



# **2019 Service Academy Gender Relations Focus Groups**

**Overview Report**

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# 2019 Service Academy Gender Relations Focus Groups

## Overview Report

Ms. Amanda Barry, Ms. Ariel Hill, Mr. Mark Petusky, and Mr. W. Xavier Klauberg  
Fors Marsh Group

Ms. Lisa Davis and Dr. Ashlea Klahr  
Office of People Analytics

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## Acknowledgments

The Office of People Analytics (OPA) is indebted to numerous people for their assistance with the *2019 Service Academy Gender Relations Focus Group (2019 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. Ashlea Klahr, Director of OPA's Health and Resilience (H&R) Research Division. Ms. Lisa Davis, Deputy Director of the H&R Research Division, was the government project manager for this effort.

The lead analyst on this assessment was Ms. Amanda Barry, Fors Marsh Group. Mr. Mark Petusky, Ms. Ariel Hill, Mr. W. Xavier Klauberg, Ms. Yvette Claros, and Ms. Tina DeMarco, Fors Marsh Group, assisted in the analysis and preparation of this report. Ms. Alycia White, Ms. Sarah Mason, and Dr. Laura Severance Fors Marsh Group and Dr. Ashlea Klahr and Ms. Lisa Davis, OPA, assisted with the review of this report. Policy officials contributing to the development of focus group content include: Dr. Nathan Galbreath and Ms. Anita Boyd (Department of Defense Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Office); Ms. Samantha Ross (U.S. Military Academy); CAPT Raymond Marsh and LT Samantha Dendor (U.S. Naval Academy); and Dr. Amanda Lords (U.S. Air Force Academy). We would like to thank all of the individuals at each Academy who assisted us in organizing the focus groups.

The data collection team consisted of Ms. Amanda Barry, Mr. Brock Brothers, Ms. Lisa DeMelfi, Mr. Sam Evans, Ms. Kinsey Gimbel, Mr. W. Xavier Klauberg, Ms. Mallory Mann, Mr. Hunter Peebles, and Mr. Mark Petusky of Fors Marsh Group.

## Executive Summary

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The *2019 Service Academy Gender Relations Focus Groups (2019 SAGR)* study is a part of an assessment cycle at the Military Service Academies (MSAs) that started in 2005, focusing on gender relations including sexual assault, sexual harassment, and Academy culture. The cycle alternates annually between a qualitative (focus groups) and quantitative (survey) assessment. The goal of the survey is to provide statistical information about prevalence rates of unwanted gender-related behaviors and student perceptions on gender relations and Academy culture, while the focus groups provide a deeper insight and understanding of the climate and culture at each Academy. Combined, these assessments help Academy leaders and Service policy makers assess the effectiveness of programs and identify opportunities for improvement.

This report uses data from focus groups to explore perception of issues related to sexual assault, sexual harassment, and other gender-related topics at the Department of Defense (DoD) MSAs (U.S. Military Academy [USMA], the U.S. Naval Academy [USNA], the U.S. Air Force Academy [USFA]).<sup>1</sup> Results provided in this report are qualitative in nature and cannot be generalized to the full population of MSA students. Themes should be considered the attitudes and opinions of focus group participants only and not the opinions of all MSA students, faculty, and staff.

## Focus Group Methodology

A total of 30 focus groups were conducted in the spring of 2019 with 268 cadets/midshipmen and 24 faculty and staff at the three DoD MSAs. Sessions were conducted by trained focus group moderators over 90 minutes in closed-door conference rooms or classrooms on each of the three Academy campuses.

Using a focus group guide and protocol, the moderator led a discussion covering topics related to Academy culture, prevention of sexual assault and sexual harassment, reporting of such incidents, and alcohol use. Using analytic induction,<sup>2</sup> major themes were identified and coded into key categories. Findings from the analysis are summarized and presented with quotations throughout the report.

## Summary of Themes

The perspectives of the cadets and midshipmen as well as the faculty and staff are invaluable in assessing and understanding the policies and programs addressing sexual assault and sexual harassment, along with the culture at the MSAs. Key themes from these discussions are highlighted below.

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<sup>1</sup> Focus groups were also conducted at the U.S. Coast Guard Academy and U.S. Merchant Marine Academy; results for these groups are reported separately.

<sup>2</sup> Analytic induction is a strategy used in qualitative research that involves collecting data and developing assertions that capture findings. Subsequently, assertions are modified as more data is collected and analyzed, taking into account the extent to which assertions are supported or contradicted.

## Academy Culture

Focus group participants identified a number of factors that impact relationships among students across the Academy including gender, the ratio of men to women, and class year. Consistent with past years, cadets and midshipmen in the focus groups noted that students generally have close relationships, including with students of the opposite sex. Due to the tight-knit community at the Academies, cadet and midshipman participants identified the rumor mill as being a prominent feature of Academy life. Rumors start and spread quickly, and can easily impact the reputations of cadets and midshipmen. Participants noted their reputation at the Academy will likely follow them not just through their time at the Academy, but also into their Service career. Thus, protecting and maintaining one's reputation is highly important for cadets and midshipmen.

Participants discussed the presence of a “bro culture,” which was described as behaviors springing out of the predominately male Academy environment, including “locker room talk” and sexual language or jokes. Female participants often described these behaviors as being uncomfortable or offensive to female cadets and midshipmen, but also seen as normal Academy culture by both male and female participants. Focus group participants described a culture of tolerance for these behaviors, which are typically classified as, or potentially lead to, sexual harassment. In particular, women described tolerating these behaviors in order to fit in and maintain their reputation. However, tolerance for these behaviors could contribute to increased risk for sexual assault, as prior research at the Academies (e.g., Barry et al., 2017a, Davis et al., 2019) and in the active duty (e.g., Breslin et al., 2019) has found that experiencing sexual harassment increases the odds of experiencing sexual assault.

