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2015 Service Academy Gender Relations Focus Groups

Overview Report



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2015 SERVICE ACADEMY GENDER RELATIONS FOCUS GROUPS

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Acknowledgments

The Defense Manpower Data Center (DMDC) is indebted to numerous people for their assistance with the *2015 Service Academy Gender Relations Focus Group (2015 SAGR)*, which was conducted on behalf of the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness (OUSD[P&R]). These focus groups are conducted under the leadership of Dr. Elizabeth P. Van Winkle and Dr. Paul Rosenfeld and falls under DMDC's Health and Readiness (H&R) Surveys. DMDC's H&R Surveys are conducted under the oversight of Dr. Maia Hurley as part of the Defense Research, Surveys, and Statistics Center (RSSC).

The lead analysts on this assessment were Natalie Namrow and Paul Cook, SRA International, Inc. Sarah De Silva, Shoshana Magazine, Samuel Posnock, Kathakali Sircar, Kathleen Dippold, and Darragh McNally, SRA International, Inc., and Lisa Davis, Maia Hurley, and Elizabeth Van Winkle, DMDC, assisted with the preparation and review of this report. Written transcripts of each of the sessions were provided by Corbin & Hook Reporting, Inc.; Gail Sherry Court Reporting Associates, Inc.; and Jennifer Windham Court Reporting, Inc. Policy officials contributing to the development of focus group content include: Nate Galbreath, Darlene Sullivan, and Anita Boyd (Department of Defense Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Office); Jimmy Love, (Office of Diversity Management and Equal Opportunity); Kerry Dunham (U.S. Military Academy); CAPT Lyn Hammer and LT Ashley Gudknecht (U.S. Naval Academy); Amanda Lords (U.S. Air Force Academy); and Shannon Norenberg (U.S. Coast Guard Academy). We would like to thank all of the Services representatives at each installation who assisted us in organizing the focus groups.

Executive Summary

The *2015 Service Academy Gender Relations Focus Groups (2015 SAGR)* study is an assessment conducted pursuant to the John Warner National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2007, Section 532. The *2015 SAGR* is part of an assessment cycle at the Military Service Academies (MSAs) starting in 2005 that consists of alternating surveys and focus groups: the surveys provide valid statistical information about incidence rates and students' perception on a host of issues; the focus groups provide deeper insights into the dynamics behind the numbers. Together they help Academy leaders and Service policy makers assess the effectiveness of programs and identify areas for improvement. Additionally, each type of assessment informs the other. For example, survey results are used to identify topics for deeper discussion during the focus groups and the focus groups identify new topics and questions to be asked on the surveys.

This focus group study assesses students' perception of issues related to sexual assault, sexual harassment, and other gender-related topics at the Department of Defense (DoD) Military Service Academies (MSAs) (U.S. Military Academy [USMA], the U.S. Naval Academy [USNA], the U.S. Air Force Academy [USAFA]), as well as the U.S. Coast Guard Academy (USCGA). Themes provided in this report are qualitative in nature and cannot be generalized to the full population of MSA students. Themes should be considered as the attitudes and opinions of focus group participants only and not the opinions of all MSA students, faculty, and staff.

Focus Group Methodology

The DMDC research team conducted 40 focus groups of cadets, midshipmen, faculty, and staff across all Academies (30 focus groups for DoD MSAs), scheduled in 90-minute sessions at each Academy. In total, researchers collected comments from 247 Academy students and 112 faculty, coaches and activity leaders, and military cadre. Focus groups were held in closed-door conference rooms or classrooms on each Academy campus. Participation in the focus groups was voluntary.

Data from the focus groups were analyzed qualitatively to identify major themes and ideas conveyed across the sessions.¹ For each theme, supporting comments from the focus group participants are included. Analysts used a combination of topical coding and repeated reviews to gather specific comments that supported the emerging themes. Where students and personnel differed in their opinions on a topic, both perspectives are presented in separate findings. Although focus group findings cannot be generalized to all students and personnel at each of the Academies, findings serve as illustrations of situations and themes for consideration by Academy officials as they review their programs.

