

Student Panel Summary

Creating a Culture of Consent at McMaster University

26 March 2019



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Creating a Culture of Consent at McMaster University

McMaster Health Forum and Forum+

The goal of the McMaster Health Forum, and its Forum+ initiative, is to generate action on the pressing health- and social-system issues of our time, based on the best available research evidence and systematically elicited citizen values and stakeholder insights. We aim to strengthen health and social systems – locally, nationally, and internationally – and get the right programs, services and products to the people who need them. In doing so, we are building on McMaster’s expertise in advancing human and societal health and well-being.

About student panels

The McMaster Health Forum hosts a fellowship each year for undergraduate students interested in strengthening health and social systems. A key focus of the fellowship is on fostering student engagement to spark action through student panels that are focused on addressing important issues on campus. Student panels build off of the Forum’s strength in convening citizen panels, and aim to strengthen campus-level decision-making by seeking student input on high-priority issues. Each panel brings together 14-16 students from all walks of life. Panel members share their ideas and experiences on an issue, and learn from research evidence and from the views of others. A student panel can be used to elicit the values that students feel should inform future decisions about an issue, as well as to reveal new understandings about an issue and spark insights about how it should be addressed.

About this summary

On the 26th of March 2019, the McMaster Health Forum’s fellows, supported by the Forum staff, convened a student panel on creating a culture of consent on campus. This summary highlights the views and experiences of panel participants about:

- the underlying problem;
- three possible elements of an approach to addressing the problem; and
- potential barriers and facilitators to implement these elements.

The student panel did not aim for consensus. However, the summary describes areas of common ground and differences of opinions among participants and (where possible) identifies the values underlying different positions.

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Summary of the panel

In the deliberation about the problem, panellists focused on three sets of challenges. The first related to challenges with current initiatives including: 1) existing initiatives on campus tend to focus on sexual-violence survivorship, rather than prevention; and 2) approaches to dealing with sexual violence may be too narrowly focused and have not evolved as students' collective understandings of the issue have expanded. The second set focused on a broader culture on campus that panellists suggested: 1) perpetuates sexual violence by protecting those accused of it; and 2) makes reaching a common definition of consent challenging due to the diverse backgrounds, perspectives, and identities of community members. Lastly, the third set of challenges related to governance and accountability mechanisms that were viewed as not always being aligned with students' best interests. In particular, panellists noted the challenges of: 1) perception that the University's process and procedures for responding to sexual violence tend to benefit the interests of the institution and the accused rather than those of survivors; and 2) University officials adopting a narrow and legalistic view in determining their responsibilities.

After discussing the challenges, panellists reflected on three elements of a potentially comprehensive approach for creating a culture of consent, which focused on: 1) exploring the cultural basis of sexual and gender-based violence; 2) establishing coordination structures that clarify leadership, integrate objectives and strengthen collaboration across the University administration and campus groups; and 3) complementing after-the-fact interventions with cost-effective primary-prevention (public-health) efforts. Using these elements as the grounding for deliberations, there was a high level of acceptance among panellists for: 1) embedding sexual-violence support staff or resources within each faculty office; 2) engaging students early in their undergraduate career through educational interventions related to sexual violence and consent; 3) encouraging and facilitating discussions about sexual violence and consent; 4) empowering students and student leaders to take on an active role in creating a culture of consent; and 5) engaging diverse stakeholders in ensuring the issues remain prominent for decision-makers on campus.

Panellists identified a lack of funding and resource allocation, and difficulty in assessing the effectiveness of interventions as key implementation barriers. For facilitators, panellists cited the increasing normalization of discussing sexual violence and consent, indicating an appetite for change.



"The system seems to be rigged towards giving perpetrators more power than survivors."

Discussing the problem:

What are the most important challenges to creating a culture of consent on campus?

Panellists reviewed the findings from the pre-circulated student brief, which highlighted what is known about the problem. During the deliberation, panellists agreed with many of the points raised in the student brief about what is driving the problem. They individually and collectively focused on the three challenges that were outlined in the student brief:

- 1) cultural challenges impede conversations around consent;
- 2) challenges with existing programs and services on campus; and
- 3) governance oversight and discipline.

We review key themes from the deliberation in relation to each of these challenges in turn below.