When asked about official rules that impact gender relations, cadet and midshipman participants identified dormitory door closure policies and fraternization policies. The participants noted that the door closure policies often caused a divide between male and female students that often led to exclusion of female students from social activities or development of rumors around physical relationships. The students also said that the fraternization policies dictated how they could interact with each other, but were often ignored in private where romantic relationships still exist. In addition to these policies, participants noted that differences in physical standards for men and women often lead to a divide between male and female students. Many participants also discussed the belief in a gender quota within cadet/midshipman leadership, such that the Academy sets aside a set number of student leadership roles for women. As a result, female participants noted that women at the Academy often need to work harder to have their accomplishments recognized by their peers. When discussing unofficial rules, cadet and midshipman participants identified unofficial rules surrounding dating, such as male cadets and midshipmen being discouraged from dating women at the Academy or within their company by their fellow male peers. As identified by the participants, many of the official and unofficial rules create a divide between the genders, whether or not this is the intention.

Cadet and midshipman participants indicated they learned these unofficial rules from the experiences of their peers, with freshmen also indicating they learned unofficial rules from upperclassmen. Cadet and midshipman participants also discussed how certain cultures are passed down through specific companies or squadrons. In addition to peers, participants indicated unofficial rules and culture were also passed down through mid-level leadership (e.g.,

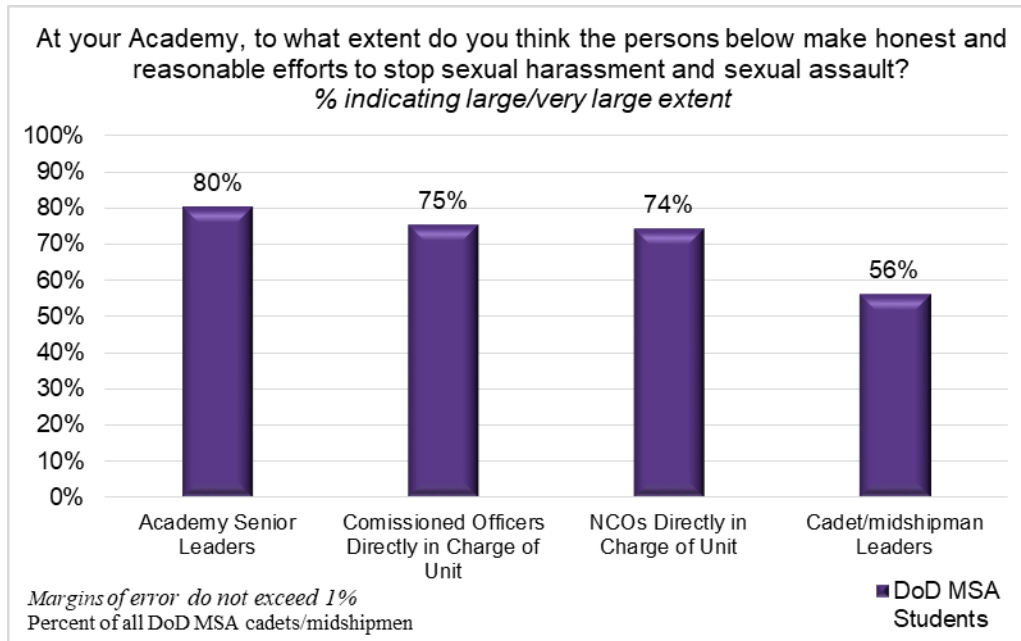
Tactical Officer, Non-Commissioned Officer, Air Officer Commanding) who were described as being important influences for cadets and midshipmen. While they play an important role in setting culture at the Academies, participants expressed that the quality of mid-level leaders varies, ranging from those who promote a healthy environment around gender relations to those who are apathetic and sometimes allow or even promote toxic unhealthy behaviors.

### **Sexual Assault and Sexual Harassment Prevention at the Academies**

In previous years, cadets and midshipmen described some behaviors as falling into “the gray area” where it is difficult to know whether and how to intervene. The *2019 SAGR* focus groups sought to better understand what types of behaviors cadets and midshipmen consider to be in the gray area. When given a list of behaviors that ranged from roughhousing or horseplay to committing an act of sexual assault, cadets and midshipmen largely responded that they were comfortable intervening in severe behaviors, would not intervene in behaviors perceived as normal at their Academy (even though these behaviors could be negative or harmful), and were hesitant toward intervening in situations where consent was unclear and/or they had little contextual information. Contextual information included the relationships between the people involved, other situational cues, and the location of the event in question (e.g., on or off campus). Most participants indicated their current intervention training does not resonate with them—the majority of cadets and midshipmen were unable to discuss or recite specific intervention techniques taught in these trainings, and some discussed how they were trained to overcome the bystander effect, but not necessarily equipped with how to do it.

The *2018 SAGR* survey found that most students believed Academy Senior Leaders were making honest and reasonable efforts to stop sexual harassment and sexual assault, while only slightly more than half of students believed their cadet/midshipman leaders were making such efforts (Figure 1). Building on this finding, focus group discussions indicated that leaders play an important role in prevention efforts at the Academies. Specifically, senior leadership was seen as effectively prioritizing sexual assault as an Academy issue, messaging zero tolerance for offenses, and displaying a genuine approach to addressing the problem, but many students indicated wanting to see more concrete results from their senior leaders’ efforts. Specifically, students in the focus groups wanted a better understanding of policies that had been implemented and the impact of those changes.

**Figure 1.**  
**MSA Student Perceptions of Leadership (2018 SAGR)**



In contrast to perceptions of Academy Senior Leaders, participants had mixed perceptions regarding student peer leadership's role in prevention, with some participants perceiving cadet and midshipman leaders as doing well, and some perceiving them as needing improvement. Many participants questioned what the right role was for peer leaders when it came to sexual assault prevention and the issues around it. Some recommended requiring peer leaders to participate in organizations like Trust, Sexual Harassment and Assault Prevention Education (SHAPE), and Personal Ethics and Education Representative (PEER) programs to help better equip them to handle these topics. Finally, participants discussed the importance of mid-level leaders at the Academies regarding prevention, identifying how these mid-level leaders were in a position to set the tone for cadet and midshipman units due to their relatability and close working relationships with students.

