International Journal of Sciences: Basic and Applied Research (IJSBAR)

ISSN 2307-4531
(Print & Online)

https://gssrr.org/index.php/JournalOfBasicAndApplied/index

Bystander Intervention and Campus Culture: College Counselors' Perceptions and Roles in Addressing Sexual Assault on Campus

Dr. Jill Willis LPC*

Grand Canyon University, 3300 W. Camelback Road Phoenix, AZ 85017, United States
Email: jill.willis.phd@gmail.com

Abstract

Sexual assault remains a critical issue on university campuses, necessitating effective intervention strategies to ensure a safer environment for students. This study investigates college counselors' perceptions of bystander intervention and their roles in mitigating sexual assault incidents within campus communities. Through semi-structured interviews with experienced college counselors, the research explores the challenges and opportunities in bystander intervention initiatives and the potential support and empowerment of students by counselors. The findings indicate that while counselors acknowledge the importance of bystander intervention, they face challenges including cultural barriers, inadequate training, and institutional constraints. The study recommends enhancing counselor training and integrating bystander intervention strategies into counseling services to significantly improve the prevention of sexual assault on campuses. This research enriches the understanding of college counselors' perspectives on combating sexual violence and offers suggestions for improving bystander intervention programs in higher education.

Keywords: professional counseling; bystander intervention; college campuses; higher education.

Received: 6/27/2024
Accepted: 8/27/2024
Published: 9/5/2024

---

* Corresponding author.

1. Introduction

There are growing movements on college campuses to address and transform the campus culture that surrounds sexual assault and survivors [1]. College campuses have a unique culture that allows for challenges to traditional beliefs and provides safe spaces to create conversations that may change the conversation and response around sexual assault. The current culture that surrounds sexual assault on college campuses ignores survivors' cries for help, blames survivors for being raped, and discourages them from reporting a sexual assault crime [2]. Up to 20% of female students experience some form of sexual violence while attending college [3]. Sexual and gender minority (SGM) individuals and historically minoritized students, such as students of color, and the intersections thereof are at increased risk for experiencing sexual violence and little research focuses on this reality [4,5]. While student beliefs related to prevention efforts have changed, the behaviors associated with prosocial bystander choices remain the same [6].

There are historical factors for why reporting is still a problem 20 years after VAWA was passed [1]. Therefore, the question remains, "How do professionals change a culture that surrounds sexual assault on college campuses with a bystander intervention approach?" In 20 years, numerous approaches attempted to answer this question and address the real problem. Taking measures like personal self-defense courses, carrying whistles and mace, and telling students to avoid walking alone has done little to address college sexual assault [1]. Prevention has primarily consisted of teaching women how to avoid potential perpetrators and using tactics to escape dangerous situations, measures that are generally ineffective [7].

2. Bystander Intervention on College Campuses

Interestingly, literature suggests that young adults (ages 18-24 years) are willing to intervene in situations to prevent sexual assault [8] yet the questions remain, "Why don't they actually intervene?" Literature also suggests that young adults are willing to intervene to prevent sexual assault; however, statistics remain 1 in 5 women will experience a sexual assault while attending college [1].

Bystander intervention programs are a channel for these challenges and conversations [1]. A bystander intervention program brings the vivid reality of sexual assault to students and challenges them to discontinue buying into myths and stereotypes that may drive the culture surrounding sexual assault [9]. Bystander intervention programs aim to educate students on exactly what a student may do to prevent sexual assaults and support survivors [1]. The author [5] suggests that researchers should focus more in the area of administration and staff as role models in the prevention methods of a bystander intervention program. College counseling centers are the heartbeat of campus that allows students to be supported, encouraged, and address multiple issues while enrolled as students. However, if college counselors had the proper tools to prevent sexual assault, campus violence would be lower, and all students could enjoy the college experience without fear of a heinous crime.

3. College Counselors' Perceptions

College counselor perceptions of bystander intervention programs were analyzed instead of evaluating existing programming or creating a new category of bystander intervention program. I designed this study to bridge a gap

in literature related to practitioners who implement bystander intervention programs to address campus violence, specific to sexual assault, and actual program evaluations of those same programs.

