

On CT H.B. No. 5029:

My name is Evan Walker-Wells and I'm a senior at Yale. I've been working as a peer educator around sexual assault at Yale for the last three years.

I'd like to talk about the focus of new trainings at institutions of higher learning proposed by HR 5029. It's absolutely essential that students learn about sexual assault and what they can do to prevent it. But the way that we teach that can make a big difference. If we focus too much on statistics and dramatic situations, we blind people to the small but essential ways they can improve the culture around them.

All of us are here today because we live in a society that too often accepts sexual violence and harassment. The way to address this problem is through education designed to change this culture itself. What's important is teaching skills and giving students the confidence that they can intervene and support friends and strangers.

At Yale, we've run a series of effective workshops over the last three years that improve our campus culture by building shared values and skills in our community.

One workshop, which we run with freshmen, focuses on how sexual assault is the result of people deliberately ignoring others' wishes, not because of misunderstandings. This workshop is meant to create a community value that sexual assault is a serious problem and that the way to address this problem is to take all kinds of sexual misconduct seriously.

With sophomores, we run a workshop that teaches how bystander intervention can be most successful not in the dramatic moments, but in the low level interactions. Interventions when we witness unwanted and persistent advances or hear rape jokes can be just as important as calling the police at the right time. We focus on how to intervene when you encounter troubling signs as well as on creating a shared value of watching out for each other and being there for your community.

The point of these workshops is not just to emphasize that sexual assault is bad. Everyone knows that. They're about creating communities where people believe that they are empowered in their own lives and can help prevent sexual assault and even lower level but still damaging sexual misconduct. What's important is spreading the skills and the confidence that students need to intervene to help friends and strangers—as well as to support those who have already lived through sexual assault.

I worry that the implementation of HR 5029 will lead to ineffective trainings that focus on statistics and scary, dramatic stories. Those don't help anyone. Sexual assault is a major problem on college campuses. But when we dwell on how traumatic it can be for many survivors, or when we focus solely on its prevalence, we can forget or doubt that we can do so much to combat this problem. Focusing on how common sexual assault is can strengthen the narratives that make it seem like an unavoidable part of college life. That is the last thing anyone should want.

It's important that whatever trainings come out of the debate around HR 5029, they focus on making schools in Connecticut more positive environments. That means shaping communities so that people who have been harassed and assaulted feel supported by their friends as well as giving everyone the tools to spot serial abusers and intervene when they see something troubling at play. We can improve our communities by changing the conversation around sexual violence and harassment and building shared values and skills.