## Resources and Reporting

When discussing the Sexual Assault Prevention and Response (SAPR) and Sexual Harassment and Assault Prevention and Response (SHARP)<sup>3</sup> offices at the three MSAs, cadets and midshipmen across the Academies discussed a lack of familiarity with the staff and resources available. Students in the focus groups commented that the office staff had not built lasting rapport with most students, and therefore a victim might feel more comfortable going to a peer, military cadre member, or faculty member whom they trust and see on a day to day basis over the SAPR or SHARP personnel. The SAPR/SHARP office was seen as the last stop in the

<sup>3</sup> The Sexual Harassment and Assault Prevention and Response (SHARP) office is only at the U.S. Military Academy.



reporting process if someone has decided to report a sexual assault and not as a broader resource for assistance in navigating problematic situations.

As found in prior focus groups and survey results, barriers to reporting sexual assault and sexual harassment persist. Participants identified these barriers as including: fears of reprisal from leadership, not being believed, social ostracism, the lengthy and rigorous reporting process, and the stigma associated with reporting. Participants also expressed a desire to protect their peers' reputations and future careers, including that of an alleged perpetrator. This protective barrier to reporting points to a sense of toxic loyalty and obligation to Academy peers due to a shared Academy experience that can trump a sense of loyalty to the institution. To increase reporting, cadets and midshipmen suggested adding more anonymous options and resources.

## Alcohol Use and Training

Students at all three MSAs spoke of alcohol use as a way cadets and midshipmen released stress, often referring to the culture around alcohol use as binge-drinking. When asked about the trainings provided around alcohol use, participants stated they are unrealistic and not always helpful in creating behavior change or promoting responsible alcohol choices. Students discussed the need for training that promotes responsibility over abstinence and should be taught by trainers students can relate to, such as recent graduates or young officers.

## Synopsis

The focus group findings align and add context to the *2018 SAGR* survey results. Participants highlighted parts of the culture at the Academies that could hinder the promotion of healthy relationships, including the tolerance of lower level behaviors that could lead to an increase risk of sexual assault for cadets and midshipmen. Cadets and midshipmen are taught to handle many of these sexually harassing behaviors at the lowest level—however, many of these lower level behaviors were identified by focus group participants as falling in the “gray area,” an area where students often do not know how to intervene or solve the issue at the lowest level. Often participants identified these lower level behaviors as not rising to the level of intervention or even tolerated as an everyday part of Academy life.

Results from the focus groups also aligned with survey results regarding the role of leadership in making honest and reasonable efforts to stop sexual assault and sexual harassment, with senior leadership perceived more favorably than mid-level and student leadership. While participants felt confident in senior leadership's ability to address sexual assault and sexual harassment, mid-level leaders and peer leadership have the most influence on day-to-day Academy life. The attitudes and influence of mid-level leaders are a key component of the prevention effort, however, participants spoke to a lack of consistency in the quality of mid-level and peer leaders and their implementation of senior leadership messaging.

Finally, participants recommended improvement to both their bystander intervention and alcohol trainings. Cadets and midshipmen expressed current trainings are not resonating and are often seen as unrealistic. Across both types of training, students in the focus groups expressed a desire for relatable training facilitators, realistic scenarios, and small group discussions.

The body of this report contains a wealth of information on these topics. While this report alone cannot answer all questions about unwanted behaviors experienced by students at the Academies, it is a powerful source of insight from the students and faculty themselves.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

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The Military Service Academies (MSA) strive to provide a safe environment for their students' education and leadership development. Working with their Service's Headquarters and the Department of Defense (DoD) Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Office (SAPRO), the Academies have implemented programs to prevent, and respond to, instances of sexual assault and sexual harassment. A recurring evaluation of these programs through ongoing mixed-methods research (i.e., surveys and focus groups) informs the development of improvements to policies, procedures, and trainings aimed at reducing sexual assault and sexual harassment and advancing care. Both focus groups and representative surveys are used to gain qualitative and quantitative feedback from students and personnel at the Academies. This introductory chapter provides background and history on these focus groups, a review of the methodology used to administer the *2019 Service Academy Gender Relations Focus Groups (2019 SAGR)*, an overview of the report, and an introduction to key terms.

### Study Background

The Health and Resilience (H&R) Research Division within the Office of People Analytics (OPA) has conducted congressionally mandated gender relations assessments at the Academies since 2005.<sup>4</sup> Title 10, United States Code (U.S.C.), Sections 4361, 6980, and 9361, as amended by Section 532 of the John Warner National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for Fiscal Year 2007, codified an assessment cycle at the Academies that consists of alternating surveys and focus groups. This requirement applies to the DoD Service Academies (U.S. Military Academy [USMA], U.S. Naval Academy [USNA], and U.S. Air Force Academy [USFA]).

This report presents findings from the *2019 SAGR*, a source for exploring general attitudes regarding the gender relations environment at the Academies. This is the seventh administration of gender relations focus groups at the Academies.<sup>5</sup> The *2018 Service Academy Gender Relations (2018 SAGR)* survey found that estimated rates of unwanted sexual contact<sup>6</sup> increased for women at USMA and USFA and men at USMA compared to 2016, resulting in some of the highest estimated rates since measurement began in 2005 (Figure 2). Estimated rates of reporting of sexual assault remained largely stagnant.<sup>7</sup> Estimated rates of sexual harassment also increased for men at USMA and women and men at USNA. These findings have prompted significant concern and calls to action from across the MSAs, Military Services, Department of Defense, Congress, and the public. The *2019 SAGR* focus groups were conducted approximately two months after the *2018 SAGR* findings were reported to Congress and are a crucial next step

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<sup>4</sup> The first assessment in this series was conducted in 2004 by the DoD Inspector General (IG). Details are reported in the Office of the Inspector General of the Department of Defense (2005).

