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# Community Reflects on Culture of Sexual Assault



“Emails are never enough,” a student wrote on a t-shirt at Take Back The Night, a student-organized event aimed at addressing sexual assault.

*Editor's Note: An unfinished version of this article was mistakenly uploaded to our website on May 16. This previous version did not meet The Exonian's editorial standards by any means. Last week, the 143rd Editorial Board reviewed the article and decided it was not ready for publication and needed an additional week of work to reach our standards. This was miscommunicated to the Web Board, leading to the publication of an unfinished version. The unfinished version was not*



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on <https://www.exeter.edu/about-us/our-commitment-safety>. If helpful, please seek confidential help at the National Sexual Assault Hotline at +1 (800) 656-4673, HAVEN 24/7 hotline at +1 (603) 994-SAFE (7233), or Counseling and Psychological Services through the Lamont Health and Wellness Center: +1 (603) 777-3420.

Two years ago, in May of 2019, more than 200 students gathered in front of Jeremiah Smith Hall in protest against the Academy's history of mishandling sexual assault cases. Since then, the Academy has instituted various policies and reforms aimed at improving the sexual misconduct response process. Students and faculty members have reflected on how administrative policy changes have shaped and affected the Academy's culture of discussing and responding to sexual misconduct.

Dr. Christina Palmer, Director of Student Well-Being, detailed the Academy's recent work in preventing and addressing sexual assault in an email statement to *The Exonian*:

"The Academy's current culture on sexual assault is not unique, it mirrors that of society. Sexual misconduct among adolescents is unfortunately common. The important work the Academy is doing to support students in their understanding of sexual violence is critical in having healthier relationships. The consent workshops through HAVEN are invaluable, in helping students to recognize that sexual violence does not always involve sexual intercourse, or penetration and does involve being coerced by another to do sexual things or do sexual things to them. Our curriculum in HHD classes are purposeful in being repetitive in sharing resources that are available, and the importance of being a bystander (to disrupt or speak up in supporting a peer that you have concerns about is vital to changing the misconception that no one is going to do anything).

It is important to note that failure of someone harmed to report or disclose sexual assault is also not uncommon, on and off the campus. Usually reports or disclosures happen months to years afterwards, as the survivor can have many reactions to the assault, including many layers of fear and shame. The impact of sexual assault can also be long-lasting, and be associated with depression, anxiety, PTSD, and other mental health disorders that hold them from moving forward.

On our campus we have a strong group of students many a part of EASA [Exonians Against Sexual Assault], GSA [Gender-Sexuality Alliance], OMA [Office of Multicultural Affairs], FEM club [Feminist Union] to name a few that speak out on the importance of our campus working harder in having open discussions about sex among



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month, we held Take Back the Night, for the first time which was a culmination of recognizing that sexual misconduct happens here, as well we all want a safer community. The Clothesline Project was a huge success in giving students an opportunity to increase awareness of the impact of sexual violence and abuse, honor survivors' strength to continue, and provided an avenue for the Academy to courageously break the silence for a safer community."

Principal William Rawson described efforts within the Academy to confront issues of sexual assault and sexual misconduct in an email to *The Exonian*:

"Following the large student gathering in the quad on May 9, [2019] and a second large meeting in the assembly hall the next day, Assistant Principal Lassey and I had a series of smaller meetings with students to discuss specific ways we could improve the school's handling of reports of sexual misconduct," Rawson wrote. "Those meetings in turn led to a series of meetings with students over the summer, led largely by Assistant Principal Lassey, that resulted in a complete overhaul of our process for handling reports of student-on-student sexual misconduct, including the creation of a Misconduct Review Board to replace what previously had been called Principal's Discretion. Those changes were incorporated in the E-Book."

