

COMMUNICATING PUBLICLY ABOUT SEXUAL ASSAULT ON CAMPUS:

Tips for Senior Administrators

In recent years, sexual assault has become an issue that is at the forefront of the minds of students, parents, alumni, employees, donors, and trustees.

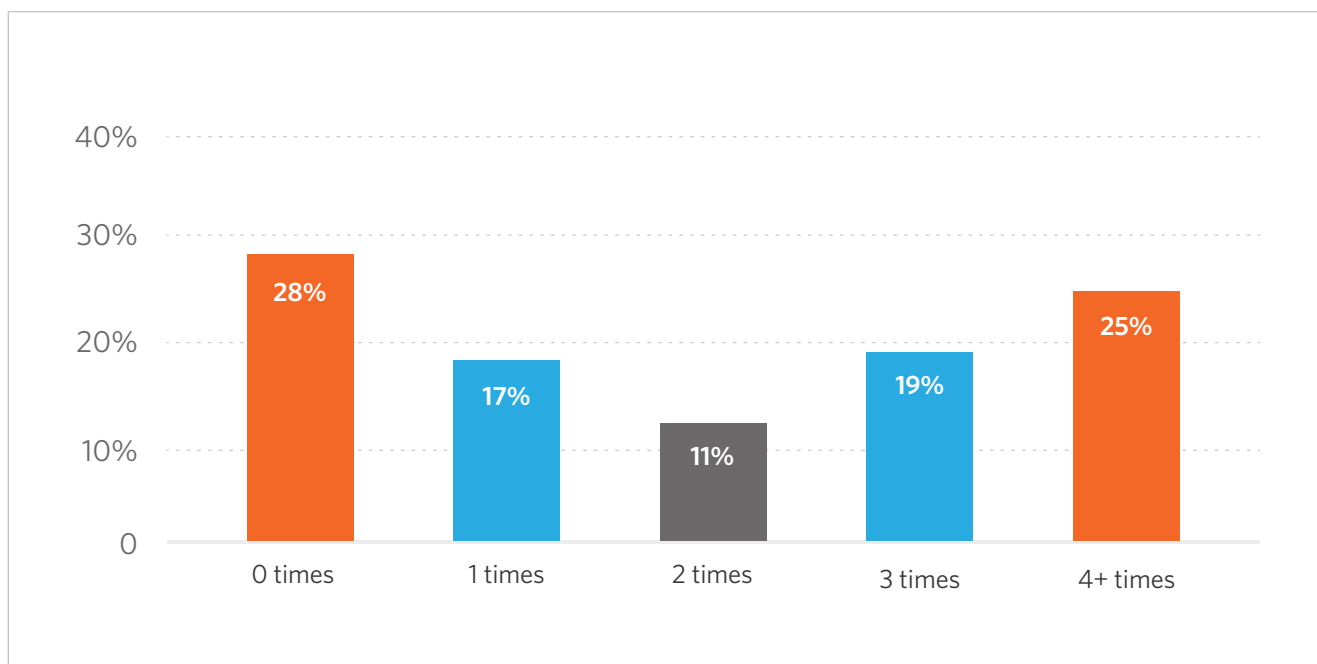
Institutions of higher education have seen unprecedented activism, legislative oversight, and [enforcement](#) around their prevention and response efforts. In keeping with these growing expectations, it is critical that those in leadership positions on campus take a proactive and vocal stance on the issue.

As a new President takes office in the White House, many are left wondering what the future will hold for the issue of sexual assault on campus. In a final push before the change in administration, the White House Task Force to Protect Students from Sexual Assault released a guide outlining detailed recommendations specifically for senior administrators in Higher Education.

The document, titled [Preventing and Addressing Campus Sexual Misconduct: A Guide for University and College Presidents, Chancellors, and Senior Administrators](#), emphasizes the important role that senior leaders play in ending violence on campus, and urges administrators to take an active stance in the development and refinement of prevention efforts on campus.

[According to EverFi research](#), on average, 25% of college presidents issued at least four public communications about the topic of sexual assault throughout the 2015-16 academic year. Despite this, however, 45% of college presidents had communicated publicly about this issue only one time or not at all.

HOW MANY TIMES HAS YOUR INSTITUTION'S CHANCELLOR OR PRESIDENT PUBLICLY SPOKEN ABOUT SEXUAL ASSAULT IN THE PAST 12 MONTHS?



¹ EverFi Sexual Assault Diagnostic Inventory, n=64

Given the important role campus leaders play in shaping the priorities and perceptions of their institutions, the recommendations below are designed to support senior administrators as they vocalize and actualize their commitment to ending sexual assault.

BE PROACTIVE

Students, parents, and alumni are becoming more aware of the issue of sexual assault on college campuses.

Now more than ever, those in leadership positions at institutions of higher education are being looked to for feedback and input on the efforts of their community. Many campus leaders find themselves speaking reactively about this issue, often following an incident or call to action from students.

It is critically important to get the message right when responding to an incident, but there are many advantages to being vocal on these issues before a problem arises.

By choosing to be proactive and communicating about your efforts throughout the academic year, you are setting the tone for future communications, establishing a visible record of commitment, and demonstrating to those at your institution (and beyond) that this is a priority at all times.

LANGUAGE MATTERS

Given the sensitive nature of these issues, it is important to choose your words very carefully and intentionally. Refrain from language that assumes or normalizes a certain sexual orientation, particularly statements that marginalize individuals who do not identify as heterosexual. Unless the specific sex or gender of an individual or group is central to the conversation, use more inclusive terms like “person” or “student.”