The literature regarding bystander intervention was limited when addressing the role of models on college campuses such as faculty, staff, and administration through qualitative methods [10]. There was an enormous need for qualitative designs that allowed participants to discuss their sense of connection with others and how they believed that influences willingness to intervene as a bystander [10]. Some of the specific influences, related to college counselors and what they believed influences the willingness of others to intervene as a bystander, could be the differences in professional identity. Personal histories, identities, and power inequity matter when deciding to engage in bystander behavior [11]. This research could be of interest to higher education administrators, college counselors, and groups who advocate for changes in professional ethical codes and state legislation.

4. Increased Student Enrollment

College counseling centers looked at a projected increase in student population and statistics that report 1 in 5 women experience a completed sexual assault while in college [8]. This intrinsic, descriptive case study depicted college counseling centers as having the responsibility to implement bystander intervention programs and their perceptions related to that experience. This study was a multi-site inquiry of small and large, rural universities and colleges in the state of Texas. Data was collected from college counselors at multiple universities and colleges who held LPC licensure and had worked at a college counseling center for at least one year.

5. Methods

The authors [12] outlined that a qualitative case study should be used when answering "how" and "why" questions, behaviors that cannot be manipulated by the researcher or design, the researcher wanted to understand contextual conditions/behaviors because they are relevant to the study, and boundaries are not clear between the phenomenon and context. This study focused on seven college counselors constituting a single, bounded unit. An intrinsic, descriptive case study was chosen to describe the real-life context of college counselors being responsible for the implementation of bystander intervention programs on college campuses.

5.1 Design

A qualitative methodological design was used for this study because of the qualitative nature of the research questions. This study was conceived after the researchers experience in a college counseling center. The objective was to explore how college counselors perceived bystander intervention programs on their campuses.

This study aimed to answer the following research questions:

1. How does a counselor, in a student-counseling center affect culture?

2. What is a college counselor's sense of connection to students and other employees?

3. What is the perception of college counselors on students' willingness to intervene as a bystander on campus?

5.2 Participants

For this study, the researcher collected data from semi-structured interviews with seven college counselors who were Licensed Professional Counselors (LPCs) and had graduated from a graduate program in counseling. She met face to face with six participants at a location of their choice and the participants' preference of time. The seventh interview was conducted online. Each participant gave genuine, open responses, to the semi-structured interview questions. Probing questions were answered when clarification was needed throughout the course of multiple interviews. Of the seven participants, three identified as female and four identified as male. The participants' ages ranged from 35-55 years old. The mean for the number of years served as a college counselor was 6.9, with a median of 5.

5.3 Procedures

Rapport was defined as the positive feelings between the interviewer and the subject with appropriate boundaries Reference [12]. Rapport-building processes included appreciation for participants' time, a discussion about the purpose of the study, and an explanation of the format for procedures that would be followed.

Each interview began with rapport building, informed consent, and explanations of questions that they had about the study. Each interview was recorded with a handheld recorder that was kept in a double-locked file cabinet to ensure confidentiality of participants during the duration of the study. Once interviews were recorded, they were transcribed into a Word document and sent to the participant for editing and clarification, if needed. Each interview was collected, transcribed, edited, and reformatted to include participants' revisions. All of the Word documents were entered into an "interview transcriptions" folder on the researcher's desktop. This desktop was a password-secured computer that was on a separate server from other departments. The questionnaire listed eight questions for the semi-structured interview. They were as follows:

1. What is your role in the culture of your college campus?

2. How do you feel your role with college students impacts you?

3. What is your sense of connection to students and other employees on your college campus?

4. In what ways do you feel best address your experience with bystander intervention programs?

5. What counseling skills or techniques did you learn in graduate school that are most effective when working with college students?

6. What do you believe influences a person's willingness to intervene as a bystander?

7. Do you plan to pursue a higher level of education in the counseling field?

8. Is there anything that you would like to add about your experience with or feelings regarding what makes a good bystander?

