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GUEST VIEWPOINT

Use science as tool on campus sexual assault

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No problem can be solved unless we name it and know the extent of it.

That insight first was made by then-Sen. Joe Biden when he wrote the Violence Against Women Act 20 years ago. It was repeated in a report last April by the White House with the observation, "That is especially true when it comes to campus sexual assault, which is chronically underreported."



The first recommendation made in that report, “Not Alone: The First Report of the White House Task Force to Protect Students From Sexual Assault,” was for universities to conduct campus surveys that measure sexual assaults and the related institutional climates that can make such victimization more likely.

But how to do such surveys, and who should do them?

The White House report recommends that universities take advantage of the expertise of sexual violence researchers on campus. Similarly, Sen. Claire McCaskill, D-Mo., recently observed, “Universities are filled with researchers that do surveys all the time.”

In August and September, University of Oregon doctoral students Marina Rosenthal and Carly Smith and I became the first at the UO to conduct such a scientific study. Data from the survey indicate many notable issues. For example, nearly 1 out of every 5 UO women has been sexually assaulted.

If you break down the numbers by the number of weeks in a school year, the data indicate that on average, a dozen female undergraduates at the UO are subjected to rape or attempted rape every week, and others are subjected to unwanted physical attention of a sexual nature.

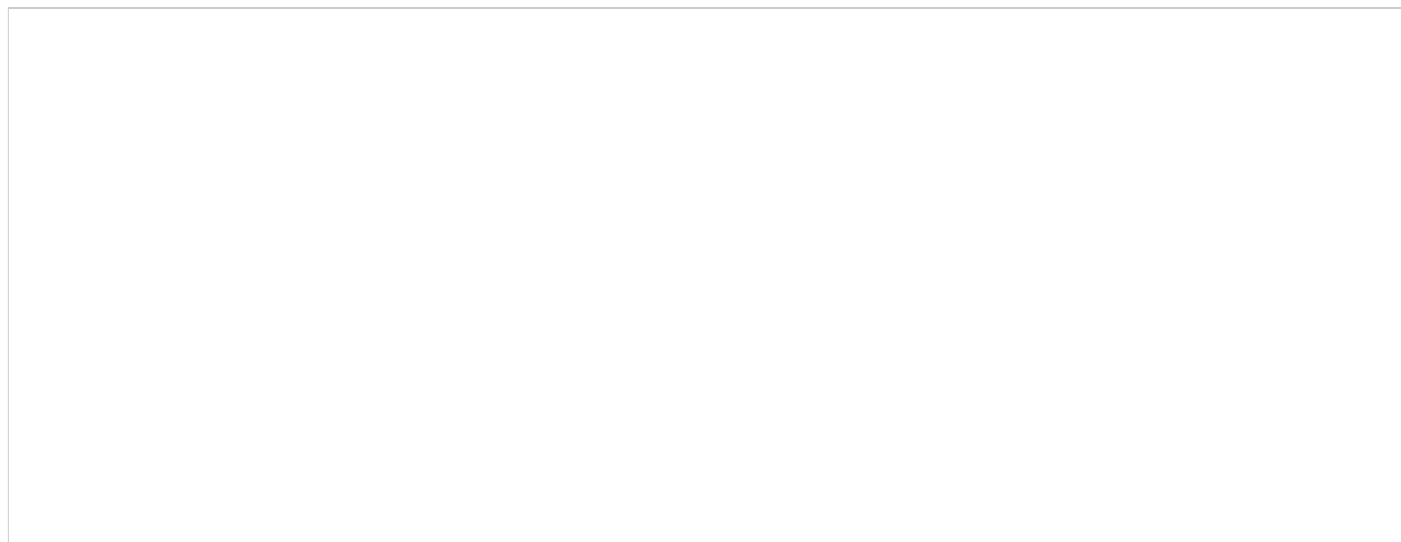
The data also show substantially higher rates of assaults against both female and male students involved in the “Greek system” of fraternities and sororities.

How is such information gathered? Is it reliable? Another way of asking these questions is to ask what exactly are scientific methods, and why it is so important to employ such methods in this domain.

In the influential book “The Logic of Scientific Discovery,” famed scientist Karl Popper explains that “empirical science” is a method of inquiry based on the testing of hypotheses against

empirical observation. It is crucial that such observations be reliable.

While most probably would agree that we need to use scientific methods to research the biology of a dangerous disease like Ebola, many seem not to understand that scientific methods are just as important in researching a dangerous condition like college sexual assault.



Why? There are three primary considerations to explore.

First, it is truly challenging to get accurate information about sexual violence from people. These are highly stigmatizing and confusing experiences that people tend to feel shamed by, to deny, and to not fully understand. Thus, they may not be able to articulate them unless asked in the proper way. Since the 1970s and '80s, researchers have been working on how to create reliable and valid measures of sexual violence.

We have learned a number of important methodological details and have made great progress over the last 40 years. That knowledge base needs to be considered in the development of any survey; in general, scientists with expertise in sexual violence are in the best position to know about measuring sexual violence. Those without such experience may use methods that fail to reflect reality.

Second, science involves a community of researchers brought together by shared principles and adherence to high academic standards. Scientists' approach to observation and experimentation is guided by the work that has come before, by theoretical insights, by discoveries about what experimental techniques work and by which ones don't.

Scientists tend to work in the context of a shared community of scientists with knowledge and willingness to give tough critique and can thus get help and feedback on their work. Scientists value transparency in methodology and data analysis as crucial to the integrity of the

enterprise. Sexual violence researchers communicate eagerly and vigorously about each other's work.

Third — and this is by far the more important consideration — true scientists have an incentive to uncover the truth rather than produce results consistent with what the public wants to hear. That is of great significance when what the public, politicians or even university administrators want to hear is at odds with the underlying reality.

Scientific reputations depend upon the replicability of our research and scholarship, and on evaluations of its quality. It is in a scientist's self-interest to do careful research that others can replicate and to conduct high-quality research that others will cite and evaluate positively.

Of course, there can be corrupting influences within science, too. We recognize the enormous power of incentives, and that is why we require that scientists disclose their funding sources.

Regrettably, some policy-makers do not fully understand the contributions that scientific experts can make toward the development of policy that actually can make a difference in people's lives. Others believe the adage that "an expert is someone from out of town." Thus they become entranced by the possibility that paid consultants should do the work — even if their work is not subjected to peer review, and even if they are not experts in the field.

University scientists live by their reputations. Consultants live by winning the next contract.

If we want campus victimization research to have integrity and to move us toward the truth, we will conduct this research in a way that makes use of both the knowledge base of science and an incentive structure that encourages researchers to produce replicable and high-quality research.

Of course, I am myself a scientist involved in conducting campus victimization surveys, and given that, everything I'm saying about this matter might be suspect. So I offer this perspective as a matter for others to debate and consider further. Debate is crucial to both science and to healthy democracies.

If we truly want to figure out how to bring an end to sexual violence on our campuses, uncovering the underlying facts about campus sexual victimization is an absolutely necessary first step. The scientific method is not perfect, but it is our best tool for uncovering those difficult underlying truths.

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