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Sexual Misconduct Conference – Excerpted from closing remarks
Tuesday, Feb. 11, 2014

Let me begin by thanking all of you for coming to this conference, especially the presidents and chancellors and their colleagues and students who traveled here from out of town. We also thank our speakers and panelists for their time commitment. The participation from a variety of institutions and a range of personal perspectives has given us a broad, rich discussion.

What have we heard over the past two days ... and what have we learned?

We heard that it should be the responsibility of college leaders to set expectations for behavior on our campuses -- to be very clear that sexual misconduct will not be tolerated, and that assault will be adjudicated and punished if it occurs.

We heard that we, as presidents, need to make ourselves available to students and to show our personal commitment to this issue. We need to give students clear explanations of what sexual misconduct is and what the consequences are. We need to provide information about the adjudication process, so students can make decisions about disclosure and reporting with this full understanding.

We learned that administrators can set the institutional tone, but we also learned that students need to talk to each other about it, to counsel each other, and to confront each other if necessary.

We agreed that we need to make the conversation about sexual assault an integral part of the student experience, beginning in the first year and continuing through all four years. Within this context, we need more peer-led conversations and peer advising on the issues.

We learned that bystander education is important, and that we need to mobilize the huge contingent of men and women on our campuses who can help -- the great majority who will not ever commit assault. We learned that bystanders may hesitate to step up to prevent a potential act of sexual violence -- out of embarrassment, shyness, fear of reprisal, and so on.

We need to remove these barriers through education and training, and we need to let students know that being a better bystander often means nothing more than having a conversation -- "checking in" with a friend at the right moment. We agreed that the numbers are in our favor, because there are many more bystanders than perpetrators. Every one of us can be a better bystander, simply by caring about each other.

We learned about the important role that men have in this issue. We heard the dominant story about masculinity that says there are only a few rigid, unchangeable ways to be a man. This attitude can make men who may consider stepping out against a culture of sexual misconduct feel atypical; it may prevent them from taking action or speaking up. We agreed that we need to nurture a new generation

of male leaders who are nonviolent and emotionally healthy, and therefore able to serve as positive change-makers on our campuses and in larger society. We need to let men know that there are other men out there who will not tolerate assault, who will speak up when they see something wrong, who will take a stand against a culture of violence.

We agreed that the hookup culture exists on our campuses, although it's not always clearly defined, and we further agreed that this lack of definition can lead to misperception and misinformation. We learned that about 80 percent of students would prefer to be in a relationship, and that many who do engage in hook-ups hold out the hope that the hook-up could lead to a more stable and meaningful relationship.

We heard that we need more counseling and mentoring programs to counteract the culture of misconduct. We need to have more conversations about what students should want and expect from relationships and what their values for relationships are. We learned about research that has shown that these conversations alone can change brain development, and help young people develop healthy attitudes.

We agreed that we should use the research power embodied in the faculty of our own institutions to address issues related to misconduct, and we should use evidence-based education to drive change.

We heard about the risks associated with drinking, and we learned about the biological reasons that women are more susceptible to the adverse consequences of drinking. We heard that 90 percent of acquaintance rapes involve alcohol use by the assailant, survivor or both.

But even as we acknowledge that alcohol is often correlated to assault, we agree that it's not the cause of assault. The assaulter is the cause of assault.

We heard that we need to focus our prevention efforts on stopping the behavior of assault, rather than focusing entirely on how potential victims can avoid being assaulted.

We learned that acquaintance rape and other forms of sexual assault are terribly under-reported on our campuses, and that education can help. We learned that the first line of contact for survivors is incredibly important; and we agreed that they need to be well-trained and well-armed with information. We agreed that mandatory training for faculty and staff can create a campus-wide culture of understanding and action.

We heard about insularity of communities within our schools, and we agreed that the dangers of insularity can undermine our efforts to educate students and prevent assault. We need to break down the barriers between communities to send a unified message about the unacceptability of sexual misconduct.

We agreed that student activism is an empowering force on this issue, and we heard great advice from our students ...

We heard that we need to pay closer attention to the experiences of women of color and to members of the LGBT communities, because they are frequent targets of assault. We need to focus on how sexual violence affects these groups, because the impact is often more hidden, and more serious because it can exacerbate other traumatic experiences related to race or gender identity.

We heard that we need to make the complexities and limitations surrounding this issue known and openly discussed -- that we need to be candid about the limits of the law, and intricacy of the adjudication process

We heard that we should define consent as saying “yes” rather than not saying “no.”

We heard that sexual misconduct is a civil rights violation; that freedom from assault is a human rights issue; and that stopping assault is a moral obligation. One thing that all of us have learned, in the course of this two-day dialogue, is that the issue of sexual misconduct does not belong to any one group or any single constituency. It’s not a problem just for college presidents and administrators; or just for students; or just for women, or just for men. This issue belongs to all of us, and it will take all of us, working together, to develop solutions that bring about real change on our campuses across the country.

In one of the sessions earlier today, we heard this quote from former Harvard President Derek Bok: *“There’s a great deal of difference between thinking reflectively about moral issues and achieving higher standard of ethical behavior.”*

Over the past two days, we have spent a lot of time thinking reflectively about the moral issue of sexual misconduct, and this is an important and necessary first step. The next step is to begin to achieve the higher standard of behavior we want on our college campuses -- by stopping sexual misconduct and assault in all its forms. We also need to look within our own institutions to see what we can do right now. I hope you will consider this brief list.

One: Spotlight the issue. As part of that, we begin to do better analysis; de-stigmatize victims; educate our own constituencies for prevention. Our graduates are the legislators, judges, prosecutors, and jurors of tomorrow. Another generation does not have to deal with the same ignorance, shame, and injustice.

Two: Generate teamwork. At each university, we have resources, including student groups who advocate on this issue; athletic departments with students trained in bystander behavior and alcohol prevention programs, women’s centers that create programming; campus and local police departments; prosecutors, legislators, and the Department of Education. Work together and take a multidisciplinary approach to reducing sexual violence.

Three: Create a network across higher education. Talk to each other; be willing to share information with other schools.

Four: Develop best practices and share them. Pull together cross-institutional teams of specialists to create evidence-based programs.

Five: Use our unique resources. We have a law school. So do William & Mary, UNC, George Mason, UCLA, and many others. We have medical and nursing schools. We have social scientists. All of them working together creates an extraordinary potential for addressing and eventually decreasing sexual assault on college campuses.

Finally, it is the responsibility of each institution, beginning with the president, to ensure a clear and equitable adjudication process, to see that our student survivors have the services they need to heal, and to build a community that is safe for everyone, and a system that addresses sexual misconduct when it occurs.

The dialogue about sexual misconduct that we began over the past two days will not end when we walk out the door. As you heard yesterday from Dartmouth President Phil Hanlon, the next conference on this topic will take place on the Dartmouth campus in Hanover, New Hampshire, July 13-17. You will hear more about it in the weeks ahead, and I hope all of you will plan to attend.