Cultural challenges impede conversations around consent

Panellists noted that the culture surrounding sexual and gender-based violence on campus creates numerous challenges for preventing sexual violence. The specific challenges identified by panellists that make it difficult to cultivate a culture of consent included:

- a lack of clear definitions for consent and sexual violence;
- a constantly changing understanding of sexuality and consent;
- a wide range of lived experience and understanding of consent and sexual violence among students enrolling at the University;
- a limited collective understanding of the environments in which sexual violence occurs; and
- power imbalances that have been created by University processes and may protect perpetrators of sexual violence.

With respect to definitions, most panellists agreed that a lack of clear definitions makes it difficult to create a culture of consent. Panellists noted that a common understanding of what constitutes sexual violence is needed to create a culture of consent, but a common understanding does not currently exist on campus (nor in society).

One factor that may contribute to the lack of common understanding of consent is that accepted understandings of sexuality and consent are constantly changing. A broader understanding of the various ways in which people express sexuality requires a broader understanding of what constitutes sexual violence. The #MeToo movement has also created a cultural change in which it has become less taboo to talk about sexual violence and survivorship. However, many people may experience sexual violence but are unable to acknowledge their experience as being sexual violence because of societally constructed notions of sexual violence. Furthermore, panellists noted that each individual experiences consent and sexual violence in different ways, which makes it difficult to set moral standards.

Another factor that makes it challenging to create a culture of consent is the widely varying degree of education on sexual violence and education that students enter university with. Panellists noted that this diversity in preparation can create situations wherein students are unable to acknowledge that they may be experiencing or perpetrating sexual violence. Panellists also noted that, from a policy perspective, more should be done at the middle- and high-school levels to educate students and encourage a culture of consent.

The fourth factor that contributes to the challenge of creating a culture of consent is a limited understanding of the environments and ways that sexual violence is perpetrated. Panellists noted that common conceptions of sexual violence at the University focus on sexual violence that occurs within a party culture, and although this is an important part of the problem, students often do not recognize that sexual violence can and does occur within relationships and on both a micro (e.g., unwanted sexual comments) and macro (e.g., sexual assault) level.

Finally, panellists mostly agreed that University processes and policies create a system wherein survivors are unduly burdened for reporting their experiences and perpetrators are afforded various protections. Many panellists expressed frustration that University policies, which are often created by people whose understanding of sexual violence and consent may be inconsistent with that of the student body, aim to protect the University from liability rather than support survivors. For example, panellists expressed frustration that survivors have to “jump through hoops” to report incidents. There was also frustration expressed by some participants that when perpetrators are identified they are often allowed to remain in student-leadership positions, even though they have abused those positions. However, some panellists also noted the tension between the need to believe survivors whilst also preserving an assumption of innocence until proof of guilt.

Box 1: Profile of panel participants

The student panel aimed for fair representation among the diversity of students likely to be affected by the problem. We provide below a brief profile of panel participants.

- **How many participants?**

12

- **How old were they?**

All participants were between 18 and 24 years old.

- **Were they men, or women?**

Men (2) and women (10)

- **What was the educational level of participants?**

As most of the participants are currently undergraduate students, the highest level of education completed by the majority of participants was high school (10); one participant completed a bachelor’s degree, and one participant completed post-graduate training or a professional degree.

- **What was the ethnic background of participants?**

Five participants considered their ethnic background as South Asian, three as European, two as Canadian, one as African, and one declined to answer.

- **How were they recruited?**

Recruited through public postings on social media, targeted outreach, or by referral from steering committee members.

Challenges with existing programs and services on campus

While deliberating about the challenges with existing programs and services on campus, panellists identified the issue that existing programs on campus focus mainly on survivorship, rather than on prevention. The importance of empowering the community to both support survivors and prevent sexual violence was cited by a number of panellists. However, many panellists agreed that there has been inadequate effort put into developing and implementing educational interventions for bystanders and individuals in positions of power (e.g., University administrators).

The majority of panel participants mentioned that the lack of standardized reporting and enforcement mechanisms on campus can preclude individuals from reporting sexual violence to campus security, even when serious concerns exist. This problem was attributed to a lack of consistent definitions of sexual violence among the student body. Among the panellists, there was a general agreement that a malleable definition should be in place to create a common understanding for reporting and enforcement services.

