

Issue Brief  
By: Gwen Oliver  
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# WE ARE All Responsible for Preventing Sexual Assault

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*“Any amount of sexual assault on Penn State’s campus is unacceptable.”*

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One in five women and one in twenty men are assaulted before the end of their college career. At Penn State, there were over 130 reported cases of sexual assault from 2013 to 2015,<sup>1</sup> and statistics show<sup>2</sup> that only 20% of women make a police report, suggesting that the number of unreported assaults could be much higher. Any amount of sexual assault on Penn State’s campus is unacceptable, and although the university has taken great strides towards a solution in the past few years, the problem continues to exist and must continue to be discussed.

Deliberation about sexual assault has become more and more prominent nationwide, among the press, university administrators, and students. People have begun to agree that an important aspect of prevention is working together. Everyone must step up and take responsibility for the problem. In 2014, President Obama launched the “It’s On Us” campaign<sup>3</sup> in an attempt to involve *everyone* on college campuses in sexual assault prevention, rather than only those it affects. Bystander intervention is now at the forefront of these efforts; when every student on campus is dedicated to sexual assault prevention, we will finally be able to put a stop to this problem. Penn State has begun to embrace these changes as well, but we need to do more. We need to make bystander intervention training a mandatory part of all first-year seminars, integrating these efforts into the Penn State culture from the first semester.



Image by George Chriss

## Current Policy: NSO

Currently, mandatory sexual assault prevention training and discussion occur before and during New Student Orientation (NSO). Students must complete two sexual assault trainings:

- Sexual Assault Awareness module (AWARE): Pre-NSO, primarily interactive videos.
- Session during NSO: Run by an NSO mentor, covers sexual assault, alcohol, and drug use.

The AWARE module goes over information on sexual assault and current university statistics and procedures. It's an interactive online module that students must complete before NSO.

During NSO, an hour is dedicated to discussion on sexual assault, alcohol, and drug use, as well as the general culture of partying that exists on campus. An NSO mentor speaks with students in small groups, taking them through theoretical situations and interactive examples. The goal of the session is to inform students of Penn State's policies and services regarding sexual assault (as well as alcohol and other drug use), and to give students ideas about how to keep themselves and their friends safe.

### What Works?

This training is in line with many experts' suggestions. According to the U.S. Department of Justice,<sup>4</sup> sexual assault prevention training is most effective when it involves active learning and multiple exposures. The session during NSO engages students by asking them questions as different scenarios are laid out, challenging them to think about what they would do in those situations.

- Would you intervene if your roommate came home with someone who was obviously inebriated?
- Can an inebriated person give consent?
- What would you do if your friend told you he or she was sexually assaulted?

These questions allow students to put themselves into real-life situations and think through different courses of action. This session, in conjunction with the AWARE module, exposes students to information about sexual assault multiple times, increasing the chances they will retain the important points.

### What Doesn't Work?

However, both the AWARE video and the session during NSO have varying success depending on students and mentors. If a student merely clicks through the AWARE video without paying attention, he or she cannot benefit from it. And, if a mentor during NSO is unable to engage students in conversation, the session becomes didactic and one-sided, rather than an active conversation. How can these inherent problems be remedied?

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# ***What We Do Now***

## **What works and what doesn't?**

### **PROS**

Video before NSO introduces students to important material

Discussion at NSO gives students second exposure

Discussion is student-facilitated; incoming students feel like they can open up

Discussion includes active learning; students think about what they would do in different situations

### **CONS**

Students can easily skip through video

Mandatory exposure to material ends after NSO

Success of discussion depends on experience/ability of NSO mentors

Students may not be able to relate to situations before experiencing college life

### **Can the Cons Be Fixed?**

In many ways, they can't. We place trust in the students when we assign modules such as AWARE, recognizing that they will only be effective if the student chooses to engage in the activity. Similarly, there will always be certain groups of students who, for one reason or another, will not want to participate during the NSO session. These are inherent problems with the current structure of prevention training. Students are only mandated to see this information before and during NSO, and they can easily choose not to engage.

One way that Penn State is working to combat this type of indifference in students is through optional programs. These programs give students a much more in-depth look at sexual assault prevention, but do not reach the whole student body.

## Success of Optional Programs: Stand for State

Stand for State, Peers Helping Reaffirm, Educate, and Empower (PHREE), and Men Against Violence are three examples of optional programs at Penn State that promote sexual assault awareness and prevention. Stand for State is Penn State's bystander intervention program; it asks students to intervene in any situation that they feel is unsafe. Students are asked to make a "green dot" (offer assistance, intervene in a dangerous situation, do an act of kindness) for every "red dot" (act of violence) on campus. Many students have taken the Green Dot pledge and are committed to being an asset to the Penn State community.

### Do They Work?

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*“The people who opt to participate in these programs likely care about sexual assault prevention already”*

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Programs similar to Stand for State have shown to be incredibly successful; Kentucky high schools where Green Dot was implemented had a 50% decrease in sexual violence, according to a CDC-funded study.<sup>5</sup> However, Stand for State is an optional program, and only reaches a small number of the 46,000 undergraduates at Penn State. We need to find a way to reach more students and get these important messages across. The people who opt to participate in these programs likely care about sexual assault prevention already; we need to find a way to address this issue will all students, especially those who wouldn't seek out more information on their own.

