Recap of Creating Safe Community Spaces: A Campus Forum

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On Wednesday, October 29th, 2014, graduate students in the School of Communication held their first campus community forum and workshop in the Halpern Centre. Titled "Creating Safe Community Spaces: Appropriate Conduct in the University", the event was organized by MA students Madison Trusolino and Pippa Adams as well as PhD students Bob Neubauer and Maggie MacAulay. It was also made possible by the strong moral and financial support of our Graduate Caucus and other campus groups.

Context: The World Has a Sexism Problem

Part of the inspiration for this event was the recognition that women in post-secondary institutions continue to experience gendered harassment and violence. While the available research on these topics is scant (particularly from the Canadian perspective), one study of 455 Canadian women students found that 77% disclosed at least one experience of sexual harassment (van Roosmalen & McDaniel, 1998). 80% of these incidents could be classified as "gender harassment", involving persistent and demeaning comments and jokes about women and sexuality, constantly assessing and commenting on women's appearances, unwanted flirtation, pinching, touching, leering and grabbing. Only 6.6% of women targeted by this behavior reported it, and only 15% of their cases had been pursued. In nearly a third of these cases, respondents claimed that their complaint was either not believed or was not taken seriously.

Sexual assault is also an ongoing problem, with less than 10% of incidents reported to the police (Johnson, 2006). Results from the 2007 Campus Sexual Assault Study commissioned found that one in five college women experienced sexual assault during their degrees (Krebs et al., 2007). In Canada, most on-campus sexual assaults occur during the first eight weeks of classes (Department of Justice Canada, 2003), and in 80% of cases, the assailant is usually known to the target (York University & METRAC, 2010).

Of notable concern is how normalized these behaviours are. One survey of Canadian college-age males students found that 60% of them indicated that they would commit sexual assault if they were certain that they wouldn't get caught (Lenskyj, 1992). A more recent study in North Dakota found that nearly one third of male university students reported similar attitudes (Edwards, Bradshaw & Hinsz, 2014). Another national survey found that 20% of male students believed forced sex was acceptable if someone spent money on a date, if their date was under the influence, or if the individuals had been dating for a long time (Johnson, 1996). These are not the responses of psycho-

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paths or monsters; rather, they are widely-held, normalized views of many – including many self-professed 'nice guys' - who grow up in a world where hegemonic masculinity is organized and achieved around the sexualized domination and control over feminized bodies. Clearly something has to change.

So what are university campuses doing about a problem that disproportionately affects roughly half of their student(s') bodies? The answer is not much. A recent investigation by the Toronto Star found that of 78 public universities across Canada, only nine had adopted a special policy to deal with sexual violence (Mathieu, 2014). Some of these include Lakehead University, which has created a Sexual Misconduct Policy and Protocol in light of a sexual assault on campus. The University of Windsor offers a Bystander Initiative where students receive university credit in exchange for attending workshops to model how to spot sexual assault and what to do about it.

Statement of Values and Principles: A Modest Proposal

Last year, a group of concerned graduate students decided to take these matters into our own hands. While we wanted to address sexism on campus, we agreed that it could not happen without also addressing racism, heterosexism, and other forms of institutionalized oppression. We observed that while we are an institution and a department that celebrates radical thinking and action, we had no set of core values or principles to hold each other accountable to. For example, there is little language in the student handbook or in official university policies that covers issues such as discrimination or harassment (unless the incident is utterly egregious). We also recognized that because universities attract people from such distinct life perspectives and experiences, not everyone has the same idea about which behaviors are considered appropriate, and which are considered inappropriate. The formation of our statement of values and principles, then, came from the desire to make these distinctions clear to everyone, rather than use it for punitive ends. This document reminds us that these are the basic minimum standards that we should expect from and uphold as members of the academic community. For students who are women, people of color, Indigenous, and queer, the document is also a reminder that "you are welcome here".

Creating Safe Spaces: The Event

The October 29th event was a celebration of the ratification of this document as well as an opportunity to find out how graduate students could work collectively to make university spaces more inclusive and equitable. Some 25 people attended the morning session. Professor Zoë Druick was our moderator, and the event began with a Territorial Acknowledgement. Next our panelists Laura Forsythe (FNSA), Kelly Burns (SFU Women's Centre), Devyn Davies (SFU Out on Campus), Sara Jo (WAVAW), and Dr. Catherine Murray spoke about some of the issues faced by women on campus as well as the initiatives and services currently available. Panelists each answered the following questions:

- What can SFU be learning from other institutions?
- What is the best way to hold people and each other accountable?
- What is the best way to support each other when dealing with sexism, racism, homophobia in the academy?

From the responses, it soon became clear that while people felt that students are capable of spearheading change, it is very difficult to do so without institutional support and commitment.
    During the discussion period, Marcos Moldes asked an important question about the intersections of gender, race/ethnicity, and class when it comes to laborers who provide the material sup-

port for SFU. Custodial staff, food service personnel, and construction workers work long and hard hours and are paid at rates that do not commensurate with the high cost of living in the Lower Mainland. That the administration had seemed to abandon the Living Wage Campaign in favor of a smiley, selfie-snapping Zero Waste sustainability initiative was "garbage", quipped one attendee.

After the morning panel and a brief lunch period, SFPIRG's Kalamity Hildebrandt came to deliver their "Introduction to Intersectionality" workshop. 15 graduate students participated in the session where we discussed identity, privilege, oppression, and how they intersect. Kalamity explained to us the history of intersectionality as a concept, and we broke out into smaller groups to discuss how systems of oppression affect people at multiple levels.

One thing that soon became clear was that attendees had different levels of familiarity with the concept of intersectionality (see Crenshaw, 1991). For some people, it was a brand-new concept, and for others, it was a new opportunity to revisit something familiar to them. As a skilled facilitator, Kalamity made it a safe and comfortable environment for people to discuss their feelings without judgment. This is markedly different from university classrooms, where discussions can often become intense, polarized, and competitive. Our hope is that others felt the same way.

Wrapping Up: Conclusions and Future Steps

So what did it *do*? In our view, a great deal. In the post-event survey, one of the more commonly cited reasons people participated was to demonstrate solidarity with others and to become better allies. We've observed a marked shift in the language people use and the ways in which people interact with each other over the past year. This is not only because of a single event but also based on all of the conversations many of us have been having about sexism, racism and heterosexism on campus. While we did not aim to "solve" deeply embedded social problems in a single day, we felt satisfied by our efforts. We set out to change the culture of the department, and we think that in some ways, we did.

So what's next? While campus forums are wonderful initiatives, their resource-intensive nature means that they are not likely to be a regular occurrence for the department. There needs to be sustained commitment from students, faculty, and the administration to continue to address these issues. It is our hope that the soon-to-be edited video version and the inclusion of the statement of principles and values in the handbook will form part of our institutional memory, and that more comprehensive material on harassment, appropriate conduct, and creating safe academic communities be integrated into annual department orientations. Most importantly, we have all done something we should all be proud of and can act as a model for other departments and institutions. This spring, the organizers hope to write up a more extended discussion of the event and present it as a workshop to ensure that this event is not a one-off, but rather initiates a process of ongoing institutional change.

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