¹ NVivo by QSR International Pty Ltd., Version 10, 2012. To analyze and categorize topics, the qualitative data analysis software package, NVivo was used to code language in the transcripts into thematic nodes. NVivo is a grouping and validation tool which provides comprehensive coverage of topics for summaries of findings.

Summary of 2015 SAGR Themes

The 2015 SAGR was conducted to understand how policies and programs addressing sexual assault and sexual harassment affect and support the cadets and midshipmen. The perspectives of the cadets and midshipmen are invaluable in assessing how well the MSAs are doing and identifying areas where they could improve. The perspectives of the staff members who interact daily with the cadets and midshipmen are likewise invaluable in understanding the social dynamics at the MSAs and how best to continue to shape the safest environment. This section summarizes the main themes heard across MSAs. Academy-specific themes are reviewed in the full report.

Perceptions About Unwanted Sexual Contact and Perceived Sexual Harassment

Across all Academies, students and faculty and staff alike indicated continued progress and improvement in how the Academies prevent, respond, and educate students about sexual assault, sexual harassment, and gender-related behaviors. In past years, focus groups participants have indicated an increase in the number of trainings and briefings on the topic. This year, participants indicated that the quality of these training and discussions has improved. Emphasis on the Academy's expectations of students to treat each other with dignity and respect and why this is important in terms of their future as military officers have made an impact. Participants indicated that they are not only more aware of these issues, they are more likely to intervene if they witness these behaviors in order to protect each other and uphold the values of the Academy and the military. This increased sense of responsibility is a shift from prior years.

In addition, focus group participants shared positive feedback about the peer-based programs at each respective Academy. While many of these programs have been in existence for some time, participants indicated that there is increasing respect for these programs as their reputation has advanced and students understand their benefit in providing peer-support on unwanted gender-related behaviors.

Reporting

Data has consistently shown that sexual assault and sexual harassment is an underreported crime. The Academies have a stated interest in ensuring that any student who experiences these behaviors is provided a safe venue for reporting. To provide this, MSAs have different types of reporting options, provide various resources, and encourage reporting in education and trainings. Despite this, the majority of sexual assault survivors still do not report their experiences to the Academy. The 2015 SAGR asked participants about why this is and how the Academy might remove barriers to reporting.

Cadets and midshipmen indicated continued improvements in the Academy's encouragement of reporting, education on how to report, and the resources available. While they unanimously indicated that the permanent party Academy leadership consistently encourages reporting, some felt that within the cadet/midshipmen leadership level, this encouragement wanes a bit and it would be helpful to hear sincere encouragement and support from this level of leadership.

Participants echoed prior survey data on why a survivor might not report, with specific emphasis on the impact of reporting on a student's reputation and career. The Academy is a highly

competitive environment and any negative perception against someone can have consequences in how they are perceived by others. Cadets and midshipmen consistently indicated that someone would weigh the benefits of reporting sexual assault or sexual harassment against the perceived impact on their reputation and standing. In addition, participants verbalized a fear that the Academy may take action against the survivor if they had violated Academy policy during the event (e.g., underage drinking).

While improvements have been made in providing an environment more supportive of the survivor, participants did indicate that there may be victim blaming (particularly assumptions that the survivor may have lied) and “taking sides” which may be perceived as retaliatory to the survivor as peers withdraw from them either in support of the alleged offender or out of concern of how to behave around the survivor considering the event that occurred. Participants suggested that education about repeat offenders would be an effective incentive to encourage reporting as survivors may not recognize that in the absence of a report, the offender may reoffend against them or against others.

Retaliation

In the *2014 Service Academy Gender Relations Survey (2014 SAGR)*, results indicated that about 41% of survivors who reported a sexual assault experienced some form of perceived retaliation.² The focus group facilitators read the DoD definitions of retaliation to participants, and then led a discussion about its occurrence.

