



## ***Crossing the Line in Lancaster County: Adolescents, Sexual Harassment & Cyber-Bullying***

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In Fall, 2011 a team of students and faculty applied for a grant from the American Association of University Women (AAUW) to investigate the understanding and prevalence of sexual harassment and cyberbullying among middle school students in a urban school district. Additionally, this team explored a strategy designed to increase understanding of and decrease the incidence of sexual harassment and cyberbullying. The call for proposals was in response to a study by AAUW which indicated "Sexual harassment is part of everyday life in middle and high schools. Nearly half (48 percent) of the students surveyed experienced some form of sexual harassment in the 2010–11 school year, and the majority of those students (87 percent) said it had a negative effect on them. Verbal harassment made up the bulk of the incidents, but physical harassment was far too common. Sexual harassment by text, e-mail, Facebook, or other electronic means affected nearly one-third (30 percent) of students." (Hill and Kearl, 2011, p 1). The grant was awarded and the team of five faculty and three students began work on a two-pronged project that included a service learning component for students in Education, Women's Studies and African American Studies classes. The two components included focus groups conducted in the four middle schools and two alternative schools in the school district and a one day event. The final goals for the project were

- 1) To raise awareness of the issues of sexual harassment and cyber-bullying in grades 7 and 8
- 2) To provide evidence-based solutions for addressing and preventing sexual harassment and cyber-bullying in schools

### **The School District**



There are 11,000 students in the school district. The district is 58% Hispanic, 19.5% African American, 16% European American and 6.5% Asian and other. There are four middle schools in the district and two alternative schools, one which provides a program for students who do not perform well in the traditional classroom setting due to serious behavioral problems and another that educates students who have not had success in the traditional classroom and reaches out to the at-risk population to improve academic achievement, attendance and parent engagement. This project focused on 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> graders from all six schools.

### **Focus groups**

One hundred and twenty undergraduate students from Education, Women's Studies and African American Studies classes interviewed a total of sixty 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade students from the four middle schools and two alternative schools. The focus groups contained two to six 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade students and were conducted at the schools during an after-school program. Conducting the focus groups was one of two components of a service learning requirement for the undergraduate students. Students were required to record verbatim answers to specified questions (See Appendix A) and provide a transcript to the student researcher. Additionally, the middle school students were asked to evaluate the focus group experience (See Appendix B), as were the undergraduate students (See Appendix C). The student researcher compiled the data and performed a content analysis of the responses.

Content analysis indicated that the majority of students saw person-to-person sexual harassment as having two major characteristics, physical touching and persistence. Online harassment was seen as verbal and sexual, but the perpetrators were perceived as more likely to be caught because it often leaves an electronic record. Students were given a copy of the AAUW definition of sexual harassment ( ) (See Appendix D). Some of the students indicated that they had been sexually harassed in person or online. All the students had witnessed bullying, but only a few indicated that they had witnessed sexually harassment. Only two students indicated that they had sexually harassed someone online or in person. The students believed that individuals sexually harassed or bullied others to make themselves feel better, as a joke, because



they were bored or because they wanted someone who did not want them. The types of sexual harassments experienced were//

An overwhelmingly majority of the middle school students indicated that they were very comfortable or comfortable with the focus group experience, very satisfied or satisfied with the experience with the Millersville students and very satisfied or satisfied with the overall experience. They also indicated that prior to the focus group they did not have a clear understanding of sexual harassment.

The Millersville undergraduates also indicated they were comfortable with the experience and only indicated one concern, which was the small number of students in the focus groups as compared with the number of undergraduate interviewers.

### **One day event**

The one day event was designed as a tool for addressing and preventing sexual harassment and cyberbullying in the middle schools. The event was attended by 130 middle school students and also by teachers, parents, community members, counselors and school social workers. This event which will be detailed below was the second component of the service learning for the undergraduate students in the classes. Student performed in a variety of functions including facilitating breakout groups, taking notes on and recording the breakout sessions. Also, since the middle school students were seated at round tables, two undergraduate students were placed at each table to facilitate discussion at the appropriate points during the day. The day began with videos concerning a recent suicide by a 15 year old young man. The young man committed suicide after being victimized by person-to-person bullying and cyberbullying based on his coming out as homosexual. The videos contained interviews with the young man's family, particularly his sister, and spoke of the viciousness of Facebook postings, notes and other communications that said the young man was evil, worthless and should die. Additionally, the support received was also noted.

