

Statement on the Results of the Sexual Conduct Survey

September 21, 2015

CAMBRIDGE, MASS.

Dear Members of the Harvard Community,

I write today about an issue that touches the lives of every one of us. The prevalence of sexual assault represents a deeply troubling problem for Harvard, for colleges and universities more broadly, and for our society at large. Sexual assault can devastate individuals as well as their families and friends. And it can tear the fabric of communities, undermine our sense of security and well-being, and subvert our fundamental trust in one another.

This past April, students across Harvard's schools—along with their counterparts at twenty-six other universities—were asked to complete a sexual conduct survey. The results warrant the attention and concern of everyone in our community. The data reinforce the alarming frequency with which our students, especially but by no means only our undergraduates, experience incidents of sexual assault. They also underscore how many students lack confidence in how our institution will respond to reports of sexual misconduct—and how many lack adequate knowledge of the resources and support available to them in times of distress and need.

These deeply disturbing survey results must spur us to an even more intent focus on the problem of sexual assault. That means not just how we talk to one another about it, not just what we say in official pronouncements, but how we actually treat one another and live our lives together. All of us share the obligation to create and sustain a community of which we can all be proud, a community whose bedrock is mutual respect and concern for one another. Sexual assault is intolerable, and we owe it to one another to confront it openly, purposefully, and effectively. This is *our* problem.

Today, the Association of American Universities (AAU) is releasing aggregated data from the universities that participated in the April survey, and we are at the same time making available a companion report on Harvard's survey results, prepared by the independent firm engaged to administer the survey. Harvard's participation rate—53 percent of all degree-seeking students across our schools—was the highest among all participating institutions, which I take as a positive sign of our community's recognition of just how serious these issues are. In addition, I

urge your attention to the letter from Steve Hyman, our former provost and the chair of the University's Task Force on the Prevention of Sexual Assault. His letter provides a textured preliminary look at the data and their implications. (See links to these documents below.)

Here, let me highlight just a few illustrative points:

- Female Harvard College seniors were asked about their experience since starting college. More than six in ten responded to the survey. Of those who responded, 31 percent (or 172 women) said they had experienced some form of “nonconsensual sexual contact” since college began. And more than half of those—ninety women, representing 16 percent of the female Harvard College seniors who responded—reported that they had experienced penetration or attempted penetration without their consent during their years in college. (The stated numbers of women do not account for the incidence of sexual assault among female seniors who did not complete the survey.)
- Across Harvard's schools, 4.2 percent of all students who responded to the survey reported that they had experienced some form of “nonconsensual sexual contact” during the past year. That translates to 518 students. Among those, roughly a third—1.4 percent of all respondents, or 170 students—reported that they had experienced completed or attempted penetration without their consent over the past year. (The stated numbers of students do not account for the incidence of sexual assault among the nearly half of our students who did not complete the survey.)

At this point, the data represent only initial findings, and Harvard's Institutional Research Office and the members of the Task Force are working to understand the results more fully. They have, however, already identified additional areas that merit further exploration. In particular, their analysis to date suggests that special attention be paid to the consistently higher rates of sexual assault reported by the BGLTQ community; to the high correlation between sexual assault and the use of alcohol among both assailants and those who have experienced assault; to the disturbingly low percentage of students who indicate they know where to get help or believe that the University will respond appropriately when assaults are reported; and to the activities that lead to assaults and the locations where they occur, including the undergraduate Houses and freshman dorms as well as recognized and unrecognized student organizations.

I have asked the Task Force to provide a full report and detailed recommendations to me by January 2016.

I find it extremely distressing to read these survey results, as I know others will. But we must confront the realities documented by the survey as we develop a comprehensive effort to combat sexual assault, one that engages our entire community in a sustained and effective manner. Over the past two years, with advice from the Task Force and others, the University and the schools have taken a number of substantive new steps to combat sexual assault: the adoption of a University-wide Title IX policy; the creation of an office (the Office for Sexual and Gender-Based Dispute Resolution, or ODR) to investigate reports of misconduct; the appointment of fifty Title IX coordinators across the campus; the doubling of staff at the Office for Sexual Assault Prevention and Response; the launch of a new web portal (Sexual Harassment/Assault Response and Education, or [SHARE](#)) to aggregate resources; and expanded orientation and training on sexual assault issues.

Clearly we must do more. University leaders—starting with the president, the provost, and the deans—bear a critical part of the responsibility for shaping the climate and offering the resources necessary to prevent sexual assault and respond when it does occur. But this challenge demands the insights and commitment of all of us—faculty, students, and staff—who are committed to building a community in which our care and respect for one another define who we are and aspire to be.

In the coming days and weeks, I want to hear your thoughts about what *I* can do, what *you* can do, and what *we* can do together to end sexual assault at Harvard. Meanwhile, I have asked the deans of each of our schools to present me with school-specific plans for community conversation, engagement, and action—drawing on the survey findings for their schools, on the ongoing insights of the Task Force, and on the many efforts they have already undertaken to engage their communities on this important issue.

Most immediately, I invite all interested members of the community to join me tonight at 7:00 p.m. in Science Center D. There, I hope we can begin a university conversation about the survey results and advance our shared thinking about approaches to the serious problem before us. There are no ready-made answers here—but the difficulty and severity of the problem make it all the more important that we come together to address it.

We must commit ourselves to being a better community than the one the survey portrays. It is up to all of us to ensure that Harvard is a realization of our ideals, not our fears—a place where our deep concern for one another enables every person to thrive and pursue the extraordinary possibilities for learning and growth that bring us together.

Sincerely,

Drew Faust