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Student activists at area colleges hearnened by boost in attention

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JUSTIN SAGLIO/BOSTON GLOBE

Jessica Klein, BU student and health resources coordinator, spoke of students' attitudes about sex crimes on campus.

By **Matt Rocheleau**

GLOBE CORRESPONDENT NOVEMBER 03, 2014

MIT sophomore Charlie Andrews-Jubelt got a vivid reminder recently of how deeply the growing emphasis on combating sexual assaults had become a part of everyday student life: In a bustling student lounge, he overheard a group of classmates — a mix of men and women — discussing defense classes to deter rape.

It was a topic familiar to Andrews-Jubelt, a leader of an MIT student group that advocates against sexual and relationship violence. But he said he was caught off guard to hear classmates who are not activists weigh in on the topic.

“I was so inspired by that conversation,” he said. “I was really happy to just see it happening organically.”

In ways large and small, the surge of national attention on college sexual assaults has trickled down to the campus quad, sparking dialogue among students and creating an environment in which more victims feel comfortable reporting the crime.

A Globe [review](#) last month found that reports of sexual assaults at more than two dozen area campuses rose by 40 percent overall last year, an increase that safety specialists attribute to more victims coming forward.

Such an open climate of awareness, Boston-area students say, might have been unimaginable several years ago. But many colleges, facing pressure from the federal government and from suddenly vocal student groups, have made reducing assaults a bigger priority — and students seem to be hearing the message.

Students said that when the topic is raised in conversation, there is generally less uncomfortable fidgeting, stammering, and avoiding eye contact. They said they are more likely to keep tabs on friends' whereabouts at parties, while those who find themselves in trouble are more likely to ask for help.

More students are joining campus groups that advocate for better sexual assault prevention and response, they say.

MaryRose Mazzola, a graduate student and member of Harvard Students Demand Respect, which highlights gender-based violence and discrimination on campus, said she has seen more students ask questions about sexual assault and about Harvard's new policies to address the problem, including the university's recent decision to create a centralized office to investigate allegations.

“It seems like it’s a much more salient issue,” Mazzola said. “Before, it didn’t seem like it was on most people’s radar. But now people are starting to understand it better and understand why it’s so important.”

While national attention has helped drive the change, some high-profile cases on local campuses have brought the issue home.

Boston University junior Jessica Klein, who works as the health resources coordinator for the student-run Center for Gender, Sexuality, and Activism at BU, said there has been heightened awareness about rape around campus in the two-plus years since a pair of hockey players were accused of sexual assault.

“That sparked a lot of conversation,” Klein said

Discussions about sexual assault were also sparked after the BU student newspaper published an April Fool’s issue that made light of rape.

Despite the new openness on area campuses, however, opinions are mixed on whether there has been meaningful change of students’ attitudes. Many students leading the effort to reshape campus culture expect it will be an uphill battle.

“This change is not something that’s going to happen instantaneously,” said Rory Gerberg, a graduate student who co-founded Harvard Students Demand Respect.

“Really that is the central issue that we face,” she added. But, “The challenge of behavioral change is no small challenge.”

Northeastern University freshman Chris Bazdanes said students sometimes ignore or downplay the topic unless they, or someone they are close to, has been directly affected.

“I feel like it’s only real when it happens to someone you know,” said Bazdanes, who does not belong to any campus groups that advocate around the issue. “That’s really the only time you talk about it.”

Andrews-Jubelt, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology sophomore, said casual, inappropriate references to sex assault still occur.

“Students will say things like ‘I was totally raped by that exam or something like that, ’ ” he said.

But he said he believes more students are becoming sensitive to the seriousness of the issue, and, as a result, such remarks are becoming less common.

In addition to his role as an executive member of the group Students Advocating For Education on Respectful Relationships, Andrews-Jubelt belongs to a campus fraternity, and said some students, including Greek life members, think sex assault affects other campuses, but not their own.

“But this is a problem on every campus and that is something we need to admit to before we can do better,” he

said.

Still, he said, he is optimistic.

“People are more and more willing to admit that the prevalence of sexual assault is actually quite high, and they’re more comfortable with the idea that this might be a systemic problem,” he said. “I think that’s a pretty promising phenomenon.”

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