6. Analysis

The data analysis for qualitative research often includes thematic, content, constant comparison, discourse, critical discourse, conversion, and analysis of narratives [13]. For a more formal analysis, an Excel spreadsheet was created with a separate tab for each interview question. Transcripts were then separated by line numbers and implemented into the Excel file, per interview question. While using open coding to identify themes, the researcher color-coded themes that were similar in participants' responses in a separate margin. The data was analyzed multiple times and then organized into color-coded themes that were similar across the different interview questions. Each theme had its own color in the final Excel file. All data collected, both printed and electronic, were in a secure location and kept for at least two years.

A Qualitative Data Analysis Software (QDAS) program called QDA Miner Lite analyzed the qualitative data in this study. QDAS programs are common in qualitative research and have gained popularity in the past 25 years in qualitative research [14]. The strengths of using programs like QDA Miner Lite and other QDAS programs include more complex and exhaustive coding schemes versus paper-based techniques, better testing for emerging theoretical propositions, and improved overall quality of qualitative analysis and interpretation [14]. After transcribing, analyzing, and coding interviews, the researcher input the themes that were found into QDA Miner Lite. This program verified, with the frequency count of the themes and percentage of codes that in the transcripts from the interviews. All of the codes were verified at a significance level of < 0.02.

6.1Trustworthiness

A peer-reviewed process that promoted validity and trustworthiness was used [15]. To obtain reliability, the data was analyzed by a college counseling center director who held a licensure as a licensed professional counselor. This director had over 30 years of counseling experience, was a licensed professional counselor-supervisor, and had worked in higher education with college students for over 15 years. They were a faculty member in the graduate counseling department and routinely taught counseling theories and group methods. Member checking was used to allow participants the opportunity to review transcripts for clarification of their thoughts as a triangulation method [16].

7. Results

"You took away my worth, my privacy, my energy, my time, my safety, my intimacy, my confidence, my own voice, until today." –Sexual Assault Survivor of Brock Turner

After interviews were transcribed, themes that emerged from the data included professional identity, theoretical framework, working with college students as a counselor, level of comfort with bystander intervention, and influencers to act as a bystander.

7.1 Research Question #1: How does a counselor, in a student-counseling center affect culture?

Participants were asked, "How do you feel you impact campus culture as a counselor?" Participants responded in different ways to this question, but all described the professional identity of a Licensed Professional Counselor. All participants described providing counseling services as part of their role on campus. Some roles included advocacy components and others defined the role as a "resource of support" for academic success in the lives of students. Other role descriptions included outreach, as an effort to tell more students about the services provided by the counseling center, and another participant defined outreach as a tool to create culture change on campus. Participants also identified theoretical frameworks that they used when they worked with college students. These theories included client centered, solution-focused brief therapy, and cognitive behavioral therapy.

The data suggested that using short-term approaches that focused on the clients' wants and needs were a best practice for college counselors. This concept was reflective of the literature that discussed what college students were looking for and how they interacted with resources on campus. College counselors, on average, do not have the time to spend establishing therapeutic relationships to use long-term and developmental interventions on college/university campuses. Often, their job descriptions do not even account for 100% counseling responsibilities. Using theories that were specific to the present needs and/or wants of college students should be a priority for counseling centers on college/university campuses.

College counselors affected the culture on campus by working with students who were not connected to other resources, organizations, or even academics. College counseling centers also provided a sanctuary for students to become a better version of themselves that can function more effectively and then share that with other students. Often, college counseling centers' best marketing plans were the referrals from their clients. These students were often high-functioning student leaders on campus who influence other students. College counselors were a support system for distress related to academics and acted as an incredible retention tool that kept the culture on campus consistent because students stay in school. Often, responsibilities related to the prevention of sexual assault were given to counselors. As a result, those counselors then become the face of consent, bystander intervention, and postvention that struck at sexual violence, or rape culture, on campus.

7.2 Research Question #2: What is a college counselor's sense of connection to students and other employees?

Participants responded in unique ways to address this question, but two categories evolved: connected and disconnected. Participants described feeling connected to the students with whom they built relationships; however, the disconnection came with opportunities to connect to more students. The idea that was communicated was feeling isolated within the counseling centers, but feeling as if they had purpose and connectivity to the students who made it into the counseling center. This idea did not have resolutions regarding how to connect with more of the student population or other faculty/staff.