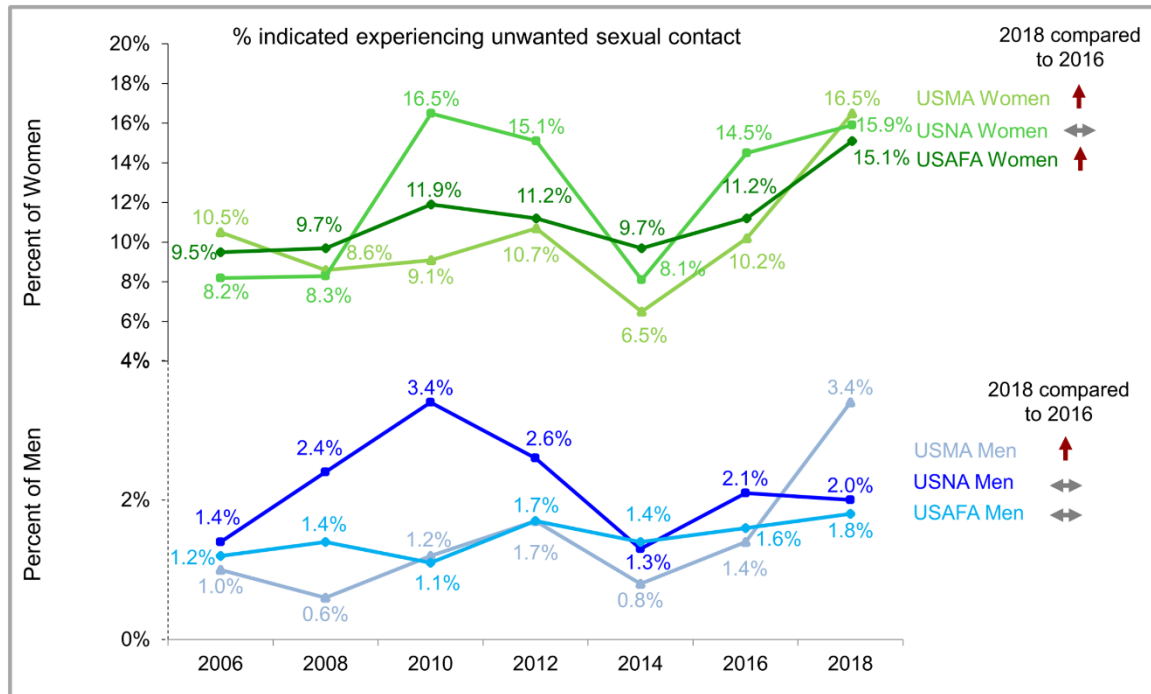
<sup>5</sup> Previous surveys were administered in 2005, 2006, 2008, 2010, 2012, 2014, 2016, and 2018, and previous focus groups were conducted in 2007, 2009, 2011, 2013, 2015, and 2017.

<sup>6</sup> Unwanted sexual contact (USC) is the metric used to assess behaviors in line with sexual assault, including penetrative, non-penetrative, and attempted penetration, on the SAGR survey

<sup>7</sup> Reporting rates are estimated using the number of students estimated to have experienced USC per the *2018 SAGR* and the actual number of official reports of sexual assault each Academy received within the same timeframe

in understanding the climate at the Academies to inform efforts to shore up prevention and bolster reporting.

**Figure 2.**  
*Estimated Past Year Unwanted Sexual Contact Rate, by Academy and Gender*



## Methodology

OPA conducted 30 focus groups on gender relations with cadets, midshipmen, faculty, and staff across all DoD Academies from April 1, 2019, to April 19, 2019. Each group was conducted in 90-minute sessions with a moderator trained in sensitive topic facilitation. In total, 268 Academy students and 24 faculty, coaches, activity leaders, and military cadre participated in the groups. Participation in the focus groups was voluntary.

The focus group guides (see Appendix A and B) for each Academy were developed to provide insights into recent efforts made by the Academies in four areas of focus from a June 20, 2017, DoD issued memorandum. The memorandum directed the Academies to increase attention in four areas (Department of Defense, 2017):

- enhancing a culture of respect,
- reinvigorating prevention through integrating sexual harassment and hazing and bullying prevention efforts with efforts to prevent sexual assault,
- improving sexual assault and harassment reporting, and
- promoting responsible alcohol choices.

Action plans for each MSA on these efforts were submitted to the DoD the summer before the 2018–2019 academic school year.

Procedures for selecting participants, developing the questions, conducting the groups, and analyzing the data are described below. The focus group procedures were reviewed by a DoD Human Subjects Protection Officer as part of the DoD information collection approval and licensing process.

## Participants

Study participants were from the general population at each Academy, and they may or may not have had direct experience with sexual assault and/or sexual harassment. Those who were recruited volunteered to participate in one of 10 focus groups: nine student focus groups and one group comprising faculty, staff, and military cadre members. Student groups were broken out by gender and class year, with the exception of one mixed-gender and mixed-class year group that was made up of students who participate in their Academy's student-led organization that is focused on gender-related issues. See Table 1 for a detailed layout of the groups that were conducted.

**Table 1.**  
*Focus Group Participant Composition*

Class Year/Category	Gender	
	Male	Female
Senior	Male	Female
Junior	Male	Female
Sophomore	Male	Female
Freshmen	Male	Female
Student Group	Mixed	
Faculty and Staff	Mixed	

Participants were initially recruited via e-mail. To select participants for student groups, each Service Academy supplied OPA with a roster of all cadets/midshipmen. After randomizing each list within clusters defined by gender and class year, rosters were returned to each Academy. Each Service Academy was responsible for recruiting the first available 12 students to participate in the appropriate session, with an even split of female and male cadets/midshipmen for the mixed-gender group. Each Academy was required to emphasize that participation was voluntary and that participants were able to exit the study at any time. For this reason, the size of the sessions varied.

For the faculty sessions, Academy officials advertised the sessions through the most appropriate forum for their Academy and solicited volunteers. The breakout for each Academy can be seen in Table 2.

