‘IT SHOULDN’T HAVE TO BE THIS WAY:’
A FOCUS GROUP ANALYSIS OF RAPE MYTHS
IN CLERY ACT TIMELY WARNINGS

Laura Heck

Dr. Amanda Hinnant, Thesis Supervisor

ABSTRACT

Throughout the last several decades, there have been federal-level efforts to help eradicate rape-supportive cultures on college campuses across the country. Among those, the Clery Act and Title IX are heavy-hitters. However, when policy fails to account for the rape-supportive mechanisms, systems and procedures that permeate society, the very ways we attempt to empower victims and potential victims of sexual assault can become tools of further oppression. Under the Clery Act, universities are required to send out campus-wide timely warnings if a sexual assault occurs on or near campus wherein the perpetrator was unknown or not caught. This research, conducted as qualitative focus group analysis, shows how students identify, interpret and make meaning out of perceived rape myths embedded in the descriptions of the sexual assaults in the Clery releases (timely warnings). Further, the way those students interacted with those rape myths was shown to uphold and maintain a rape-supportive culture that denied, trivialized and justified sexual assaults. Through this research, it becomes clear that procedures such as timely warnings perpetuate and reaffirm students’ acceptance of rape myths in relation to sexual assaults on college campuses. It is necessary, then, that a public health approach to sexual assault prevention on college campuses is necessary to eradicate a rape-supportive culture by changing the dynamics of the culture, instead of focusing on bystander intervention or reducing risk.