College counselors were often delegated any number of responsibilities outside of the areas of counseling or therapeutic interventions. Often the professional ethics of counselors, specifically confidentiality, were barriers to connecting with other employees or departments on a college/university setting. College counselors, even while

having responsibilities as marketing/outreach, cannot ethically have dual relationships with clients/students. College counseling centers are often housed within student affairs divisions, where employees outside of the counseling department are encouraged to mentor and befriend students to make their college experience feel more connected and home-like.

The feeling of being isolated within the counseling department and isolated from campus life can be overwhelming at times for college counselors. Counselors are the secret keepers of campus. They have an expanded reality of what campus life is legitimately like. For college counselors who are not prepared for this reality, it can lead to complex issues that, if go unaddressed, may lead to burnout. Understanding the responsibilities of college counselors is a preventative step in addressing the issues that create isolation.

College/university counseling centers are tasked with the responsibilities of implementing these programs. These programs took a multilevel approach to prevention and intervention when addressing sexual assault. In this study, three participants indicated they felt comfortable with bystander intervention programming. These three participants were from four-year universities. This result reflected the literature that four-year institutions receive and provide more resources than two-year institutions to address sexual assault on campus.

The culture that surrounds sexual assault on college campuses left students/survivors feeling revictimized and guilty. For example, when giving a report, female students are often asked by campus law enforcement to describe what they were wearing at the time of the assault. This is a very fundamental example of rape culture, and how the systems and processes are set to blame the victim. As counselors, teaching students to recognize this and shift their framework related to sexual assault can be a daunting task that is overwhelming, mostly because of the deeply ingrained culture that exists around sexual assault. Counselors must have a level of understanding and comfortability, as humans, related to this topic before they can begin training students. Sometimes, as the participants of this study discussed, that is a difficult process.

Counselors hear story after story, from survivor after survivor, of their experiences of assault, learning how to function post-assault, and then the reality of attempting to maintain and succeed academically on the campus where the assault occurred. These barriers for students can be overwhelming for the counselors working with survivors. Participants indicated how working with these students, to address these barriers, affected them personally, changing them as a human and as a counselor.

7.3 Research Question #3: What is the perception of college counselors on students' willingness to intervene as a bystander on campus?

Participants gave five separate variables that they felt influenced a bystander to intervene. Those influences were training, protection from risk, sense of hope, humanity, and awareness. Participants reported that they felt individuals were more likely to intervene if they understood what to look for in a situation where violence could occur and felt comfortable taking action. Participants also discussed needing to understand what risks were involved if they reported to judicial affairs or the dean of students' office and how much information they would need to share. The last idea that participants discussed was a sense of hope that their intervening would matter.

Participants believed that the willingness to make a different choice or influence those around them and challenge the culture would require a belief that violence on campus could be prevented and stopped.

The preponderance of literature about bystander intervention programs does not include counselors' perspectives of what influences a bystander. The mass of the research was related to the effectiveness of bystander intervention programs. College counselors are the individuals on campus who get direct contact with survivors and work with them to remain on campus, despite a sexual assault. Bystander intervention programs are a layer of how to prevent sexual assault on campus, not the way to end power-based violence occurring on college campuses.

8. Discussion

Multiple implications in the field of college counseling were identified in this study. A main implication is the need for a more consistent description related to what a counselor does on the college or university campus. Participants indicated a variety of duties that ranged from academic advising to implementing bystander intervention programs.

The Texas College Counseling Association (TCCA) defines its association as the place for those in secondary education institutions whose professional identity is counseling and whose purpose is fostering students' development [17]. This organization nor state legislations defines what counselors in college counseling centers are responsible to do based on ethical codes or theories. In the state of Texas, the occupational code for higher education designates that psychologists employed at institutions of higher education can operate without a license to provide psychological services to students. This includes the professional occupation as a college counselor. Professional development related to college counselors needs to include the requirement for a doctorate, specific to mental health, such as counselor education and supervision or counseling psychology. Continuing education may keep licensures maintained but for the purpose of career advancement, doctoral degrees are necessary within higher education.