Focus group participants noted that the Academy has improved education and awareness about retaliation. Most participants did not feel professional retaliation/reprisal was common and believed that permanent party leadership would not likely retaliate if a cadet or midshipman came to them to report an incident and would instead provide a supportive framework by which to move forward with a report. Participants did recognize that social retaliation, in the form of ostracism and maltreatment, might occur. However, they often indicated that these behaviors—while potentially perceived as retaliatory—might reflect uncertainty and/or fear about how to treat a survivor. There was a stated fear that if someone accused a fellow cadet/midshipman of an offense, they might also accuse others in the future. In addition, other students might back away from survivors or become less involved. All of these behaviors can result in perceived ostracism and participants felt this would be difficult for the Academy to address and prevent.

Focus group participants were mixed in their understanding about whether to report retaliation, how they would report it, and to whom.

Social Media

Comments from earlier surveys, as well as focus group comments from active duty members, highlighted aspects of social media that are sometimes used to make inappropriate comments about others (often harassing or sexist) and to retaliate against someone for reporting sexual assault (cyber bullying, spreading rumors, chastising someone for reporting a friend, making false accusations about the veracity of a report). Of particular impact at the Academies is Yik Yak, an anonymous, geo-located forum smartphone application. Based on feedback from cadets

² DMDC, 2014.

and midshipmen on the widespread use of Yik Yak, the 2015 SAGR focus group facilitators asked specifically about the use of this application.

Focus group participants indicated that the protection of anonymity draws some people to applications such as Yik Yak for posting comments they would likely not express in person or post on sites such as Facebook. While not as common as other types of complaints, using anonymous social media sites to post sexist remarks or remarks about a sexual assault survivor, often questioning the validity of a report, were suggested by some participants. However, participants indicated that Academy leadership has begun to take a more proactive stance on social media with emphasis on appropriate behaviors as well as education on how these comments negatively reflect on the Academy at large. These discussions were valuable to participants and they indicated more self-policing of posts whereby negative posts are “down voted” or removed by students themselves.

Perceptions of Leadership

A question on the 2014 SAGR survey asked cadets and midshipmen to rate the extent to which various leaders made honest and reasonable efforts to stop sexual assault and sexual harassment. Overall, the survey found the highest marks for Academy senior leadership, followed by military staff who interact frequently with cadets and midshipmen. While, overall, ratings were high across all Academy personnel, lower ratings were generally given for civilian faculty and athletic staff. Focus group participants were given those results and asked to reflect on why some levels of leadership were rated higher than others.

Cadets and midshipmen consistently indicated that faculty and staff members take sexual assault seriously. The relative order of the ratings may reflect to some degree the role of the staff members. Focus group participants said they expect senior leaders to set the priorities and emphasize prevention of sexual assault and sexual harassment. Participants indicated that they do not expect other staff members (faculty or athletics) to discuss sexual assault as much.

While virtually all staff members indicated they knew that sexual assault prevention is a top priority, not all staff members sense a specific role for themselves. Faculty and staff participants commented that the emphasis varies by academic or athletic department. Faculty members are expected to meet curricula standards and adding discussions of sexual assault can be challenging. Other staff members indicated they did not feel prepared to discuss such topics.

In general, the degree to which cadets and midshipmen interact with faculty and staff may reflect the relative order of ratings. For example, unless one is a varsity or club athlete, there is not much interaction with athletic staff during a physical education class. Similarly, cadets and midshipmen interact less often with faculty than their military leadership (TACs, AOCs, Company officers, etc.). Cadets and midshipmen also indicated that the ratings of their leaders might reflect the degree to which they have a personal relationship with them and feel comfortable discussing very sensitive issues.

Cadets and midshipmen gave mixed perspectives on the ratings of their cadet/midshipman leaders. Some indicated that once a cadet/midshipman is in a leadership position, they expect them to take issues seriously and reflect the emphasis the Academy places on sexual assault and

sexual harassment. Others felt that their cadet/midshipman leaders either have other priorities that diminish the emphasis they place on these issues or do not really have much authority or the skills to deal with issues.