"Starting before my arrival, I believe the community has worked hard to improve awareness and understanding around issues of sexual assault and sexual misconduct. The adoption of an affirmative verbal consent policy in the fall on 2018 was an important change," Rawson wrote. "Dr. Palmer and the HHD department have led efforts to improve training and educational programming around issues of consent, healthy relationships, and bystander training, among other important topics. Students also have played an important role in building awareness and promoting change. The recent first Take Back the Night event, including the powerful Clothesline Project, is a good example of continuous efforts by students and adults to speak out against sexual violence, build awareness and create a better campus culture for everyone."

"I don't have specifics to offer [about policies surrounding sexual assault on campus that the Academy is looking into for the future] at this moment, but we regularly examine our practices for ways we might improve our training of adults and students and ways we might improve how we handle reports of sexual misconduct," Rawson wrote. "We will continue to meet with EASA leadership and other students to hear their perspectives on these issues. I see this



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administrative leaders, especially following the most recent case involving longtime math instructor Szczesny Kaminski.

“The Kaminski case broke my heart. It really hurt my trust; it really blew the chance of any trust I could have in the administration to care about keeping us safe,” she said. “Looking at the Kaminski case alone, I can't say we've come farther than we were five years ago. I don't think there's been a massive change.”

Westray recalled the Academy's issues with sexual assault since her prep year. “One of my very first memories of Phillips Exeter surrounding sexual assault is the lead up to Back in Black. I was terrified of the dance because everyone was talking about sexual assault at the dance,” Westray said. “I was just shocked at the way people talked about it. People told me to be careful. Half of the upperclassmen went around wearing t-shirts about consent. It was unbelievable that we need all of this at a 21st century school dance. There's clearly a problem.”

“I'd like to see faculty and administration live up to their promises. They often tell us ‘I regret to inform you’ in their emails,” Westray added. “I think they shouldn't just inform us it's happening, and it's happening again. They should tell us that they're working to stop this from happening and live up to that.”

Some students believe recent policies, such as the Visitations (sometimes referred to by students as “Vs”) policy established in the 2019-2020 academic year, have increased the likelihood of sexual assault on campus contrary to their intention. The 2018-19 Visitations policy only required students to formally request Visitations when visiting friends of a different gender identity. The policy, as found in the 2018-19 E-Book, read: “At the convenience of the faculty member on duty, boys and girls may visit in one another's rooms, with the door halfway open and the lights on, Sunday through Friday from 7 to 8 p.m., and on Saturday (and other nights with 11 p.m. check-in) from 8 to 10:45 p.m. On Fridays that precede a no-class Saturday, visitations may be granted from 7 p.m. until 9:45 p.m.”

The 2019-20 Visitations policy adopted a gender neutral stance to Visitations. *The Exonian* reported in September 12, 2019 that the new policy permitted Visitations “at the start of duty hours and continue until 7:55 p.m. for preps and lowers, and 8:55 p.m. for uppers and seniors on weekdays. On weekends, visitations extend from the beginning of duty hours to five minutes before check-in. Students may still visit one another in common spaces, from 9:50 a.m. to check-in, without permission.” In addition, the 2019-2020 Visitations policy required that “all interior and exterior



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the new policy felt more restrictive due to the removed accessibility of same-gender identity Visitations.

Many students also found the stipulation that doors must be “fully open,” as opposed to the 2018-2019 policy of “halfway open,” to be too invasive of privacy. Many students shared with *The Exonian* that they observed the number of illegal Visitations increase dramatically following the instatement of the 2019-20 Visitation policy, and shared that they more commonly opted for illegal Visitations rather than approved Visitations.

“The non-heteronormative policy was necessary, definitely,” Student Council President and upper Siona Jain said. “[But] what we saw was a huge increase in illegal Visitations, and students, if in an unsafe situation, [felt that they had] to weigh their physical safety against punishment if they were caught with illegal Visitations. Based on my conversations with Principal Rawson, he knows this, and to my knowledge, the admin will work to change the Vs’ policy this summer.”