The next activity was a three-part scenario performed by undergraduate students depicting sexual harassment and cyberbullying. A young lady is waiting for the school bus and is being sexually harassed verbally by a fellow student. The sexual harassment escalates and the young man attempts to kiss her when she refuses he threatens to send a Facebook posting indicating that she not only kissed him, but had sex with him



and a number of other young men along the school bus line. She still refuses and he sends the posting. The next scene opens in the school cafeteria with a group of students, many of whom are the friend of the young lady whose name is Yolanda. Her Facebook name has now become “Ho’landa” and she is now in the hospital having overdosed on pills. The students speculated on whether this was an accident or an attempted suicide. One of the students continued to use the derogatory name. The students discussed how no one wanted to be her lab partner in class after the posting and how she was bullied by her class mates. They noted how she began to skip school and that her grades suffered. Lastly, they spoke about the fact that although they knew the rumor was not true, that none of them had come to her defense or spoke to the young man about the inappropriateness of his behavior or the need for him to retract the posting. In the end, they decided to visit her in the hospital. At this point, two volunteers are requested from the audience to participate in the third part of the scenario, the visit to the hospital. The students are to improvise what they say to Yolanda in the hospital. In the final scene, the students all apologize for their lack of support and or participation in the bullying and offer to do whatever they can when she returns to school. Yolanda indicated that she would be transferring to another school.

After each scene there is audience interaction led by two undergraduate student facilitators. Questions are asked concerning what the students think went on in the scene, what and whose behavior was wrong, how the individuals in the scene should have reacted and what could have been done to make things better. The middle school students made a number of insightful comments. One of the most telling remarks indicated that because of technology and widespread social networks, Yolanda would not find relief by transferring to another school or school district. The scenario was written by the Youth Theater Director of the local regional theater in conjunction with undergraduate students and based on information gathered from the focus groups.

This was followed by breakout groups facilitated by undergraduate students who had been trained by a local, but nationally known trainer with expertise in youth groups. After ice-breaker exercises, students were asked about the type and prevalence of sexual harassment and cyberbullying at their schools, as well as the responses of students, teachers and school personnel to these incidents. Before the students went to



the breakout groups, they received T-Shirts which had been designed by one of the undergraduate students. The shirts were black and red, the school district colors, and said, "Drawing the Line Lancaster: Ending Adolescent Sexual Harassment and Cyber - Bullying.

The breakout groups yielded several surprisingly insightful remarks from students. It was discovered that sexual harassment was not only prevalent, but accepted as just "playing around " or "fun" The young people did not consider the effects. Some of the schools had "Ball Tap Tuesdays," "Slap Ass Fridays" and "Titty Touch Wednesdays." Usually a Facebook, Twitter or text message would be posted in the morning announcing these events to everyone at a particular school. A significant number of students would then perceive themselves as having been given license to slap individuals' rear ends, touch their breasts, or hit them in the testicles. Many of the students abhorred this behavior, but felt that they just had no option but to tolerate it. Some of the young ladies indicated that they were especially angry at the young ladies who seemed to enjoy this behavior and just giggled. They felt this made the young men think that all the young ladies craved this type of attention. Additionally, the students noted that the school staff often did not do anything when they observed these behaviors. The student also indicated that they either had experienced or knew someone who had been sexually harassed or cyberbullied and commented that little support was provided to these individuals. Additionally, students did not usually report these incidents to the school authorities or even their parents, but did mention it to their friends. School authorities and parents were not informed because either the students did not believe anything would be done or believe that it would make the situation worse. This was based on their own past experiences or on observations of what had happened to others. Students said they were unaware that any repercussions were visited upon offenders. Also, "snitching" on others often simply leads to the escalation of harassment and bullying as well as the disdain of their peers. The student also brainstormed solutions.

While the middle school students were in their breakout session, school personnel, parents and community members were in a breakout session conducted by recently retired teachers and current teachers of the school district and discussed



similar topics as the students as well as strategies that would increase the understanding and aid in the prevention of cyberbullying and sexual harassment. The teachers confirmed that they were aware of the Tap Ball Tuesdays, etc. and that the students were correct that little was done. Teachers indicated that on one such Tuesday nothing was done until one student was hit so hard in the testicle he was curled up on the hallway floor. It was stated that in inner city public school, punishing this behavior may be a low priority when compared with the more serious behaviors that are confronted on a daily basis. Lastly, it was noted that often victims were not informed when perpetrators have been punished due to confidentiality and the perpetrators may not let it be known. Lastly, the teachers and administrators indicated they want us to do an event like this each semester at the schools and beginning with sixth graders.

The next component of the program was an interactive presentation by Courtney Macavinta, author and esteem coach, co-founder and president of The Respect Institute. The project coordinators felt it was important to have someone, vibrant and African American or Hispanic. Ms. Courtney fit all of the criteria. Her presentation was upbeat and involved her audience. One of the highlights was when she asked each middle school students to stand-up and asked one other student what they would want them to do if they saw or knew about them being sexual harassed or bullied. This emphasized the need to make sure the person being harassed or bullied is given control over how the situation is handled. The last thing this person needs is one more individuals attempting to take control. After that the students agreed they would do what the person asked. The students were very serious about this part and did not make silly or inappropriate requests.