**Table 2.**  
*Participants by Academy*

Academy	Date	Student Participants	Faculty Participants
U.S. Military Academy	4/1–4/3/2019	92	9
U.S. Naval Academy	4/15–4/19/2019	90	10
U.S. Air Force Academy	4/8–4/12/2019	86	5

## Development of the Guides

The focus group discussion guides (i.e., the protocol) were designed to elicit insights on important issues identified in the 2018 SAGR and to obtain actionable information relevant to the four lines of effort spelled out in the 2017 DoD memorandum. OPA drafted the initial guides and then worked with DoD SAPRO, DoD Office of Diversity Equity and Inclusion (ODEI), DoD Office of Force Resiliency (OFR), each Service SAPR/SHARP office, and each Academy to incorporate their feedback before finalizing guides.

The guides included multiple sections identified as high priority by the stakeholders mentioned above, including culture, official and unofficial rules, leadership, bystander intervention, and barriers to reporting. The student and faculty guides can be found in Appendix A and B, respectively. The protocols also included several activities and handouts designed to encourage discussion and to foster thought beyond top-of-mind responses. Table 3 shows the different activities used throughout the focus groups. The handouts that were provided to participants can be found in Appendix C.

**Table 3.**  
*Focus Group Activities*

Activity	Group Type	Description
Leadership Assessment	All groups	Participants were asked to grade different levels of leadership on their handling of issues related to sexual assault. Moderators probed around the reason behind the grade and what leaders could do to improve their grade.
Bystander Intervention	Students groups	Participants were asked to place a range of behaviors on a handout to indicate if they would or would not intervene to stop the behavior. Participants were also given the option to place the sticker on a third option, the “gray area.”
Campus Mapping <sup>8</sup>	Student groups if time allowed.	Participants were asked to map where alcohol use occurs and “gets out of hand” on and around campus.

<sup>8</sup> Due to time constraints, most groups were unable to complete the campus mapping activity.

Each section of the protocol has the goal of prompting a guided discussion around key topics of interest. The student guide was divided into eight parts, the goals of which are specified below.

- Part 1: Introduction to the Focus Groups

In this section of the protocol, the focus group moderator set the ground rules for participation in the discussion and encouraged dialogue through a warm-up question. The aim of this section was to create an environment for maximum participation.

- Part 2: Gender Relations at the Academy, Leadership, and Resources

Section two sought to better understand the environment around support and resources for sexual assault and sexual harassment prevention and response at the Academy. Participants were asked to provide both positive and constructive feedback on different levels of leadership and their role in gender relations at the Academy through a prompting activity (see Table 3). The discussion also included targeted questions about the SAPR/SHARP office in order to better understand trust in the office and with whom students are most comfortable interacting on these topics.

- Part 3: Rules and Culture at the Academy

Part three asked participants to think about Academy rules and culture in an effort to better understand how to enhance a culture of respect at the Academy as prioritized by the Secretary's 2017 memorandum. Questions in the section sought to understand the official and unofficial (i.e. informal) rules of the Academy, their effects on issues related to sexual assault and sexual harassment, and if these rules applied to class years and genders in different ways. The discussion also focused on who was communicating these rules to students (e.g., other students, alumni, faculty).

- Part 4: Boundaries and Intervention

This section of the protocol was aimed at better understanding how to reinvigorate prevention efforts with a particular emphasis on understanding what behaviors students saw as areas where they would intervene if they witnessed a problematic situation. Using an activity (Table 3) students were asked to classify behaviors in which, as a bystander, they would and would not intervene and when they would be unsure. The goal of this discussion was to understand why students made the choices they made in the activity to better understand gaps in trainings around bystander intervention.

- Part 5: Reporting

Part five focused on improving sexual assault and harassment reporting, as directed by the Secretary's 2017 memorandum. Questions and probes in this portion of the guide focused on generating ideas on how Academies could close the gap between the number of students who experience an instance of unwanted sexual contact or sexual harassment and those who make an official report. The moderator asked follow up questions to better understand the unique barriers to reporting that may exist at the MSAs.

- Part 6: Alcohol

In order to understand how to promote responsible alcohol choices as directed in the 2017 memorandum, part six of the protocol asked students questions about alcohol use at and around the Academy. Questions in this section touched on differences between class years, when alcohol use gets out of hand, and what types of trainings students receive on alcohol. Students were asked for suggestions on how to make training more effective.

- Part 7: Risky Behaviors

In the penultimate section, students were asked to discuss the types of risky behaviors (e.g., sexual jokes, sexual harassment, gawking) that occur on campus using a map as an aid. Most focus group sessions did not include this activity due to time constraints.

- Part 8: Conclusion

To end the groups, participants were asked one last open-ended question to ensure that if a participant had a major point they were unable to express during the group, there was an opportunity to raise this point before the session ended.

The faculty guide used a similar format to understand the same concepts. Faculty were not asked to complete the Bystander Intervention activity or the campus mapping activity.

## **Conducting the Focus Groups**

Focus groups were conducted on site at each Academy in closed-door conference rooms or classrooms. Experienced facilitators trained in focus group moderation and sensitive topics led the sessions. Gender-specific groups were led by facilitators of the same gender (i.e., male groups were led by a male facilitator, female groups were led by a female facilitator). For mixed-gender groups, the facilitator was either male or female. Focus groups were audio-recorded and transcribed. All audio recordings were destroyed 90 days after transcription was completed.

## **Analysis**

Data from the focus groups were analyzed using a multistep analytic induction method (Erickson, 1986). First, the data were organized by Academy, removing any personally identifiable information (PII) or other identifying information. Next, using qualitative analysis software (NVivo), the team coded data into key themes, and analysts developed assertions, which stated possible findings. Transcripts were coded and verified by two independent analysts to avoid individual bias. Once the data were compiled for each assertion, researchers determined whether to keep, revise, or eliminate the findings based on the support, and contradictions for the assertion. If an initial finding did not have evidence of support, it was eliminated as a potential assertion. Assertions that were retained are summarized in the subsequent chapters of this report.



Quotes that exemplify key findings found through the analytic induction process are included throughout the report.<sup>9</sup>

Findings for each Academy are presented in separate chapters:

- Chapter 2 provides a summary of findings from the U.S. Military Academy.
- Chapter 3 provides a summary of findings from the U.S. Naval Academy.
- Chapter 4 provides a summary of findings from the U.S. Air Force Academy.
- Chapter 5 provides a discussion of major themes from across the Military Service Academies.