## The Role of Freshman Seminars

### What Are They?

Each freshman entering Penn State Main Campus is required to take a freshman seminar. These classes are intended to:

- Be major-specific (often, not always)
- Cover a variety of topics
- Introduce freshmen to college workloads, expectations, and responsibilities

The University gives general guidelines<sup>6</sup> on the content of freshman seminars, but does not mandate what information must be covered. The loose structure of these seminars is often helpful, because it allows each college and even each major to disseminate information that is helpful for their students. For example, Biology majors may learn about how to seek out research positions, whereas this information would be less valuable to someone pursuing a degree in Finance. However, there are certain topics that every freshman should be exposed to, such as sexual assault.

The Academic Administrative Policies and Procedures Manual<sup>7</sup> explains one of the goals of these seminars is to “engage students in learning and orient them to ... aspects of the transition to college life.” The transition to college life surely includes information about sexual assault; if one in five undergraduate women is sexually assaulted before she graduates, knowledge about assault prevention should be an integral part of assimilation into college life.

### How Can We Use these Seminars?

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*“We should mandate that at least one day in each freshman seminar be dedicated to discussion on sexual assault.”*

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We should mandate that at least one day in each freshman seminar be dedicated to discussion on sexual assault. By doing so, we will effectively reach all incoming freshman for the third time to discuss sexual assault prevention. The CDC,<sup>8</sup> NSVRC,<sup>9</sup> and the U.S. Department of Justice<sup>10</sup> all agree that more exposure to information regarding sexual assault prevention is more effective. So, if we can reach students a third time, it will increase the chances that the information will stick.

Furthermore, discussion on sexual assault might become more meaningful for some students once they have begun to experience college life. College is the first time many students drink and have other social experiences, and talking about sexual assault before and during NSO, when most students haven't even been to a college party, may make the students feel removed from the problem. By readdressing the issue once freshman have experienced college life, the topic will seem more relevant, and participants will likely have more to contribute. Freshman seminars are the perfect place to reach all freshmen once they have already entered college life.

### What Would this Look Like?

To ensure all students are exposed to all important information regarding sexual assault, we should develop a curriculum for professors and facilitators to use during freshman seminars. This will not only guarantee that all students will have access to any information they need regarding sexual assault, but will also take the pressure off of professors to design the discussion on a topic they may not feel comfortable teaching.

### What Would the Curriculum Look Like?

This curriculum could address a number of issues and prevention strategies relating to sexual assault, but one topic in particular has been shown to be effective at other universities around the nation: bystander intervention.

Pomona College, UMass Amherst, Westpoint Military Academy, UPenn, UNH, and Dartmouth<sup>11</sup> are a few of the many schools that have adopted bystander intervention training as a tool for sexual assault prevention. The many benefits of this training and approach to sexual assault prevention are discussed further below.

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*“We already have the tools in place to disseminate information about bystander intervention.”*

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### Bystander Intervention at Penn State

At Penn State specifically, we already have tools in place to disseminate information about bystander intervention. Stand for State, Men Against Violence, and Peers Helping Reaffirm, Educate, and Empower (PHREE) are programs that have trained students in this particular area already. And, students are exposed to a bystander intervention system, the 3Ds (Direct, Distract, Delegate),<sup>12</sup> through NSO. The Center for Women Students already sends representatives from Men Against Violence and PHREE to some freshman seminars to discuss sexual assault prevention.

## University of New Hampshire: This Works

The University of New Hampshire (UNH) utilizes a program called “Bringing in the Bystander,”<sup>13</sup> which has been identified by the CDC<sup>14</sup> as a “promising program.” The program is held in a small-group setting, with one male and one female facilitator. It begins with a short introduction, where facilitators discuss what sexual assault means and draw on personal experiences to demonstrate the importance of the topic. Local statistics and examples are used to keep the conversation relevant to participants and the information close to home. Information about how to recognize dangerous situations and specific ways to help once an unsafe situation is identified are both covered, and participants discuss the benefits and drawbacks of bystander intervention in many situations. Students participate in active learning exercises like role playing to truly engage with the material, and the session wraps up with a pledge to intervene in dangerous situations. Participants are sent home with a summary card to remind them of the session and the main points of bystander intervention.

UNH’s program hits on many of the key points of “good programs,” according to the NSVRC<sup>15</sup> and U.S. Department of Justice.<sup>16</sup> It is current and evidence-based, it is run by trained individuals, it increases awareness of sexual assault and what a dangerous situation looks like, it builds skills to deal with such situations, and it increases students’ sense of responsibility for the outcomes of unsafe situations. Furthermore, such a program, with some minor adjustments, could fit into a 50-minute class and be integrated into freshman seminars.

## UNH: Bringing in the Bystander

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### How the Program Works

At UNH, bystander intervention training is done in small groups with two facilitators, one male and one female. It integrates discussion with active learning exercises.