After the students returned to school, Ms. Macavinta conducted a workshop for any undergraduate students that could not be at the all day events, faculty members at the university, teachers and community members.

**Evaluation of the one-day event.** The packet which everyone received contained an evaluation of the one-day event (See Appendix D). Of the total attendees, 125 returned their evaluations.



Table 1 Participant Category

Category	Frequency	Percent
Students	118	94.4
School District Staff	5	4.0
Undergraduates	2	1.6
Total	125	100.0

The small number of undergraduates and teachers and undergraduates is not reflective of the attendance by these categories, but of the fact that these individuals believed that the evaluation was just for the students.

A significant majority of the respondents indicated the conference was very informative (Table 2) and very interesting or interesting (Table 3)

Table 2 Conference Informative rating

	Frequency	Percent
Very Informative	76	60.8
Informative	42	33.6
Not Very Informative	4	3.2
Total	122	100.0

Table 3 Conference Interest Rating

	Frequency	Percent
Very Interesting	51	40.8
Interesting	65	52.0
Not Very Interesting	7	5.6
Total	123	100



More importantly the participants indicated that the conference gave them a better understanding of how to prevent sexual harassment and cyberbullying (Table 4) increased their confidence in doing something about it when they see or experience it (Table 5), made them more aware of what to do if they are sexually harassment (Table 6), better understanding of what sexual harassment is (Table 7) more likely to report (Table 9) less likely to harass (Table 10) and more likely to report their own sexual harassment (table 11)

Table 4 Understanding How to Prevent Improvement Rating

	Frequency	Percent
Better Understanding	93	74.4
Same Understanding	30	24.0
Lesser Understanding	0	0
Total	123	100

Table 5 Confidence Doing Something About Rating

	Frequency	Percent
More Confident	90	72.0
Just As Confident	33	26.4
Less Confident	1	.8
Total	124	100.0





Table 6 Action Awareness Rating

	Frequency	Percent
More Aware	82	65.6
Just As Aware	40	32.0
Less Aware	2	1.6
Total	124	100

Table 7 Better Understanding of What Sexual Harassments Rating

	Frequency	Percent
Understanding Better	85	68.0
Understand Just the Same	39	31.2
Understand Less <sup>3</sup>	1	.8
Total	125	100.0

Table 8 Likelihood to Report Others Rating:

	Frequency	Percent
More Likely	69	55.2
Just as Likely	52	41.6
Less Likely	4	3.2
Total	125	100.0



Table 9 Likelihood to sexually harass someone

	Frequency	Percent
Less Likely	101	80.8
Just As Likely	22	17.6
More Likely	1	.8
Total	124	100.0

Table 10 Likelihood to Report Me Rating

	Frequency	Percent
Less Likely	17	13.6
Just As Likely	41	32.8
More Likely	67	53.6
Total	125	100.0

In terms the components of the conferences that were most interesting, informative and had the most impact.

Table 11 Most interesting Rating:

	Frequency	Percent
Skit	64	51.2
Small Groups	28	22.4
Speaker	25	20.0
4.00	5	4.0
5.00	3	2.4
Total	125	100.0



Table 12 Most Informative Rating:

	Frequency	Percent
Skit	27	21.6
Small Groups	34	27.2
Speaker	57	45.6
4.00	4	3.2
5.00	3	2.4
Total	125	100.0

Table 13 Most Effective Rating

	Frequency	Percent
Skit	40	32.0
Small Groups	33	26.4
Speaker	47	37.6
4.00	2	1.6
5.00	2	1.6
6.00	1	.8
Total	125	100.0

## Conclusions

The project was a success . Sexual harassment and cyberbullying is a problem in the school district as early as sixth grade. The students are willing to speak on these topics; therefore the focus groups did help us develop an effective intervention strategy a one-day conference. The one-day conference did result in a change in attitudes for an overwhelming majority of the students. The strategy was so effective, teachers, counselors and students suggested we do the one day conference for each school starting in sixth grade and once a semester. This is probably not possible, but an annual event is being considered as well as training of school district personnel.



## Appendix A

### Focus Group Questions:

1. What is sexual harassment?
2. Is harassment different face to face than on-line? If so how?

(Here is where we said we would give them copies of the AAUW sheet on sexual harassment.)

3. Have you ever been harassed or harassed someone else? If so, why?

Have you sexually harassed someone else in person or online? If so, why did you do this?