## Terminology

Throughout the report, uses of the phrases “sexual assault” or “sexual harassment” do not indicate that the actions met the definition under the Uniform Code of Justice (UCMJ). Terms such as “offender,” “perpetrator,” or “victim” are not intended to convey any presumption concerning sexual assault allegations; references to perpetrator/offender throughout this report should be interpreted as “alleged perpetrator” or “alleged offender.” Without knowing the specific outcomes of particular allegations, the presumption of innocence applies unless there is an adjudication of guilt. References to “retaliation,” “reprisal,” “ostracism,” or “maltreatment,” or perceptions thereof, are based on the negative behaviors as reported by the focus group participants; without knowing more about the specifics of particular cases or reports, this data should not be construed as substantiated allegations of reprisal, ostracism, or maltreatment. Therefore, no legal conclusions can be drawn on whether behaviors meet the definition of an offense having been committed.

**Glossary.** Throughout the report, quotations are used to highlight key themes and findings. Within quotations, participants may use slang and terminology specific to the military, their Service, or their Academy. Please use the glossary in Appendix D as a guide.

## Strengths and Limitations of Focus Groups as a Methodology

Qualitative research is an important tool in understanding the student experience at the Service Academies on topics related to gender relations, sexual harassment, and sexual assault. Focus groups provide an interactive and dynamic process for exploring the Service Academy student experience. Indeed, focus groups enable researchers to collect data on topics of interest and better understand themes that often cannot be explored fully using surveys—and are often used to generate new survey content. The protocol development process allows for the focus of the discussion to adapt from year to year based on the changes in the environment, policy office priorities, and issues highlighted in the reporting of SAGR survey results. Due to the dynamic nature of the methodology and the discussion-based data collection, focus group data is limited in its ability to examine changes over time, provide frequencies of themes, or compare one group

<sup>9</sup> For clarity, throughout the report, filler words (e.g., “like,” “um,” “you know,” “yeah”) were removed from quotations, and explicit words are indicated by [explicit] where they have been removed.

precisely to another group. In addition, results from focus groups cannot be generalized to the entire population at the Service Academies. Data collection is discussion-based; therefore, although many subjects are addressed, not all questions are asked in all groups and not all participants are able to answer each question. However, focus groups offer a deep and nuanced understanding of topics of interest that is difficult to glean through surveys. Accordingly, OPA's mixed methods approach of alternating focus groups and surveys provides a comprehensive understanding of gender relations at the Academies.

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## Chapter 2: U.S. Military Academy

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The United States Military Academy (USMA) is located in West Point, NY, a relatively isolated area approximately two hours' drive north of New York City, NY. USMA is home to approximately 4,300 cadets with a gender ratio of three males to every one female. The Corps of Cadets is organized into a brigade, which is further organized into four regiments. Each regiment has three battalions, each with three companies. Ten 90-minute focus groups were conducted at USMA between April 1 and April 3, 2019. These focus groups included 92 cadets and nine faculty members. Of the 10 focus groups, nine groups were conducted with student participants and one group was conducted with faculty and staff participants. Of the focus groups with student participants, four groups comprised all male cadets by class year, four groups comprised all female cadets by class year, and one group comprised cadets (both male and female) who were involved with the on-campus Trust program.

### Academy Culture

USMA is the oldest of the U.S. Service Academies and acceptance is considered an extremely high honor. Cadets who participated in focus groups discussed how both of these aspects contribute to the Academy culture. They expressed great pride and a sense of duty to their country as a result of their attendance, but they also spoke about the challenges that are compounded by their isolation.

Culture is an important aspect of Academy life affecting everything cadets do, ranging from their day-to-day interactions with their peers and instructors to their broad views on a variety of topics. The focus groups explored several cultural topics, including general culture and interaction between cadets; cultural beliefs about gender; the official and unofficial rules that govern the lives of cadets and the enforcement and effects of those rules on cadets; how these beliefs, perceived policies, and guidelines are passed down through the Corps; and how all of these cultural factors affect sexual assault and sexual harassment prevention at USMA.

### Life at the Academy

Participants were asked to describe their perceptions on what life is like at the Academy. Many participants described a distinct feeling of pride in the Academy and comradery between their peers that is often tempered by fierce competition. Further, some cadets described their time at the Academy as immensely challenging and cited their inability to leave campus as a stressor.

### Competition and Stress

Competition is common, especially between male and female cadets. According to participants, students are continuously in competition with each other despite the sense of comradery. Cadets are ranked according to their performance, which affects future career outcomes and opportunities. The cadets in the focus groups expressed that this competitive atmosphere is beneficial in that it drives many cadets to be their best.

*“We’re all competitive here, so it’s like we compare ourselves to an academic standard or a physical standard, and there are some differences there that are innate to being men or women.” —Sophomore, Female*

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However, male and female participants also spoke about how the competitive atmosphere also creates some negativity in the Corps. Cadets in the focus groups expressed a level of cynicism about their difficult and sometimes monotonous studies. This feeling is further compounded by a lack of leave privileges, especially among more junior students who do not have the option to leave campus as frequently as their more senior peers. The constant scrutiny and inability to escape the professional environment creates stress.

*“Whenever you can leave West Point, do it... saying if it's a free pass that weekend, take it. Or don't ever sit on your passes. Or if your friend's on a sports team, take a sport pass or whatever... as plebes, we only can leave-- we only have one base pass, and we can earn two more passes on top of that. So that makes a maximum of three times you can leave. Whereas with upperclassmen, it's progressively more.” —Freshman, Male*

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### **Rumor Mill**

Several cadet participants expressed that many rumors are spread at the Academy. As a result of the small, largely isolated nature of the Academy, information and misinformation travels fast, especially when there is ambiguity around an event. Some male cadets expressed a feeling of discomfort around their peers because they are unsure whether they can be trusted not to spread damaging rumors.

