
Regional

Sexual assaults on campus need to be addressed

In the last few weeks two films have been released that on the surface seem to be unrelated in content, but are closely linked in their message.

The first of those films is "Spotlight." It tells the true story of how a team of reporters for The Boston Globe worked to uncover a pattern of sexual abuse of children and its cover-up in Massachusetts by the Catholic Church. This investigative reporting earned the newspaper the 2003 Pulitzer Prize for public service. The movie is considered to be a very accurate representation and shows how these criminal acts represented a systemic problem within the church. The movie received wide acclaim not only because of its artistic merits but also for the exposé of the facts.

The other film is "The Hunting Ground." This is a documentary that had a limited theatrical release on February, but was broadcast by CNN on November 22. It deals with the issue of sexual assault on U.S. college and university campuses. This documentary included not only numerous on-camera interviews with victims of these crimes, but also with scholars who have studied the issue as well as former university administrators.

"The Hunting Ground" also received wide artistic acclaim, but also its share of negative criticism – particularly from the higher education institutions mentioned in the film, such as Harvard and Florida State University. Administrators of those institutions claimed the movie to be inaccurate and taking sides with the victims. The release of this documentary has coincided with a rise of reports in the media of sexual assaults across campuses

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during the last few years at both prestigious Ivy League institutions and smaller lesser-known ones.

According to the American Association of University Women, one out of 10 colleges reported rapes on their campuses in 2014. Given that in the U.S. there are about 5,000 institutions of higher education, that means that at least one rape has occurred in at least 500 of them in a single year. Yet, most likely this is a conservative figure. As anyone who is aware of the nature of crime statistics, sexual assaults are among the least reported. Many women feel uncomfortable reporting these kinds of crimes for a variety of reasons. In most of the cases the perpetrators are people they know because they are other students or coworkers. Further, the U.S. Department of Education has levied fines to colleges and universities on numerous occasions for underreporting these crimes, which supports the contention that these statistics must be very conservative. Not that we lack legislation addressing this issue. The Clery Act of 1990, named after Jeanne Clery, a 19-year-old student at Lehigh University in Pennsylvania, who was raped and murdered in the campus residence hall in 1986, was specifically designed to make all institutions of higher education that receive some form of federal financial support (virtually all of them) report crime statistics on their respective

campuses.

But, obviously, that has not been enough. Now states from Connecticut to California have come up with tougher legislation aimed at colleges and universities to take more firm stances in preventing, reporting and handling sexual assaults. Sen. Claire McCaskill (D-MO), along with nine other sponsors, has introduced the Campus Accountability and Safety Act (CASA) bill aimed at reducing sexual violence in institutions of higher education. This bill, introduced in 2014, is still pending in the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives. In the meantime, the U.S. Department of Education has issued new guidelines on how to handle sexual assaults on campuses while the U.S. Department of Justice, acting on recommendations from a White House task force, is funding more research on this issue.

Given the seriousness of the situation one wonders why so many colleges and universities have not taken a more proactive stance on this issue? The answer is two-fold. First, very few academic leaders have had any training on how to handle crises that affect the public image of their institutions. As any expert in communications would tell them the position they need to take has to be very proactive and open to show that they are really doing something that is really meaningful, not just to issue perfunctory statements aimed at protecting the brand name of their institutions.

The other is that these leaders think – erroneously – that the only means to protect their reputation and that of their campuses is by softening

(if not totally covering up) the problem. And some of them have already taken a lot of heat for their stances, such as the president of the University of Iowa, Sally Mason, who said in an interview that sexual crimes were part of "human nature." Bryan Golden, the campus police chief at Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College in Georgia, was fired after he was quoted as saying that most sexual assaults are not rape, but "women waking up the next morning with a guilt complex."

We should not forget that early colleges were founded by churches and once public institutions began to proliferate, they adopted the same cultural habits of the private ones: insularity, secrecy in their handling of internal affairs, and the tendency to overprotect their own. And that is where the connection between the sexual crimes at the Catholic Church in Massachusetts and the ones on campuses resides.

One of the most chilling moments of "Spotlight" is when at the end of the movie they show the long list of cities where sexual abuse by Catholic priests has been reported. Unfortunately the list of colleges and universities where sexual crimes occurred last year alone is even longer. Unless the culture of insularity and mismanagement is changed, higher education will be facing the same bad image as the Catholic Church.

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