In an effort to address the concern that students may have to choose between remaining in an uncomfortable situation during illegal Visitations or receiving a disciplinary response, the E Book states that, “If at any time a student is concerned about personal safety or feels uncomfortable during a visit, they are encouraged to leave the room immediately and to seek out an adult for support. A student leaving a visitation under such circumstances will not face community conduct consequences for any rule violations that occurred concurrent with the visitation.” Despite this policy, Jain believes that many students still feel uncomfortable leaving such situations while engaging in illegal Visitations.

Jain characterized her impression of sexual assault policy changes in recent years: “I appreciate the change from Principal’s Discretion [since the protest], but I think the Academy often employs band-aid solutions to sexual assault problems.”

Many students agree that the 2019-2020 Visitations policy inadvertently encouraged illegal Visitations. “I do think that the new Vs’ policy increased the rate of illegal Vs’,” senior Phil Horrigan said. “Illegal Vs’ are risky. The school went one step forward and two steps back with the policy: they made it gender neutral, which is critical, but they cracked down on teenagers having safe relationships.”



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students understood the protest to be in part a response to this recent case, organizers said that the protest was directed towards a longstanding history of the Academy's failure to address sexual assault.

Horrigan agreed, noting that since the protest, conversation on sexual misconduct on campus has waned. "It has been interesting watching the level of awareness of matters of sexual assault over the last four years because it has fluctuated a lot. In 2019 awareness peaked, and it's been going down since then as more grades graduate," Horrigan said. "I think students in my grade are aware of the campus climate and are active in smaller groups at curbing the issue. I'm not sure about younger grades, though. It seems like they don't know about the history. It's our job as upperclassmen to make sure that the student body stays active and in the know."

Fiteni added that he believed the Academy should more directly guide the community's response to cases of sexual misconduct. "I think Exonians treat a lot of information around sexual assault as gossip, and that it's information one would 'miss out on.' That's just unhealthy. I think the school should really think about when and how they should share information, and I think we as students need to re-evaluate how we think of and process incidents of sexual assault."

Feminist Union co-head and upper Janessa Vargas emphasized the difficulty of discussing sexual assault in a productive way. "It's difficult for me to talk to underclassmen in my dorm and just see that everyone is shocked that there [are more emails about sexual misconduct cases], and that they know someone who reported and is not getting justice," Vargas said. "I think the thing that's more saddening is that I've become extremely desensitized to the subject matter and I've accepted this, even though I don't want to, as part of Exeter."

Senior Violet Goldstone attended the Jeremiah Smith protest in her lower year. "I went because I feel like the Academy has a long history of not acknowledging sexual assault or sweeping it under the rug. As a woman, I feel really uncomfortable going to a school that doesn't protect other women from sexual assault," she said.

"I'm not super well-versed on the changes in policy per se, but I do think that though the rules may have changed, the attitudes on campus remain the same," Goldstone added. "I think that sexism and misogyny definitely still exists and is in fact very present. Why do girls still get dress-coded differently than boys? Ask ourselves that."

Goldstone wants to change how the Exeter community responds to sexual assault. "I don't want to call anyone out but I think we see groups on campus dismissing and delegitimizing cases of sexual assault and the victims. It could be



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EASA is a student-led group created to educate students and spread awareness about issues surrounding sexual assault. “I wish there could be more presence on the EASA front. I remember in my prep and lower years when we met as a club. Going to EASA was such a formative experience because it really taught me about what sexual assault was, how we can combat it as a community and really I felt changed,” Goldstone said.

Vargas had similar thoughts about the school educating students in the wake of COVID-19. “In my prep or lower year, we used to have mandatory training. We had a mandatory bystander training or just definitions of sexual assault,” she said. “I understand that COVID has faulted a lot with programming across the board, but I think at this point it's becoming an excuse for the administration to not train students and not be transparent about faculty investigations.”

“I genuinely think that, especially in terms of how they handle investigations with faculty or with grooming, they are not even trying to be transparent with the student body,” Vargas said. “I think something that COVID has taken away from Exeter that I think is extremely important is the strength of student protest. I think student protests are vital to any campus...It's something essential that I honestly believe needs to happen again.”