			
<b>Intro</b>	<b>Looking at Situations</b>	<b>Discussion</b>	<b>End</b>
What is sexual assault? Personal examples Local statistics	What do dangerous situations look like? What can you do?	Benefits and drawbacks of intervention Why do it?	Pledge to intervene Summary card

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### Why the Program Works

- Current
- Evidence-based
- Builds empathy
- Trained facilitators
- Builds skills through active engagement
- Pledge creates sense of responsibility
- Summary card reinforces lessons





## Important Takeaways

- Facilitators should be students

One of the main ideas behind Stand for State and the Green Dot program is that influential upperclassmen will be able to engage younger students more effectively than administrators or professors.<sup>17</sup> In fact, students trained in bystander intervention by Men Against Violence and PHREE could facilitate sessions in freshman seminars. Jennifer Pencek, Programming Coordinator for the Center for Women Students Course, feels confident that they have sufficient student volunteers to facilitate these programs. And if students do not demonstrate interest in facilitating, course credit or designation as Teaching Assistants could incentivize a position as facilitator.

- Build empathy with personal anecdotes and local examples

UNH's idea of beginning the program with personal anecdotes and local examples is also key to building empathy among students. It's easy to discuss national statistics regarding rape, but a story about a friend who was almost assaulted or the knowledge that 51 cases of rape were reported at Penn State in 2015<sup>18</sup> would have a much larger impact. When students can visualize how their peers or how they themselves are impacted by sexual assault, they will be much more willing to engage in meaningful discussion. Another way to gain this sense of empathy would be to have students anonymously record their personal experiences with or thoughts on sexual assault, then to have facilitators share some of the answers.

- Use activities to practice skills

Once this foundation of empathy is built, using activities to actively practice bystander intervention skills will help students to build the confidence they need to step in in a dangerous situation. And discussion on the benefits and problems with bystander intervention will address fears students may have about misreading a situation or putting themselves in danger, and give them ways to minimize or avoid these problems.

- Summary card

Finally, the take home card (or brochure, or magnet) will act as a reminder to students of what they learned. Seeing the information in a different form will help to reinforce the concepts and remind the students of their responsibility to intervene every time they see it.

## Why Bystander Intervention?

There are many ways to approach sexual assault, and bystander intervention is only one of them. You may question why Penn State should choose to promote bystander intervention above knowledge of rape statistics, discussion of gender norms and expectations, or addressing the role alcohol plays in sexual

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*Only 45.5% of students would intervene if they noticed someone acting in a “sexually violent or harassing manner.”*

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assault. Simply put, many schools lack bystander intervention programs, yet these programs have shown to be effective where implemented.

In a nationwide survey, it was shown that only 45.5% of students would intervene if they noticed someone acting in a “sexually violent or harassing manner.”<sup>19</sup> This concerning statistic demonstrates that students do not feel comfortable with bystander intervention strategies. However, this problem can be remedied. After implementing a bystander intervention program, 57.7% of Dartmouth students would reportedly intervene under the same conditions.<sup>20</sup> This difference, greater than 10%, shows that understanding bystander intervention strategies is key to increasing bystander intervention, and demonstrates that these programs can actually work in a university setting.

### **Barriers to Intervention**

Bystander intervention can be a powerful tool to combat sexual assault, but there are many barriers to intervention. The main barriers to bystander intervention, as identified in a study by Shawn Meghan Burn,<sup>21</sup> are as follows:

- Failure to notice the situation
- Failure to identify the situation as high-risk
- Failure to take responsibility for the situation
- Failure to intervene due to lack of skills
- Failure to intervene due to social norms

Bystander intervention training can address every one of these barriers, and will promote bystander intervention, and by extension, a safer community.

Intervention training focuses on what dangerous situations look like, pointing out risk factors such as a solitary individual, a private space, and the presence of alcohol. By teaching students about bystander intervention techniques, we are effectively eliminating the lack of skills barrier and forcing students to take responsibility for the situation as trained individuals. And, by teaching all students about the importance and effectiveness of bystander intervention, we will create a norm of intervention; it won't be weird or overbearing to step in, it will be considerate, even heroic.

We have the opportunity to make bystander intervention the norm at Penn State. If even one out of ten students take the bystander training to heart, that will be 10% more people looking out for their peers and preventing sexual assault. Bystander intervention can be a powerful tool, but only if we choose to make it one.

## **Moving Forward**

We now begin the process of realizing this vision of bystander intervention. Any and all support for this program will help to move it forward, so please take them time to voice your thoughts on the idea. Improvements and alternative suggestions are welcome, and I encourage you to contact me with any questions you have regarding the material presented here. In these preliminary stages, I



want feedback more than anything else: Can I count on you for support? Why or why not? How can this be improved? What information or resources are lacking as of right now?

Once I get feedback from all of you, I would like to bring this proposal to the Faculty Senate and begin the process of making bystander intervention a standard of education here at Penn State. We can move this program forward, but only together. WE ARE taking responsibility for sexual assault prevention.

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## Endnotes

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