*“A lot of times, stuff happens. That happens, and there’s no answer as to what actually went down, and rumors start spreading, people talk... That has an effect on company morale and stuff because then like, ‘Oh, can I trust walking around my own company and can I trust people in my own company?’” —Sophomore, Male*

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### **Relationships**

There are a number of relationship dynamics at play at West Point. Cadets were asked how they interact with each other and how gender and class year might influence those interactions. Many cadets expressed that they feel like their classmates are family, but they also discussed how gender and class year can impact how people are treated.

#### **General Relationships**

By and large participants in the focus groups discussed a sense of comradery and support among cadets. The unique circumstances of being in a military setting and at the Academy create tight-knit relationships. Many cadets believed the difficulties associated with life at West Point leads cadets to lean on each other for help; there is a sense that if they are not united, they will fail.

*“I know I try to describe West Point to my family, and the easiest way to say it or describe it is like growing up with a bunch of extra siblings. That’s honestly what it feels like because you live together, you eat together, you see each other every day, and you kind of grow up in the same environment, so you see them as peers and as teammates or as brothers and sisters. I think it’s very different from what a normal college experience would be where you’re friends or not.”*

—**Sophomore, Female**

Female cadets expressed a sense of equality with male cadets from the outset. Some expressed that “Beast”—the intensive training that occurs at the beginning of the first year at the Academy—introduced them to an environment where they felt close to their peers. However, this perception lessened as the school year went on and female and male cadets became increasingly more distant from each other.

*“When we came in here for Beast, I was like, ‘Okay, everyone is—I’m not feeling any type of sexism or anything like that.’ Not that I had an expectation to, but just general reflection of it. And I remember thinking, ‘This is going to—we’re all so close, and we’re going through the same things.’ And, all of us were pretty athletic, so there wasn’t any really—that really weak link, and she’s a female. There wasn’t really any of that in my platoon, which might’ve been an anomaly situation, but we just worked really hard and we had a good leadership, so it was a good experience. But as the school year came and we scrambled from our companies and weren’t with them anymore, I definitely saw a lot more separation between the guys and girls. Just both naturally because we’re not rooming with guys, you can’t talk outside of your room, you can’t talk outside. And so there’s less interaction that you can have in that way. And then also just seeing a little bit of boy’s clubs start to form.”* —**Senior, Female**

## **How Gender Affects Relationships**

**Academy gender ratio** There are relatively few female cadets at the Academy compared to male cadets, and many cadet participants discussed the gender imbalance at the Academy. Some female cadet participants expressed that this imbalance drives female cadets to view many of their relationships with male cadets as particularly competitive due to the drive to outperform men and earn their place.

*“The ratio here is like five to one, male to female. So it’s definitely always competing. You’re always competing with the male here.”* —**Freshman, Female**

Several male cadets viewed the gender ratio difference in a different light. They tended to think in terms of potential romantic partners and how the relative ratio of male to female cadets means that it is often common knowledge who a female cadet has sexual or romantic relationships with. In fact, some male cadets expressed that female cadets who have many romantic relationships are viewed negatively, with some using the term “Barracks Bunny” in reference to female cadets who are considered promiscuous.

## **Class Year Relationships**

Cadet participants described class year relationships in much simpler terms than relations between men and women. Many stated that upperclassmen tend to have a level of authority over more junior students at the Academy, although this dynamic is only strictly respected if cadets are in the same chain of command. Cadet participants described the most extreme of this hierarchy existing for freshman cadets, or plebes, who are forbidden from interacting with students other than other freshmen unless it is for a professional reason. Some upperclassmen expressed that they expect more junior students, and specifically freshmen, to address them by rank at all times.

*“I don’t see a real difference between someone above me or below me, unless they’re in my chain of command, and I have to give them respect because it’s expected of me. But plebes, that’s far more strict. It’s private. They don’t end something with rank. It’s kind of, ‘What? You might want to try that again.’”*

—**Junior, Male**

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## **Gender Beliefs at the Academy**

Many cadet participants described a “bro culture” in which inappropriate language and behaviors are often tolerated. Both male and female cadets expressed a need to try to fit in with this culture. Female cadet participants also expressed that gender plays a role in how the accomplishments of female cadets are perceived and that they feel they need to accomplish more to get similar recognition.

### **Bro Culture**

The gender imbalance at West Point has a large impact on how male and female cadets interact and the beliefs that cadets hold regarding gender. Participants commented on a stereotypical masculine culture at USMA that includes roughhousing, using sexually charged language, and making jokes that mixed company would find offensive. Female cadets are expected to adapt—both female and male cadets expressed that female cadets are encouraged to act like one of the “bros.” Being a “bro” means adopting more stereotypical male interests and allowing problematic behaviors like “locker-room talk” and roughhousing to slide under the radar.

*“I feel like the girly-girls outgroup themselves a little bit and then the more tomboyish girls kind of blend and mesh better than everybody else. And that’s not to say the girly-girls don’t blend some, but I think you can see a more noticeable divide. The more feminine you want to be, the more isolated you might be from the general male group.”* —**Senior, Male**

*“I think we have a lot of pressure to be a bro and be okay with sort of the locker-room talk and the way that guys kind of interact. And it’s like well, if you’re not cool with us saying that, then you’re not cool, and you’re not one of the bros. And I think a lot of guys have this sort of perception that they need to make the women here more like them, instead of just having a more cohesive, ‘We’re different, but we’re still together and equal.’”* —**Junior, Female**

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Despite this idea of being one of the “bros,” female cadets are often not given the same level of respect by male cadets across a variety of domains. One striking example of this inequity is the way female cadets are treated when it comes to romantic or sexual relationships. The relatively small number of female cadets means that they often individually receive much more attention from many more male cadets (compared to the amount of attention male cadets receive from female cadets). Male participants expressed a perception that when female cadets have multiple sexual partners, other cadets are aware, and those female cadets are looked down upon. Further, both male and female cadets spoke about the idea that if a female cadet is friendly with a male cadet frequently, others are quick to assume that a more serious romantic or sexual relationship exists despite a lack of concrete evidence.

