sexual orientations. In other words, this research project has lead me to conclude that we need a two pronged approach- we need to engage in research about consent to help develop an effective education model in addition to identifying what actually leads to sexual assault and then systematically working to address those causes.

I think one of the most important things I realized was that maybe we don't need to push for all students to use "clear," "explicit" consent. Non-verbal consent cues are not only the norm, but seem to be effective. So maybe our time and attention would be better spent on encouraging students to actively look for consent cues, teaching them that if they aren't sure, then it is time to slow down and ask, and motivating them to break down the sexual stereotypes that can potentially lead to sexual assault in the first place. It also taught me that while there are several "wrong" ways to get consent, the right way is highly dependent on the individual and their situation. Sex is not cookie-cutter, so why should sexual consent be? Once we educate students on consent and give them the space and tools their need to communicate their desires and expectations, then we should let people figure out what works for them in their own relationship(s). Unfortunately, I don't think this is the solution many are looking for; it isn't a "quick" fix to the problem of sexual assault because removing or altering stereotypes and teaching kids things like how to drink in moderation requires undoing years of cultural education on top of the enormous amount of time, money, and work it will take to educate and actively engage students of all ages in talking about consent.

On the more technical side, this project provided a meaningful platform on which to practice my research skills and my ability to write in argumentative and inspiring ways. Given the limited amount of recent research on sexual consent behaviors and that research's narrow scope, I think this paper has provided an in-depth examination of ethical consent and how while college students use consent. I don't think the argumentative aspect of the paper is as strong and my introduction seems a little lack luster given the breadth of the paper itself. I was also challenged in the creation of my mini-lecture YouTube videos in that I experienced firsthand how hard it can be to write concise, meaningful, and inclusive scripts. In the second video, which dealt with many of the problems or questions that came up in my work or during my time as a PSHE, even after all the research I did, I still struggled to answer them in a way that held true to the original, ethics-based definition of consent, but that incorporated the idea that consent's implementation can vary depending on the individual and their situation. The definition video was certainly easier than the other video, which is a bit too long and definitively feels like a mini-"lecture". (However, I do take pride in my PowerPoint abilities, so at least the slides are visually appealing!)

Overall, if I had to do this again, I would have organized my notes into an Excel sheet or binder, so they could be more easily referenced, especially since I have several articles with both overlapping authors and concepts. For the first quarter of my project (spring 2016), I should have kept a time sheet as that would have helped keep me accountable in my work. Over these last two quarters, the time sheet provided by my WGSS 411 advisor was invaluable in managing my work load and the fact that we had a specific classroom to visit at least every two to three weeks meant that I felted like I was actually in a class with classmates, as opposed to feeling like I was tackling all this work by myself. For Honors 490, it certainly would have made me feel more connected to

the Honors program if there had been even three meetings with the other seniors working on their projects over the course of the quarter.

        While I don't have definitive plans for graduate school yet, I am working towards either volunteering or working in a WGSS related field, and I would like the opportunity to apply this research to whatever I end up doing over the next year or two. On a practical level, I think the data and my recommendations have the potential to influence future education and consent policies which in turn would mean that affirmative sexual consent's goal of sexual assault prevention would actually be able to come to fruition, as opposed to it just being this idealistic model thought to solve everyone's consent "problem." Additionally, I would love to see the research on consent expanded to include LGBTQ+ and non-white students over the next few years, and I think it would be really powerful to work on this type of research as a graduate student sometime down the road.