Box 2: Key features of the student panel

The student panel about creating a culture of consent on campus had the following 11 features:

1. it addressed a high-priority issue in university communities;
2. it provided an opportunity to discuss different features of the problem;
3. it provided an opportunity to discuss three elements of a potentially comprehensive approach for addressing the problem;
4. it provided an opportunity to discuss key implementation considerations (e.g., barriers);
5. it provided an opportunity to talk about who might do what differently;
6. it was informed by a pre-circulated, plain-language brief;
7. it involved a facilitator to assist with the discussions;
8. it brought together students affected by the problem or by future decisions related to the problem;
9. it aimed for fair representation among the diversity of students involved in or affected by the problem;
10. it aimed for open and frank discussions that will preserve the anonymity of participants; and
11. it aimed to find both common ground and differences of opinions.

Governance and accountability

When discussing the potential to create a culture of consent on campus, panellists noted that multiple dimensions of governance and accountability ought to be improved. Specific aspects of the problem cited by panellists included:

- perception that the University's process and procedures for responding to sexual violence tend to benefit the interests of the institution and the accused rather than those of survivors; and
- University officials adopting a narrow and legalistic view in determining their responsibilities to prevent and respond to sexual violence.

A perception from panellists that existing University processes and procedures create an environment where those accused of sexual assault and the University's reputation are protected above survivors' interests was a recurring theme in deliberations. Panellists noted that policies limiting their ability to publicly identify people accused of sexual assault (who had not been found guilty of wrongdoing though internal or external investigative processes) were a barrier to prevention that served to protect the accused while also minimizing perceptions of the prevalence of sexual violence on campus. Similarly, panellists held the view that the punishments issued to those who had been found guilty of wrongdoing were disproportionately weak in relation to offences committed and were ineffectual. Though panellists described this as failing to respond to sexual violence, they agreed that strong enforcement of the Sexual Violence Policy, as well as meaningful and visible punishments (i.e., those that concerned members of the student body are made aware of, such as removal from leadership posts) would also be strong preventive tools.

Additionally, panellists believed that University officials adopt a narrow and legalistic view in determining their responsibilities when it comes to preventing and responding to sexual violence. For example, though the scope of McMaster's Sexual Violence Policy extends to interactions between students on- and off-campus, some panellists described weaker enforcement actions when an alleged incident of sexual violence occurred off-campus. Panellists also took issue with the University's perspective of sexual violence focusing predominantly on actions that meet the burden of being considered illegal, while not pursuing other instances of sexual violence that do not meet this burden, but are nonetheless inherently problematic. Some panel members argued that this is a product of the University operating in a broader system that has been assigned the dual obligations of

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supporting survivors of sexual violence, as well as affording the accused the rights they are owed in order for the University to avoid its own legal consequences.



“There needs to be a focus on survivors, but when there is an assault, there is a ripple effect in the whole community.”

Discussing the elements:

How can we address the problem?

After discussing the challenges that together constitute the problem, participants were invited to reflect on three elements for creating a culture of consent on campus:

- 1) exploring the cultural basis of sexual and gender-based violence;
- 2) establishing coordination structures that clarify leadership, integrate objectives and strengthen collaboration across the University administration and campus groups; and
- 3) complementing after-the-fact interventions with cost-effective primary-prevention (public-health) efforts.

The three approach elements can be pursued together or in sequence. A description of these elements, along with a summary of the research evidence about them, was provided to participants in the student brief that was circulated before the event.

Element 1 – Explore the cultural basis of sexual and gender-based violence

The discussion about the first element focused on how the cultural drivers of sexual and gender-based violence can be understood and addressed. As outlined in the student brief, this could include various strategies to address a culture where consent may be disregarded, such as:

- introducing new or strengthening existing educational interventions;
- reshaping the constructed and reproduced narratives of sex and gender that do not align with the principles of consent; and
- promoting multidisciplinary research focusing on the cultural basis of sexual and gender-based violence as well as effective interventions to address this culture.

Box 3: Key messages about exploring the cultural basis of sexual and gender-based violence (element 1)

Three values-related themes emerged during the discussion about element 1:

- promoting discussions and dialogue;
- fostering collaboration between the University, students, and other organizations to clarify roles; and
- empowering students.

Element 1 resonated strongly with panellists, and three values-related themes emerged during the deliberation about it: 1) promoting discussions and dialogue; 2) fostering collaboration between the University, students, and other organizations to clarify roles; and 3) empowering students.