Athletic Teams

Based on data and handwritten comments in the 2014 SAGR survey, as well as recent examples in the press of misbehavior of some athletes and teams, focus group participants were asked to share their perceptions of athletes and teams with regard to sexual assault and sexual harassment. While each MSA offers a number of club sports and intramural teams, the majority of comments on this topic focused on the Division I athletes and teams.³

Some students and faculty and staff were not in agreement about this topic and themes reflect these varied opinions. Many students and faculty and staff felt athletes and athletic staff are under more scrutiny and therefore held to higher standards than other members of the Academy both in terms of academics and behaviors, including unwanted gender related behaviors. Violations of sexual assault policies are more visible and therefore they are held more accountable for their behaviors. In addition, some felt athletic staff take issues of sexual assault and sexual harassment seriously and encourage appropriate behaviors among their athletes.

However, some students and faculty and staff indicated that athletes tended to feel more entitled and are held to lower standards than other students, which may carry over to unwanted gender-related behaviors within teams and/or against other students. In addition, they perceived that the culture within some of the teams included rituals and traditions that might perpetuate unwanted behaviors, particularly as it related to “horseplay” in the locker room. There was a perception from some participants that there tends to be a “group think” dynamic within teams where people, especially lowerclassmen, participate in activities out of expectation and effort to fit in.

While participants were in disagreement about the perceived culture among athletic teams, they agreed that there are many outstanding leaders among Division I athletes where the qualities that make a person an outstanding athlete carry over to their conduct as cadets and midshipmen. In addition, students and faculty and staff pointed out that the improper behavior of one athlete tends to be generalized to an entire team and this may impact perceptions. For example, when a Division I athlete misbehaves, people tend to identify that person within the context of the team, whereas they would not do so based on that person’s affiliation with any other group or activity. Cadet and midshipmen focus group participants also noted that there are non-athletes who misbehave, so inappropriate behaviors are not exclusive to athletes.

Academy Culture

Focus group participants were asked to discuss their understanding of the culture at their Academy with respect to sexual assault and sexual harassment—the shared understanding of priorities, why improper behaviors occur, and how to foster a culture to reduce/eliminate improper behaviors.

³ The three DoD Academies are Division I as classified by the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) while USCGA is Division III.

Cadets and midshipmen indicated they feel safer from sexual assault at their Academy than they believe they would be if they attended a civilian college or university. They cited the numerous programs and resources available as reasons they would feel safer, especially the emphasis on bystander intervention. They also noted that there is a strong bond among peers where they watch out for each other to intervene when they see a risky situation unfolding. Cadets and midshipmen indicated that this sense of responsibility for each other is ingrained in them through their training and the emphasis exhibited by leadership on preventing sexual assault. They do not perceive either the resources or the interpersonal unity to be as apparent at other colleges/universities.

While not a specific topic for discussion, comments were made during focus group sessions that both indicated the presence of victim blaming and the potential repercussions of this rhetoric. This sentiment is supported by data from the *2014 SAGR* where the majority of MSA students indicated that they perceive victim blaming occurring at the Academy to some extent. Some focus group participants made statements that the majority of reports made to the Academy are “false reports” whereby the accuser was lying about the assault. Often this was based on a misunderstanding of why sexual assault cases do not always lead to official action or criminal punishments. Though this perception of victim blaming was heard within the groups, cadets and midshipmen also identified these misperceptions as a specific barrier to reporting, stating that someone who reports might be blamed or not be believed and this would subsequently subject them to scrutiny. Similarly, in discussions about retaliation, cadets and midshipmen often cited the belief that a survivor was perceived as lying as a justification for retaliatory behaviors. For example, peers may ostracize the survivor for fear of also being unjustly reported or may openly engage in harassment or maltreatment of the survivor to punish them because they believe the victim is lying about a fellow cadet/midshipmen. Cadets at USAFA mentioned increased training on this topic and the benefit of such discussions.

Upperclass cadets and midshipmen commented on the changes they have observed over the past few years. A number of focus group participants said their companies/squadrons are much less tolerant of inappropriate comments and jokes than they would have been two years ago. Peers are more likely to speak up when someone is out of line with a comment or behaviors. Participants credited the ongoing emphasis and rhetoric by Academy leadership as impacting this change.