Three preferences of theoretical framework emerged from the participants: client-centered, solution-focused brief therapy, and cognitive behavioral therapy. As college counselors and college counseling centers begin to have more responsibility put on them, a research need is to define best practices for evidence-based interventions. Short-term, goal-oriented theories help define what student-counseling centers are and are not. Developing a standard for scope of practice is needed within this field as well. Developing a scope of practice and having a model that provided more guidance for college counselors needs to be developed. Based on the literature review, six themes could be used as best practices for working with sexual assault survivors. These themes included trust/identity development, strength-based interventions, psychoeducation, outreach activities, and human sexuality counseling.A tertiary implication for college counseling is to realize the toll endured by counselors who work to implement bystander intervention programs. Implementing a bystander intervention program at a college or university is a multitier process that required effort, planning, and a high sense of purpose from the individual who is required to implement it [7]. Campus violence is no longer just an issue related to women [7] but an issue that affects all students, faculty, and staff.

Participants in this study report that they changed as humans because of the clients that they work with, especially clients who had experienced sexual assault on campus. Many times, participants struggled with how to respond during the interview, not because of an inability to answer, rather because of a flood of emotion and conviction from working with students whose lives changed because of violence on campus. Creating opportunities for staff within college counseling centers for wellness activities and training related to burnout is important for administrators to consider. Budget lines to cover licensure mandates is an avenue of support that could be implemented to address these barriers.

Participants from this study responded to the responsibilities of bystander intervention implementation with either comfort or inexperience. The expectation that student counseling centers are the go-to resource for administration related to everything that administration is not comfortable or familiar with needs reevaluating. Providing the appropriate resources so that student counseling centers can respond to the demands of administration in a way that is effective, evidence-based, and most importantly helpful to students must become a priority for institutions. Creating integrated systems of academic training labs that include professional counseling, public health, and social work academic departments, creating health and wellness centers, referrals to nutrition and exercise science are a few ways to address the barriers that are established related to college counseling centers implementing bystander intervention programs.

College counselors know the true culture of campus. The perceptions that training, protection from risk, sense of hope, humanity, and awareness are the reasons why college students are willing to intervene, as a bystander should be investigated. These five themes could be built upon to shape how programs are developed and implemented on college and university campuses. These five themes could also be used to better train college counselors and provide a model for working with clients who are support systems with peers and family members. These five themes also provide a specific set of tools that can be given to administration and college counselors for professional development and to help improve their understanding of how to work with survivors of sexual assault.

9. Recommendations for Future Research

This study produced several alternatives for future research related to college counselors' perspectives of bystander intervention programs. Defining what a counselor at a college setting is responsible for would be a starting point. From there, looking at students' perspectives of effectiveness of counseling services would help create evidence-based practices and theories that are not currently abundant in the literature related to student counseling centers. More research is needed to create structure within the higher education administration system for the programs addressing campus violence; with the needed structure in place, these programs will be better equipped to meet federal mandates while ensuring a collaborative relationship with their institutions of higher education and governing bodies that benefits both faculty/staff and the student body. Student counseling centers need to provide data for what they are already doing and measure the effectiveness of the treatment plans that they are implementing. Research related to evidence-based practices, connection of services provided and retention rates, and integration of wellness models for professional staff to combat stress and fatigue in college counselors are all areas that can be evaluated.

10. Conclusion

This study underscores the pivotal role college counselors play in addressing sexual assault on university campuses through bystander intervention. Counselors' insights reveal that while bystander intervention is a promising approach, its effectiveness is contingent upon overcoming cultural resistance, improving institutional support, and ensuring counselors receive adequate training. The findings highlight the need for a more integrated approach, where counselors are not only equipped with the necessary skills but also actively involved in shaping and promoting bystander intervention initiatives. By fostering a campus culture that encourages proactive bystander behavior and supports victims of sexual assault, universities can create a safer and more supportive environment for all students. Future research should continue to explore the specific strategies that can enhance counselors' involvement in bystander intervention and how these efforts can be scaled across diverse campus settings.