With respect to promoting discussions and dialogue, panellists expressed a desire to normalize conversations about consent. Panellists supported encouraging conversations about consent and sexual violence because these student-led conversations encourage the University administration to pay more attention to the issue. Furthermore, panellists noted that when students talk about issues that have an impact on their lives (such as sexual violence) everyone becomes more aware of the human impacts of the issue and their actions.

Panellists also noted that while engaging students and promoting discussions is desirable, there may be a tension between freedom of speech and creating a culture of consent. Panellists suggested that freedom of speech ought to be upheld to seek and create more

knowledge in the world, but this can be difficult to balance against the need to respect people's rights. Finally, panellists largely agreed that regardless of how much awareness is built and how much effort is put into shaping constructions of consent, there will be some people who receive training and know the principles of consent, but fail to enact consent in their own lives due to power dynamics and maladaptive behaviours.

Regarding the second value-related theme (fostering collaboration between the University, students, and other organizations to clarify roles), panellists largely agreed that the University is uniquely positioned to take action on this issue and the administration should take greater advantage of its position. Panellists noted that because the University has an internal process for handling reports of sexual violence, it is able to discipline and rehabilitate perpetrators that may otherwise evade discipline in the justice systems outside the campus environment. Panellists also noted that the University has a duty to make the process of investigating allegations of sexual violence more transparent and survivor-centric (particularly the policy for disclosures of sexual violence in residence). Finally, although panellists were eager for the University administration to do more to create a culture of consent, they also noted that in order to best serve a diverse student body, the administration needs to listen to students' desires and values and act in the students' best interests.

Lastly, regarding the third value-related theme (empowering students), panellists mostly agreed that more students could benefit from the sexual-violence training that student leaders (such as Welcome Week representatives) receive. Some panellists recommended introducing online sexual violence-prevention training as a prerequisite to take part in Welcome Week activities. Furthermore, panellists expressed a desire for student leaders to raise greater awareness about what constitutes sexual violence and where students can seek support.

Element 2 – Establish coordination structures that clarify leadership, integrate objectives and strengthen collaboration across the University administration and campus groups

The discussion about the second element focused on how existing or new coordination structures within the University community could be leveraged to create a culture of consent on campus. As outlined in the student brief, this could include various approaches to creating these structures, such as by:

- establishing a clear leadership mandate;
- including a range of stakeholders in a collaborative structure; and
- engaging with and remaining accountable to community members.

Element 2 was identified by panellists as the least important of the three elements proposed, however they considered it to be the element with the greatest opportunity for implementation. Three values-related themes emerged during the deliberation about element 2, which included: 1) establishing credibility through diversity and intersectionality; 2) fostering collaboration among University and student leaders; and 3) supporting empowerment via funding and resource allocation.

For the first value-related theme, panellists identified recruiting a diverse and intersectional leadership roster as a key component of creating an effective coordination structure. Panellists noted that a person's sexuality, gender, race or ethnicity may all influence their understanding and expectations with regards to consent, thus a diverse set of views must be represented in order to reach all members of the community. Further, panellists stated that discussions around consent on campus are largely heteronormative, and do not adequately address the challenges faced by the LGBTQ+ population on campus. Panellists also

Box 4: Key messages about establishing coordination structures that clarify leadership, integrate objectives and strengthen collaboration across the University administration and campus groups (element 2)

Three values-related themes emerged during the discussion about element 2:

- establishing credibility through diversity and intersectionality;
- fostering collaboration among University and student leaders; and
- supporting empowerment via funding and resource allocation.

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suggested the inclusion of people from the greater Hamilton community or other educational institutions/backgrounds.

In relation to the second value-related theme (fostering collaboration among University and student leaders), panellists stated that in order for coordination to be successful, there would need to be buy-in and effective dialogue between student groups and with University administrators. Panellists shared their perceptions of University leadership as being uninterested in collaborating with student groups or taking the lead on new initiatives when prompted. In order for a coordination structure to be successful, panellists acknowledged that communication between constituent groups/stakeholders would need to be open and honest, and that an emphasis would need to be placed on ensuring groups/stakeholders are continuously aware of one another's activities so that redundancy or potential for collaboration could be identified. Further, panellists suggested that this communication should include long-term representatives rather than student leaders only (such as Student Representative Assembly representatives - who are elected to one-year terms) given challenges with high turnover and the need for continuity.