Jain also believed there was a lack of Academy-programmed conversations about sexual assault in the past year. “I think my lower year was great in terms of have dorm conversations with the local sexual assault prevention group, HAVEN,” Jain said. “I also think the play [*Now That We're Men* by Katie Cappiello, a school-wide mandatory play in the 2019-20 school year] was incredibly thought-provoking, and all the dialogue felt very realistic, almost pulled from a boys locker room...it was on a lot of peoples' minds going forward. However, this was about a year ago, and I don't think we've had as many conversations about sexual assault outside of EASA and Fem Club [Feminist Union].”

Lowerclassmen, most of whom are unaware of the protest from two years ago, feel that the campus culture stifles conversation on sexual assault. “I think people consider sexual assault to be this external, removed issue,” lower Sam Creelan said. “People think about it in abstract terms because it's easier. And to think about it, we don't actually talk about it on campus. It's almost taboo, especially among boys.”

Upper Zara Ahmed had similar thoughts on transparency from the administration. “Sexual assault doesn't feel like it has as much of a presence in terms of policy and what adults tell us in the conversations called our own. I would like





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The duty of informing students on sexual misconduct partially lies within *The Exonian* itself. Reporting sexual assault in *The Exonian* has been an area of contention for senior and 142nd Editor-in-Chief of *The Exonian* Anne Brandes. “During my time as a staff writer, themes emerge across articles. The two major themes that I've noticed are sexual assault at the Academy and racism at the Academy. These themes are reflected by campus dialogue and student protests,” Brandes said. “At the end of my tenure as Editor-in-Chief of *The Exonian*, the campus was experiencing another wave of awareness concerning the unsolved issues with sexual assault education, campus culture, reporting policies and administrative resource allocation. I wrote an article describing my experience as a writer called 'Reporting on Exeter and Sexual Assault.'”

“In the article, I hoped to synthesize takeaways from my experience. The key takeaway is basically that, despite some policy modifications on the administrative level, sexual assault remains a cultural and systemic problem,” Brandes said. “I offered a possible solution to this observation: increased transparency. I posited that publishing statistics in an open manner would help address the cloaked nature of sexual assault.”

EASA shared their current plans addressing sexual assault. The club has been working to improve conversations surrounding sexual assault between students and the administration, and among students themselves. “We have been working with the administration to discuss how they can be transparent with the student body during times when there is a case in process (especially with the Kaminski case),” EASA co-head Savita Keidel said. “I hope the club will continue to work with different teams on campus to help with the unhealthy cultures that can come out of sports as well as continue big events like Take Back the Night that promote a lot of awareness on campus.”

“I personally hope to see a shift to addressing the actual causes of sexual assault (power structures, people not respecting boundaries) rather than things that aren't actually part of the problem (like cancelling EP and making visitations so restrictive),” Keidel added.

Vargas shared Feminist Union's plans thus far to spread awareness about sexual assault. “We're trying to collaborate with EASA to actually bring HAVEN back because we've noticed that when you have such a variety of people at this school, when each have very different understandings of sexual assault, there needs to be mandatory training. Even if that training is uncomfortable for a lot of people, I think it's very necessary, and probably the most necessary for people who are completely unaware of what's going on,” Vargas said.





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sexual assault,” Brandes continued. “Both the administration and the faculty have devoted countless hours into understanding and curbing sexual assault at the Academy. The missing piece, in my view, is more about urgency. I find that most huge policy changes are the result of student efforts in the wake of tragedy. Instead, the Academy should be thinking ahead with a sense of urgency to prevent tragedy from occurring in the first place.”

Two years have passed since more than 200 students gathered at the front of J. Smith Quad and although students acknowledge that significant progress in policy has been made, the Academy’s culture—a collective effort from students, faculty and administrators alike—still has a long way to go.



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