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Sexual assault at Catholic colleges and universities

Nicole Sotelo | Mar. 10, 2011

Ave Maria University is known for its strict policies against sexual intimacy -- no repeated inappropriate displays of affection, no condoms, no sex. Unfortunately, these rules don?t stop rape.

According to the U.S. Department of Education, which tracks campus-related sexual assaults, there were two reported crimes at Ave Maria University -- with has a student body of 825 -- in 2009, the last year for which reporting is available. In 2010, there was at least one allegation of ?immoral conduct? against a student by a nun, according to news reports [1].

Indicated by the statistics at Ave Maria, Catholic campuses are not immune from the widespread reality of sexual assaults taking place on college and university campuses.

Last week at St. Joseph?s University in Philadelphia, students were informed [2] that a current part-time chaplain had been sued in 1999 at another Catholic university over allegations of sexual harassment.

Earlier this year, at least two separate instances of sexual assault were reported at Notre Dame, including the case of a woman who committed suicide nine days after reporting her crime. In both cases, the campus police department is facing serious allegations against their handling of the crimes.

In the first case, the suspect was not interviewed for 14 days; the other case not for 11 days. The U.S. Department of Education has opened an inquiry into the university?s response to sexual assaults [3].

These are not isolated cases, but rather representative of what young adults face at Catholic institutions of higher education. Below is a brief look at the reported sexual assault statistics across the country at a broad representation of Catholic colleges and universities, taken from the U.S. Department of Education [4].

College or University	**Number of Sexual Offenses Reported to Have Occurred on Campus in 2009**	**Total Number of Students**
Boston College	11	15,036
The Catholic University of America	2	6,768
Dominican University, Ill.	1	3,909
Franciscan University of Steubenville	0	2,725

University of San Diego	3	7,868

What is equally shocking is that these statistics potentially tell us very little about the real number of sexual assaults on college campuses. Studies reveal that less than 5 percent [5] of such crimes are ever reported to campus or law enforcement officials.

Research also shows that the highest number of assaults occur among 18-21 year-old women (*Journal of American College Health*, Vol. 45, 1997) and as many as one in five female students experience assault [6] during their college years.

For the last ten years, U.S. Catholicism has rightly focused on sexual violence through the lens of clergy sexual abuse against minors, but we cannot be blind to the sexual abuse against young adults taking place at Catholic colleges and universities.

When there are still Catholic university administrators who hire alleged sexual offenders to campus staffs and when there are university officials who do not respond to sexual assault reports in a timely manner, there remains an institutional problem akin to that of the systemic failures known for the clergy sex abuse crisis.

A Catholic school identity does not stop sexual assault. Policies against sexual intimacy don?t stop assault.

What does help are universities that follow national policies such as the Clery Act and colleges that respond to sex crime allegations with efficiency. Anything less and we will continue to fail our youth and young adults who are too often the victims of Catholicism?s institutional failures.

[Nicole Sotelo is the author of *Women Healing from Abuse: Meditations for Finding Peace*, published by Paulist Press, and coordinates **www.WomenHealing.com** [7]. A graduate of Harvard Divinity School, she currently works at Call To Action.]

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