

Mae Ehrnfelt
Laurel Hall 428A
83 Windham St.
Willimantic, CT 06226
(203) 654-6128 / ehrnfelte@my.easternct.edu

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Senator Bartolomeo, Representative Willis, and members of the committee,

My name is Mae Ehrnfelt and I am a junior attending Eastern Connecticut State University. I am the president of the Eastern chapter of the National Organization for Women as well as an intern with Planned Parenthood of Southern New England.

I am submitting written testimony in support of proposed S.B. 636, An Act Concerning Affirmative Consent. This bill would require colleges and universities to include affirmative consent in their sexual assault, stalking, and intimate partner violence policies. Affirmative consent is the conscious and voluntary agreement to engage in sexual activity, and should be a key element in determining whether sexual activity was consensual.

We live in a society in which victims in sexual assault cases are typically blamed for the violence that is acted upon them by perpetrators. In instances of assault, we ask first, “What was she wearing?” We ask, “Was she drunk?” We ask, “Did she say no?” It should not matter if the victim was wearing sweatpants or a mini-skirt. It should not matter if she was sober or if she had a few drinks. It should not matter if she was silent or if she failed to protest the attack. The fact of the matter should be that if affirmative consent was not given, then the relations were not mutual and it was clearly an instance of assault.

Some people might be concerned about the drawbacks of asking for consent in a relationship. I’ve had friends suggest that it might be awkward for them to ask their partner to clearly state their consent during sex. They complain, “But Mae, won’t that ruin the mood?” My response is always the same: No, affirmative consent will not ruin the mood. Sexual assault will, however, ruin the life of the victim and sometimes of the perpetrator. What affirmative consent will do is clear the blurred lines between consensual relations and assault.

As a college student, I’ve heard horror stories of women’s reputations being scorned for what has happened to them at parties. I’ve had friends come to me, crying, because they weren’t sure if it was their fault that they were assaulted because they didn’t know how to react when the assault was happening. The victim should never think it is their fault that they were assaulted. The conversation around assault needs to change from what the victim did wrong, to instead focus on the detrimental actions of the perpetrator. Establishing an affirmative consent policy helps to shift the focus of the investigation to the perpetrator’s behavior and away from questioning what the victim did to say no.

It is my belief that affirmative consent will provide students with safer, more supportive college campuses. The lines between what is wrong and right will no longer be blurred. In terms of consent, Connecticut should abide by the affirmative “yes means yes,” instead of the ambiguous “no means no.”

Sincerely,
Mae Ehrnfelt