Also, it’s critical to stay away from victim-blaming statements or language that justifies or minimizes an unacceptable behavior (e.g., “boys will be boys” or “the student who was assaulted should not have been drinking”). Keep your words supportive, compassionate, caring, and committed to ending sexual violence.

STAND BY YOUR WORD

Be mindful of any promises or suggestions that you make, as you will be held accountable for them. If you say that ending violence on campus is your number one priority, for example, those on your campus will expect to see that translated into resources and action. Be prepared to have a plan in place for backing up any promises, and keep your community updated on how that plan is being executed.

While many schools have invested heavily in response-related initiatives, the solution to ending sexual assault ultimately lies in prevention. Unfortunately, EverFi research has shown this to be an area ripe for improvement as institutions are often spending less than \$30,000 on prevention initiatives.



PREPARATION IS KEY

One of the best things about proactive communication is that you are in full control of the tone, content, and delivery of your message.

Whether you are writing a campus-wide email, speaking to the media, or delivering a keynote or address for the student body, seek input from the experts on your campus who spend their time working with students around this issue. Additionally, anticipate potential resistance or opposition. Despite our best efforts, there are sometimes those who will be critical.

While transparency and strong proactive efforts will be supported by most, there may be pushback by a vocal minority. By anticipating this before it happens, you can ensure that your message is clear, consistent, and aligned with the importance and severity of the issue.

ACKNOWLEDGE THE ISSUES

While the widespread prevalence of sexual assault has been continuously demonstrated in national studies, [many college presidents are still reluctant to acknowledge the issues at their own institution.](#)

It is important to understand that this is an issue that exists on every campus, and it's critical to learn (and share) what is happening in your community. Consult with those who work directly with students and make yourself aware of anything that may impact how your message is received.

Helpful things to know are specific statistics referenced in your institution's Annual Security Report or campus climate survey data, ongoing plans for prevention efforts on campus, and upcoming opportunities for students to get involved. Additionally, it is important to recognize that many of the sexual assaults that occur on campus [are never reported](#). As such, numbers like Clery statistics may not paint the most accurate picture. [Leading institutions are committed to transparency and actively seek to understand the true nature of these issues on campus.](#)

HIGHLIGHT THE GOOD

You likely have individuals on your campus who are working hard to support survivors, educate the community, and eliminate sexual assault. Share some of their successes.

Describe your prevention efforts and goals for your campus. Talk about any programs that you are currently implementing, volunteer opportunities, and available resources.

Additionally, it is important to acknowledge that [most college students already have healthy attitudes and behaviors regarding the issue of sexual assault](#). It is important to take a stance that recognizes that the vast majority of students want to have healthy relationships, and live and learn in a healthy and safe community. Tailor communications to engage these students as part of the solution!

HAVE A CLEAR STANCE

Prior to communicating publicly about the issue, connect with yourself around where you stand on it and the position and priorities of your institution.

Have a consistent message and use that to drive your efforts and communication going forward. Consult with those that work directly with this issue at your institution and benefit from their insights and expertise. Institutionalization starts from the top – as a senior administrator, you have a crucial role to play in ensuring that prevention efforts are a mission-critical priority. It is imperative that strong policies are in place and consistently enforced, and that an institutional lack of tolerance for sexual assault is communicated clearly, publicly, and frequently.

CONTINUE THE CONVERSATION

Make it a point to communicate about prevention efforts on a regular basis. Even something as small as an email highlighting ongoing efforts can be incredibly meaningful for students, faculty, and staff. Consider speaking about the issue during a public address, releasing an annual prevention report, sharing the positive work that your staff is doing, or acknowledging a student group who has made efforts towards the issue. Consistent and ongoing institutional support is a crucial step towards ending violence on campus.

Visible leadership around this issue is crucial, and is often a critical factor in whether or not a school's prevention and response efforts are aligned with both the letter and spirit of the law. Acknowledgement and commitment from senior leaders around these issues—too often misperceived as a liability—are incredibly powerful assets that must be leveraged to create safer, healthier campus communities.

We have reached a pivotal time in higher education: legislation, activism, and student rights are intersecting, and the issue of sexual assault is under a magnifying glass.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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Erin McClintock is a prevention expert and strength-based mental health counselor with over a decade of experience in the field of collegiate wellbeing. As Director of Partner Education at EverFi, Erin critically explores the issues of mental health and wellness and their intersectionality with sexual assault and substance use. Erin joins EverFi after many years of overseeing wellness and prevention efforts on college campuses in Massachusetts. She holds a Master's Degree in Mental Health Counseling and completed her post-graduate training and education in trauma and addiction studies.

ABOUT EVERFI

Our mission in higher education is to drive lasting, large-scale change on critical wellness issues facing students, faculty, and staff. We work with over 1,300 institutions to drive transformative impact on sexual assault, high-risk drinking, and financial education through evidence-based online programs, data, and advisory services.

We also help institutions comply with Title IX and Clery Act (Campus SaVE / VAWA) compliance efforts by providing best-in-class, research-based, population-level online learning programs for students, faculty and staff. We collaborate with our partner institutions to provide programs that are effective, compliant, and customized to meet their needs.

*Learn More About EverFi and Sexual Assault
Prevention Programs at [EverFi.com/HigherEd](https://everfi.com/highered)*