

Dear Higher Education

LETTERS FROM THE SOCIAL JUSTICE MOUNTAIN

The 2024 Election and the Revenge of Rape Culture

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Dear Higher Education,

We need to have a talk, but first, I'd like to tell you my story.

I am a cisgender, white, able-bodied but disabled, straight-passing queer woman. I'm also a survivor of intimate partner violence and campus-based sexual assault. We'll get to the violence I experienced later. First, it's important to understand the environment that influenced my positionality. I was born in 1991 and raised in a hamlet about 30 miles west of Rochester, New York. Once home to the largest salt mine in North America, Retsof had a population of 340 people according to the 2010 census. I graduated high school in 2009 alongside 80 other students, all of whom I had been with in the same building since kindergarten.

The world made me feel like a woman far before I was ready to, but it was within the brick walls of my K-12 school that I learned what that meant for my body. The school enforced strict dress codes for girls, and it became a running joke that half of the girls' soccer team would be called into the Principal's office to have our uniforms measured. "Hands to the side—your shorts can't be shorter than your fingertips," they'd say. Too much exposed thigh. I vividly remember being called into the hallway in 8th grade because my shirt was deemed too revealing. My physics teacher, who was a man, asked a teacher from across the hall to speak to me about my low-cut shirt and instruct me to change into a t-shirt from gym class. The message was clear: I couldn't distract the boys—or the teachers.

Throughout my schooling, there were three or four known instances of teachers being sexually inappropriate with students. The most memorable being my Spanish teacher and gym teacher, who would later become my softball coach. My teacher left his faith, got divorced, and began dating a girl younger than me, making it Facebook-official once she graduated. The gym teacher, who was friends with the coach of the boys' basketball team, had players fill out a survey rating the girls in the school by their "hotness," body parts, and who was the "best kisser." Unrelated to the survey, my gym teacher was prohibited from having girls in his office with the door closed. A student teacher I had when I was in 11th grade sent me Facebook messages for weeks during the fall of my freshman year of college. He shared that his marriage was struggling and said he wanted to visit me so I could "show him around campus and have some fun." The situation ended when my discomfort with his messages led me to remind him that his wife had once babysat me. At that time, I was in an emotionally abusive relationship, and I was terrified that my boyfriend would read my Facebook messages and accuse me of cheating.

Higher Education, I am sure you're asking yourself why I am telling you this and what it has to do with you. We'll get there, I promise.

During college orientation, we were divided by sex into groups, and upperclasswomen taught us how to avoid getting raped, handing out "rape whistles" engraved with the college's name. They told stories of people jumping

out of bushes and mentioned a rumored silent alarm in our dorms triggered by hairspray. My favorite prevention tip was to pee on the assailant—apparently, it would make him lose interest. I still have the whistle on my key-chain. In February of my sophomore year, I ended things for good with my abusive boyfriend from my hometown. Elated with my newfound freedom, my roommates and I drank a box of cheap wine and headed out to a fraternity. I'd say I'd spare you the details of what happened that night, but the truth is, I don't remember them. It's both a blessing and a curse, having just fragmented snapshots of that night, scattered and atrocious. He was cute in that boyish way only a 6ft white football player from a small town can be. We'd had a sociology class together the semester before and talked about how isolating it was to be from upstate New York at a private college with trust fund kids from New England. He was nothing like the predators I grew up watching on *Law & Order: SVU*. He was nothing like my ex-boyfriend. It was inconceivable to even consider his actions that night as rape. I grew up with the message that "boys will be boys," that they suffer from an uncontrollable desire to have sex with any girl or woman who places herself in a position to be "taken advantage of." With the best of intentions, my own mother told me on multiple occasions, "don't get drunk, you'll get taken advantage of."

I had an internship with a defense attorney the summer before my senior year of college. One day, I was tasked with researching the alleged sexual assault victim of their college-aged client. I went through her Facebook profile, saving pictures she had posted shortly after she accused their client of raping her. I will never forget the picture in question—a young girl out on Halloween in a sparkly dress and with a smile on her face. They said a girl who had been raped wouldn't go out partying, in that dress, with that smile. She was lying. On my last day, the lawyer invited me for a celebratory drink. He was friends with my aunt, so I was confident he wouldn't make any advances. He told me about his divorce and suggested that, to keep a husband, I should greet him in lingerie every day when he comes home. I was 21 and intentionally single.

The ideas of being unable to consent due to intoxication and of alcohol-facilitated sexual assault did not exist at this time. What did exist was women waking up with regrets after a night of bad sex. I buried the broken memory of my assault so deep into the back of my brain that two years went by before I started to question the reality of what I had experienced. I didn't call it rape until 2014, when campus-based sexual assault made headlines and a movement was born (Nelson). I still think of the girl in the sparkly dress.

My entire educational experience was shaped by the pervasiveness of rape culture—and I thought that was normal.

Rape culture is an environment where sexual violence is normalized or excused due to attitudes, behaviors, and beliefs that trivialize, downplay, or even condone sexual assault and harassment. This culture often blames victims, focuses on the behavior of the victim rather than of the perpetrator, and perpetuates harmful stereotypes about gender roles, consent, and power dynamics (*Rape Culture, Victim Blaming, and the Facts* | *Southern Connecticut State University*). I was healed and empowered by the activism of the past decade, such as End Rape on Campus (EROC), It's On Us, the #MeToo movement, and Time's Up. It provided us with a glance into what a society that centers consent and prioritizes equality could look like.