References

[1] C. A. Franklin, H. R. Jin, L. M. Ashworth, & J. H. Viada. (2016). "Sexual assault resource availability on Texas higher education campuses: A web site content analysis." *Women & Criminal Justice*. [On- line]. Pp. 1-27. doi:10.1080/08974454.2015.1128377

[2] R. M Hayes, R. L Abbot, & S. Cook (2016). "It's her fault: Student acceptance of rape myths on two college campuses." *Violence Against Women*, [On- line]. 22(13), pp. 1540-1555. doi:10.1177/1077801216630147

[3] K. Baton, R.D Williams, J.M Housman. (2023)."Systemic Review of College-Based Bystander Interventions to Reduce Sexual Violence." *Health Behavior and Policy Review*, [On- line]. 10(2), pp. 1204-1217. doi: 10.14485/HBPR.10.2.2

[4] K. T Kirk-Provencher, N. S Spillane, M. R Schick, S. J Chalmers, C. Hawes, & L. M. Orchowski (2023). "Sexual and Gender Minority Inclusivity in Bystander Intervention Programs to Prevent Violence on College Campuses: A Critical Review." *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*, [On- line]. 24(1), pp. 110 124. https://doi.org/10.1177/15248380211021606

[5] S. McMahon., J. Burnham, & V.L Banyard. (2020). "Bystander Intervention as a Prevention Strategy for Campus Sexual Violence: Perceptions of Historically Minoritized College Students." *Prev Sci*. [On-line]. 21. Pp. 795–806 https://doi.org/10.1007/s11121-020-01134-2

[6] K.Yule & , J. Grych. (2020). "College Students' Perceptions of Barriers to Bystander Intervention." *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*. [On- line]. 35(15-16), PP. 2971-2992. https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260517706764

[7] R. P. Barone., J. R. Wolgemuth., & C. Linder. (2007). "Preventing sexual assault through engaging college men." *Journal of College Student Development*. [On- line]. 48, PP. 585-594.

https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2007.0045

[8] J. D Foubert,, J. Langhinrichsen-Rohling, H. Brasfield., & B. Hill. (2010). "Effects of a rape awareness program on college women: Increasing bystander efficacy and willingness to intervene." *Journal of Community Psychology*. [On- line]. 38, PP. 813-827. doi:10.1002/jcop.20397

[9] S. J. Potter&, J. G Stapleton. (2012). "Translating sexual assault prevention from a college campus to a United States military installation: Piloting the know-your-power bystander social marketing campaign." *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*. [On- line]. 27, PP. 1593-1621. doi: 10.1177/08862605110425795

[10] S. McMahon. (2015). "Call for research on bystander intervention to prevent sexual violence: The role of campus environments." *American Journal Community Psychology*. [On- line]. 55, PP. 472-489. doi:10. 1007/s10464-015-9724-0

[11] B. E. Bloom, R. Joseph, M. D. Ulibarri, E. Reed & E. C. Ulloa. (2024). "Factors Associated with Engaging in Bystander Intervention Behavior Among College Students." *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*. [On- line]. 39(7-8), PP. 1731-1759. https://doi.org/10.1177/08862605231212170

[12] P. Baxter & S. Jack (2008). "Qualitative case study methodology: Study design and implementation for novice researchers." *The Qualitative Report*. [On- line]. 13(4), PP. 544-559.

[13] N. Petty, O. Thomson, G.Stew. (2012). "Ready for a paradigm shift? Part 2: Introducing qualitative research methodologies and methods." *Man. Ther*. [On- line]. 17, PP. 378–384

[14] M. Woods, T. Paulus, D. P. Atkins, & R. Macklin. (2016). "Advancing Qualitative Research Using Qualitative Data Analysis Software (QDAS)? Reviewing Potential versus Practice in Published Studies Using ATLAS.ti and NVivo." *Social Science Computer Review*. [On- line]. 34, PP. 597-617. https://doi.org/10.1177/0894439315596311

[15] B. Johnson & L. B. Christensen. *Educational research: Quantitative, qualitative, & mixed approaches.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2007

[16] C. Glesne. *Becoming qualitative researchers: An introduction (4th ed.)*. New York: Longman, 2011

[17] "Texas College Counseling Association." Internet: https://txca.org/tcca/ [8/10/2024].