Have you experienced sexual harassment online? If so, in what ways?

4. Have you ever witnessed sexual harassment/ cyberbullying?

How did the experience or the witnessing impact you?

5. Why do you think people harass others in person or online?
6. What do you think can we do to stop this in the future?



## Appendix B

### **Focus Group Questionnaire for SDoL Students**

1.) How old are you?

- a) 11            b) 12            c) 13            d) 14            e) 15

2.) What grade are you in?

- a) 7<sup>th</sup>            b) 8<sup>th</sup>

3.) Prior to today's focus group meeting, did you have a clear understanding of what sexual harassment is?

- a) yes            b) no

4.) Prior to today's focus group meeting, did you have a clear understanding of what cyber-bullying is?

- a) yes            b) no

5.) How comfortable were you answering the questions throughout the focus group?

- a) very comfortable    b) comfortable    c) neutral    d) uncomfortable    e) very uncomfortable

6.) How satisfied were you with your experience with the Millersville University students?

- a) very satisfied    b) satisfied    c) neutral    d) dissatisfied    e) very dissatisfied

7.) How satisfied are you with the overall experience of the focus group?

- a) very satisfied    b) satisfied    c) neutral    d) dissatisfied    e) very dissatisfied

8.) Is there anything we can improve from the focus group experience?

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9.) Do you have other comments?

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## Appendix C

### Focus Group Questionnaire for University Students

- 1.) How old are you?
    - a) 19 or under
    - b) 20-23
    - c) 24-29
    - d) 30-39
    - e) 40-55
    - f) over 55
  - 2.) What is your classification in college?
    - a) freshman
    - b) sophomore
    - c) junior
    - d) senior
    - e) graduate student
    - f) unclassified
  - 3.) Prior to today's focus group meeting, did you have a clear understanding of what sexual harassment is?
    - a) yes
    - b) no
  - 4.) Prior to today's focus group meeting, did you have a clear understanding of what cyber-bullying is?
    - a) yes
    - b) no
  - 5.) How comfortable were you asking the questions throughout the focus group?
    - a) very comfortable
    - b) comfortable
    - c) neutral
    - d) uncomfortable
    - e) very uncomfortable
  - 6.) How satisfied were you with your experience with the SDoL students?
    - a) very satisfied
    - b) satisfied
    - c) neutral
    - d) dissatisfied
    - e) very dissatisfied
  - 7.) How satisfied are you with the overall experience of the focus group?
    - a) very satisfied
    - b) satisfied
    - c) neutral
    - d) dissatisfied
    - e) very dissatisfied
  - 8.) Is there anything we can improve from the focus group experience?-
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- 9.) Do you have other comments?
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## Appendix D

Please circle the answer that most indicates how you feel

1. This conference was a) very informative    b) informative    c) not very informative
  
2. The conference was a) very interesting    b) interesting    c) not very interesting
  
3. Because of the conference, I have
  - a) a better understanding of how to prevent sexual harassment
  - b) the same understanding of how to prevent sexual harassment
  - c) a lesser understanding of how to prevent sexual harassment
  
4. Because of the conference when I see or experience sexual harassment I will feel
  - a) more confident doing something about it
  - b) just as confident doing something about it.
  - c) less confident doing something about it.
  
5. Because of the conference, I am
  - a) more aware of what to do when I am sexually harassed
  - b) just as aware of what to do when I am sexually harassed
  - c) less aware of what to do when I am sexually harassed
  
6. As a result of the conference, I
  - a) understand better what sexual harassment is.
  - b) understand just the same what sexual harassment is.
  - c) understand less what sexual harassment is.



7. As a result of the conference, I am

- a) more likely to report sexual harassment I have witnessed
- b) just as likely to report sexual harassment I have witnessed
- c) less likely to report sexual harassment I have witnessed.

8. As a result of the conference, I am now

- a) less likely to sexual harass someone
- b) just as likely to sexual harass someone
- c) more likely to sexual harass someone

9. As a result of the conference, I am now

- a) less likely to report sexual harassment when it happens to me
- b) just as likely to report sexual harassment when it happens to me.
- c) more likely to report sexual harassment when it happens to me.

10. The part of the conference that was most interesting was the

- a) skits
- b) the small group discussions
- c) the speaker, Ms. Macavinta

11. The part of the conference that was most informative

- a) skits
- b) the small group discussions
- c) the speaker, Ms. Macavinta

12. The part of the conference that had the most effect on me was

- a) skits
- b) the small group discussions
- c) the speaker, Ms. Macavinta





## References

Hill, C and Kearn, H. (2011). *Crossing the Line: Sexual Harassment in the Schools*. Washington, D.C.:AAUW.