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## Shifting Sexual Violence Prevention Messaging: Placing blame where it belongs while fostering collective empowerment and self-efficacy

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### Commentary

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In his book, *The Men's Program: A Peer Education Guide to Rape Prevention*, John Foubert (2005) discusses how sexual assault associated with negative hypermasculine ideologies or toxic masculinity--especially beliefs that women are inferior to men. Researchers have also noted a complex connection between strict gender roles and violence against women, which together contribute to the so-called "rape culture." (Carroll et al., 2016; Edwards et al., 2011). Additionally, Foubert (2005) suggests men at risk for committing sexual assault tend to believe their sexual and aggressive urges are out of their control and blame the victim. This viewpoint has been suggested as an explanation for how potential rapists justify coercive behaviors (Canan, Jozkowski, Crawford, 2016).

It is estimated that one in five women and one in 16 men are sexually assaulted while in college (Krebs et al., 2007). The literature supports that the most prevalent demographic of perpetrators of sexual assault are men; however, intersectionality, the interconnection of social categorizations such as race, class, and gender, is paramount when addressing social justice issues (Black et al., 2010; Carbado, Crenshaw, Mays, & Tomlinson, 2013). Therefore, discussions with cisgender males are integral to understanding this viewpoint and to considering how college men's gendered beliefs and preferred communication styles may affect their understanding of sexual consent, which could ultimately impact how and

whether they engage in active, affirmative consent with their sexual partners (Shafer et al., 2018).

In the last five years, there has been a substantial movement towards sexual assault programming on college campuses including the White House Task Force *It's on Us* (2019), *Me Too Movement* (2018), and the *Hunting Ground* film (Ziering & Dick, 2015). Prevention has shifted from risk reduction (i.e. don't walk alone, cover your drink) to bystander intervention (i.e. create a distraction, ask directly). RAINN (2019) states, "The only person responsible for committing sexual assault is a perpetrator, but all of us have the ability to look out for each other's safety." Another important shift in sexual assault programming is the "we believe you" movement encompassing key stakeholders at universities including police officers and deans to create a culture of believing the survivor and eliminating victim-blaming from sexual assault language (EVAWI, 2019). For example, instead of asking, "what were you wearing or why were you walking alone," stakeholders are trained to avoid language that implies it is the victim's fault. For instance, using language such as "I believe you" and "how can I support you."

Georgia Southern University has implemented evidence-based bystander intervention programming that provides an example of the shift in sexual assault programming on college campuses. The Georgia Southern University Sexual Assault Response Team (SART) has applied social

capital theory and the socio-ecological framework to develop and manage a Prevention of Men's Violence against Women Champion's Coalition (CDC, 2019; Coleman, 1998). Coalition goals include the following: to utilize social capital to reduce stigma and establish a call to action among students, faculty, and staff to prevent and address sexual assault and gender violence within the GS community; to align Georgia Southern University sexual assault prevention and awareness messaging with recommended national tool kits; and to promote awareness for future SART Campaigns.

The impact Georgia Southern University's Men's Violence against Women Champion's Coalition has resulted in the application of best practice and theoretical based intervention to help invest in a culture of change relevant to today's societal climate (Skuraton, 2018). Doing so will create an atmosphere of success, safety, and wellness which promotes an environment for students, faculty, and staff to thrive. Coalition efforts included engaging key stakeholders on college campuses that can be generalized to the population and utilized on various campuses to create a culture of change on a national level.

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