Schools trying to prevent and respond to sexual violence

By Susan Kinzie
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Most students don’t think violent relationships are a problem at college, said Georgetown University senior Jared Watkins, who helps lead a group of men there who are concerned about sexual assault and violence. If students think about it at all, they picture an older married couple, maybe in poor health -- nothing like their friends at school.

Then Yeardley Love was found dead. The death of the University of Virginia senior, and the murder charge against her classmate George Huguely, defied the stereotype for students who couldn’t imagine such a brutal crime on a college campus.

Now some students and school officials are wondering whether they are doing enough to prevent problems and recognize that dating violence can happen anywhere.

“It’s incredibly common both at the high school and college level,” said Julie Finkelstein, director of policy programs for Break the Cycle, a nonprofit organization that tries to end teen dating violence. Some studies suggest that one in five relationships at college involves violence. Sixteen-to-24-year-olds have the highest reported incidence of domestic and dating violence, according to Department of Justice statistics.

College, which seems safe, with sheltered campuses, nearby friends and adults looking out for students, can be surprisingly dangerous, advocates say. It’s easy to follow someone on campus and know his or her routine, said Connie Kirkland, director of sexual assault services at George Mason University.

“People go to class, they go back to their dorms, they go to the same places to eat,” she said. “It’s really easy to intercept them.”

Several campus experts on dating violence said they have seen a large increase in the number of stalking cases in recent years, most likely because technology such as texting and instant messaging makes it so easy. “Sometimes a student says, ‘He texts me 20, 50, 80 times a day, just to see where I am’ -- just to see that I’ll respond,” Kirkland said.

Schools can offer a level of protection beyond the criminal justice system’s capabilities, including their own judicial processes and protective orders in some cases, or the ability to move a student out of a dorm quickly to a safer location.

That is important because “young women are really not protected under the law,” said Kathryn Laughon, an assistant professor of nursing at U-Va. who specializes in intimate-partner homicide and safety planning.

State legislation varies widely. In the District, the law has been for young people who seek help for dating violence. Maryland passed a law in 2007.

In many states, Laughon said, people younger than 18 can’t file for protective orders. Virginia received its failing grade because it does not allow people to obtain protective orders against someone they are dating or have dated. They must be married to, have a child or live with that person, and the court must determine that there has been physical abuse.

Maryland’s law, like Virginia’s, encourages public schools to include information about dating violence in their curricula. Some states can get protective orders. In the District, people as young as 12 years old can petition for protective orders, which can be issued against anyone if a judge determines there has been physical or sexual abuse, threats, stalking or property damage. The orders can be granted to people who are dating, just not to those who are married.
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Some school systems have education and prevention efforts. In Prince George's County, public schools include lessons about dating violence in the health curriculum.

In Fairfax County, a 2008 survey of young people prompted concerns about issues such as depression, suicide and dating violence, and administrators added a lesson to the ninth-grade curriculum. About 7 percent of those who responded said a boyfriend or girlfriend had intentionally caused them physical harm. Nearly 5 percent of the teenage boys and girls surveyed said they had been forced to have sex.

At U-Va., where university-sponsored awareness events are part of freshman orientation, school officials are talking about whether Love's death could have been prevented. Additional efforts are planned for this summer and fall.

Dozens of colleges have joined the Red Flag Campaign, an awareness program begun in Virginia a few years ago that encourages students to watch for signs of dating violence and speak up to help friends.

The University of Maryland encourages events that raise the issue and offers programs designed to prevent violence, such as workshops with stories written by students.

What's needed, said Fulcher of Break the Cycle, are clear school policies and procedures, and education for students and staff members on dating violence, much as sexual harassment was addressed on campuses in the 1970's and 80's.

GMU created a policy that addresses dating violence a few years ago. Referrals come from the health center, for example, where students know to ask follow-up questions and offer help if a student comes in with certain injuries. The university is hoping to broaden that training in the fall to student leaders and others.

Georgetown has ongoing events to raise awareness, said Carol Day, director of health education services.

When, of the men's group at Georgetown, said the school would like to offer monthly events next year.

"People don't want to think about the fact that students are assaulting other students," she said.

"But usually it's people who know each other -- friends, boyfriends, girlfriends, partners."

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