Finally, panellists emphasized that for the last theme (supporting empowerment via funding and resource allocation) an effective coordination structure ought to receive a greater amount of funding than the University currently earmarks for efforts to prevent and respond to sexual violence. In particular, panellists supported the creation of additional Sexual Violence Response Coordinator positions and suggested that some of these positions could be embedded within faculty offices given the disparity in resources available between different faculties. Panellists also noted that the McMaster Students Union would benefit from the creation of a sexual violence service coordinator position to remedy the paucity of collaboration between different students union organizations that all aim to provide services to survivors of sexual violence.

Element 3 – Complement after-the-fact interventions with cost-effective primary-prevention (public-health) efforts

The discussion about the third element focused on identifying a range of public-health approaches to prevent sexual violence-related harms (e.g., education, awareness-raising, and bystander intervention training), and the processes which facilitate the integration of these approaches within the set of core services offered at McMaster. As outlined in the student brief, this could include:

- introducing a range of approaches to reduce sexual violence-related harms (e.g., education and awareness-raising and bystander intervention training) in the set of core services offered at McMaster;
- adopting a public-health approach to understanding sexual violence by using existing data to identify risk and protective factors for perpetrating or experiencing sexual violence; and
- adopting a public-health approach to addressing sexual violence by deploying primary-prevention programs targeted at modifiable risk factors.

Two values-related themes emerged during the deliberations about element 3: 1) empowering students by targeting educational interventions related to consent and sexual violence at the outset of a student's undergraduate career; and 2) holding students accountable by enforcing consent-related criteria for certain student leadership roles.

In relation to the first theme, many panellists highlighted the importance of directing primary-prevention efforts towards first-year students in transition periods. Again, the diverse backgrounds of students at McMaster was identified as underpinning the need to ensure that all students entering university have a coherent understanding of consent and sexual violence. Furthermore, several panellists noted the need for increased advertising for student wellness and support services, citing that there should be heightened emphasis on

Box 5: Key messages about complementing after-the-fact interventions with cost-effective primary-prevention (public-health) efforts (element 3)

Two values-related themes emerged during the discussion about element 3:

- empowering students by targeting educational interventions related to consent and sexual violence at the outset of a student's undergraduate career;
- holding students accountable by enforcing consent-related criteria to attain certain student leadership positions on campus; and

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raising awareness early in a student's undergraduate career. By extension, it was also suggested that increased service utilization may not serve as an indicator of increased sexual violence. Rather, it may suggest an increased awareness of services and de-stigmatization of reaching out for these services among the student body.

For the second theme, the majority of panel members also suggested that there should be consent-related criteria and continuous training (rather than isolated, 'one-off' training) implemented for students in leadership roles (e.g., Welcome Week and Residence Representatives). This may serve to create a culture of consent not only among first-year students, but upper-year students in positions of power.

Despite the deliberations about element 3, this element was difficult for panellists to conceptualize given the consensus among panellists that programs on campus focus mainly on survivorship, rather than on prevention. The scarcity of preventive programs and services on campus that can serve as starting points for discussion may have rendered it challenging to identify approaches to prevent sexual violence-related harms, and the processes which facilitate the integration of these approaches within services offered at McMaster.



“Universities are uniquely positioned to teach students about consent and send champions of consent into the world.”

Discussing implementation considerations: What are the potential barriers and facilitators to implementing these elements?

Panellists identified the lack of funding, especially given the upcoming cut to student services, as a significant barrier to developing, implementing and monitoring primary-prevention interventions for sexual violence. Challenges associated with monitoring the effectiveness of implemented interventions were also highlighted. As one panellist noted: “You have no idea if you’re actually making a difference.” Panellists also emphasized the significant challenge of accepting and internalizing clear and consistent meanings of sexual violence given the experiential heterogeneity that exists among students and administrators. Shifting the attitudes and values underpinning lack of engagement and action in this issue was also cited as a barrier. As one panellist highlighted: “How do we get the people who don’t care into the room? How do we change their values so they understand the meaning and harm of sexual violence?”

When turning to potential facilitators to moving forward, panellists highlighted that experiences and discussions of consent and sexual violence are becoming increasingly normalized as the stigma against speaking out is lessening. Panellists also noted that the existing community resources and interest among students to create a culture of consent can be leveraged in a more unified way to serve as a facilitator.

Acknowledgments

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Conflict of interest

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