Dear Higher Education, under a Trump presidency, rape culture has resurged with a vengeance. To be clear, normalization of harmful behavior never disappeared—we simply started talking about it, applying social consequences, and feeling empowered. Maybe the backlash was inevitable, but what was once confined to the darkest corners of the internet has now seeped into mainstream discourse. The American people elected a man found liable for sexual abuse, with dozens of additional accusations against him. As he fills Cabinet and key staff positions with individuals accused of sexual misconduct (Long), the Republican Party and its constituents continue to celebrate him. Trump's reelection in 2024 highlights a deeper crisis: young men find him appealing. Democrats saw a significant drop in support from voters under 30 in nearly every swing state, and while young voters still lean Democratic, many shifted away by double digits, with the biggest declines among men

(Montanaro). Moreso, according to thousands of exit polls conducted by Edison Research on behalf of the National Election Pool, a key factor in the election was voter motivation: those who cast their vote primarily in support of their chosen candidate rather than in opposition to their opponent leaned toward Trump, highlighting his strong appeal among his base (Boak and Sanders).

So, what is going on with our boys, and how does this impact higher education? I suggest reading *Men Who Hate Women* by Laura Bates. In particular, Chapter 9, “Men Who Don’t Know They Hate Women,” exposes the disturbing ways in which misogynistic ideologies infiltrate the minds of young men, often without them even realizing it. Through years of speaking in schools, Bates observed a troubling shift—once met with curiosity and skepticism, discussions of sexism are now increasingly greeted with hostility and denial. As she recalls, a teenage boy wearing a *Make America Great Again* hat bluntly questioned, “But how do I know you’re telling the truth?” after she shared her personal experience of sexual assault (Bates 288-289). As a prevention educator who has conducted nearly 100 presentations and workshops, I see this as a canary in a coal mine. This reflexive disbelief, Bates notes, is not an anomaly, but rather part of a broader trend where young men parrot talking points from online communities that frame feminism as an oppressive force and paint men as the real victims of gender inequality. It isn’t hating women; it’s standing up for men. It isn’t hating women; it’s asking for “real” equality. It isn’t hating women; it’s accepting biological differences. It can’t be hating women if everybody is laughing about it online (Bates 299). This disturbing narrative exposes the insidious ways in which sexual violence is minimized and misrepresented, ultimately reinforcing a culture in which the devastating reality of sexual violence is obscured by fabricated statistics and inflammatory rhetoric.

On September 18, 2018, the independent nonprofit research organization Data & Society published *Alternative Influence: Broadcasting the Reactionary Right on YouTube*, authored by Rebecca Lewis. The report exposes an “alternative influence network” of more than sixty academics, media pundits, and internet figures across eight channels. They range from more mainstream, self-proclaimed libertarian and conservative commentators to extreme misogynists, white supremacists, and racists. Many of these YouTubers are less defined by any single ideology than they are by a ‘reactionary’ position: a general opposition to feminism, social justice, or left-wing politics” (Bates 305). The online radicalization of boys—through gaming forums, fitness communities, and YouTube algorithms—is horrifyingly covert. Without greater awareness, many parents and educators remain oblivious to the way these ideologies are shaping the next generation of young men. Young men who will enroll in our colleges and universities and most likely sit in one of your classes.

I know I just painted a pretty grim picture of our society’s future, so let me leave you with this.

One of the most healing experiences I’ve had began when I joined a mixed-martial arts gym in 2023. The gender divide is harsh, equating to about one woman for every 10 men. The gym is violent and sweaty, with air so saturated by testosterone you can feel and taste it. The parking lot is dimly lit and, in theory, this should be one of the most unsafe places I’ve ever been. I am especially attuned to the subtle behaviors that often thrive in gym environments: catcalling, leering, and actions that make you want to shrink yourself. Or the unspoken judgment that you’re less committed or less deserving to occupy a male-dominated space. I’ve been training for over a year, and not only have I never experienced unwanted behavior, but I’ve also never witnessed anyone being harassed or leered at. Long before I got there, the gym owner established a culture of respect that is so powerful, it does not need to be verbally articulated. Typically, people partner with others of the same gender, but on occasions when there’s an odd number of women, I’ve partnered with men. Being in physical positions that mimic intimate behaviors without experiencing even the slightest inappropriate touch or lingering gaze is a reality I truly never imagined could exist.

And so, my dear Higher Education, if a violent gym can create a culture of consent, there is no excuse for our classrooms to tolerate or embrace rape culture. Higher Education, I ask this question respectfully and literally: **“If someone new came into your life, how would you show them that you don’t tolerate sexual violence?”**

The bureaucratic and capitalist structure of higher education is inherently carceral, shaping how harm is perceived and addressed. Instead of reducing human experiences to procedural checkboxes, we must prioritize accountability, prevention, and meaningful intervention to shape the culture. A punitive framework relies on the conduct system to define harm, limiting our ability to recognize it and distorting its severity. To break this cycle, move beyond viewing every “situation” through the lens of the conduct system and instead embrace a framework of community care. Focus on the person experiencing harm or at risk of it. While everyone reacts differently, how we move and react with our bodies in situations often conveys a loud message when we’re uncomfortable. Similar to our understanding of microaggressions, individuals don’t need to experience severe acts of harm to warrant intervention—just as microaggressions should be addressed, so should messages that reinforce rape culture. Sexual violence is rooted in systems of oppression such as racism, sexism, homophobia, colonialism, and more, all of which contribute to its prevalence and impact.

Don’t let perfection be the enemy of good. Acknowledging harmful behaviors and language that won’t be tolerated in your presence sends a powerful message. Most importantly, lead by example. The rise of the mainstream alt-right stems from the social construction of toxic masculinity by men. Likewise, it is men who must lead by example in fostering positive and healthy masculinity. It must be organically woven into every space, and I fear that the culture of higher education is dependent on how you behave and the example you provide for young people.

*Thank you,
Leslie Skeffington*

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