*“But based off the ratios of males to females here, the odds are if you’re a guy in the Corps of Cadets and you’re dating another girl in the Corps of Cadets, they have probably slept with somebody else in the Corps of Cadets, and so it seems like that girl’s a ho. But then if that guy is sleeping with the equal amount of people that aren’t here necessarily, then they’re all fine. And, it kind of projects this factor like the girls are sleeping around significantly more than the guys, and I think that might not be the case.” —Senior, Male*

### **Similarities in Gender Beliefs Among Men and Women**

Many participants expressed a belief that female cadets are seen as just as capable as male cadets or that female cadets do not need any help in order to succeed at the Academy. In addition, many cadets expressed that they view their peers, both male and female, in a professional way; as colleagues they will have to work with at the Academy and throughout their career. Although inclusion is not universal, it is something that female participants often recognized.

*“I’ve had a female superior to me, and it’s the same as a guy, honestly. They do the same job and, I guess in retrospect, I never thought of them, as like, ‘Oh, this is a female in charge of me versus a male in charge of me.’ I didn’t see a difference. It’s still the rank. It’s still the person. They’re still both professional, and they’re still doing what they’re supposed to do.” —Freshman, Male*

### **Differences in Gender Beliefs Between Men and Women**

Female cadet participants said they believe that they must work harder to prove themselves at the Academy. This often takes the form of taking their duties much more seriously, fear of making mistakes, and pushing themselves to higher limits beyond what they believe is expected of their male counterparts. Some female cadet participants expressed the belief that gender quotas for leadership positions undermine the perception of validation for female cadets who hold them. Further, some female participants stated that male cadets experience discomfort when competing with female cadets for the same roles.

*“...She said proving yourself. And I think that’s something that I think we face a lot, is a male will come into some situation and just sort of be assumed to be competent or capable, whereas a female coming into the role, you’re always*



*going to have to prove yourself. You're always going to have to go above and beyond what that male could do, or whatever, in order to even be seen as maybe equal."* —**Junior, Female**

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Male cadet participants expressed that they feel they need to self-censor themselves in order to avoid getting in trouble. Avoiding places where they could accidentally offend a female cadet with words or actions was a common theme among male cadets. Simultaneously, some male cadets said they feel that female cadets are allowed to get away with problematic behaviors that they consider sexual harassment without any repercussions.

*"I realized it's possible for girls as well to do stuff that could be considered sexual harassment, or sexual assault, very easily. Which isn't really something I'd considered coming here. I know there's this one girl that's on a team of mine who consistently makes really weird sexual comments and stuff like that. And a lot of people have a problem with it. And it's noticeable on the team, in our company. But she kind of gets a pass because people just write it off as her being a [female cadet]."* —**Sophomore, Male**

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## Official and Unofficial Rules Around Gender

Cadet participants were asked about rules that impact gender relations, including the official rules—or the rules laid out by the Academy that they have to follow—and the unofficial rules—or rules they learn from others at the Academy that are not strictly codified.

### Official Rules

Cadet participants cited a number of rules that govern how male and female cadets interact at the Academy. Many of the policies that cadets indicated are official Academy rules involve policies surrounding fraternization. When asked about official rules, many cadets referenced keeping doors open if more than one person who are not roommates are in a room, avoiding sharing a horizontal surface with others, particularly with others of the opposite gender, and having sex in the barracks. Differences in physical training (PT) standards were often discussed as well.

The door closure policy dictates that if more than one cadet who are not roommates are in the same room in the barracks, the door to the quarter must remain open. Some cadets believed that this was only true if it was a male and female cadet, but others suggested that the rule had changed to be gender neutral. Cadets said that the horizontal surface rule was in place to keep two cadets from lying in bed or on a couch together and was used to maintain a professional setting. These two rules seemed related to the rules against having sex in the barracks and other fraternization rules, in that if there was no privacy and physical closeness, the likelihood of sexual activity is lower. Further, the fraternization policies were perceived as especially explicit in regard to interactions with plebe cadets. Most participants stated that sophomores, juniors, and seniors are to not have any interaction with freshmen outside of their professional duties.

PT standards are different for female and male cadets. Many male cadets believe that the female standards are too easy compared to male standards. Female cadets expressed that they are aware that the standards for PT scores are lower than for men, but that due to physical differences



between men and women, these differences makes sense and women should not be punished for them.

### **Unofficial Rules**

Unwritten rules tended to take the form of candid advice they have received or more granular behaviors that male cadets thought could get them into Sexual Harassment/Assault Response and Prevention (SHARP)-related trouble. Cadet participants stated that romantic relationships between cadets, especially within company, are discouraged. Male cadets expressed that they are told to keep their hands to themselves, not to go out in bathrobes, and to make sure they are conscious when entering rooms or walking through certain areas.

*“I would say, it’s informal. It’s not like upperclassman sits you down, and it’s like, ‘Don’t do this.’ It’s just something that you hear from everyone else, and it’s like it’s common knowledge that you don’t date in company and cadating<sup>10</sup> is a bad idea.”* —**Junior, Male**

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### **Enforcement and Perception of Rules**

Both male and female cadets who participated in the focus groups noted that there is selective enforcement of both official and unofficial rules. Many cadets admitted that official Academy policies sometimes go unenforced. Some rules such as those surrounding plebe cadets are more consistently enforced. Other cadets talked about how enforcing certain rules like the PT standards cause difficulties.

### **Fraternization**

Cadet participants expressed that official rules are selectively enforced or often completely unenforced. Many cadets said they believe that the fraternization policy is seldom enforced and that dating among cadets remains frequent. Cadets noted that this creates problems for people down the line after a breakup.

However, most cadets agreed that the rules protecting plebes from relationships with older students are enforced frequently, and many cadets expressed they find these relationships to be unacceptable.

*“It’s pretty strongly reported...Because your plebes are—I don’t know how you guys view them, but most of my company views them as little siblings or sub-children, basically. So, when somebody breaks a rule around them, it’s pretty visceral.”* —**Senior, Male**

*“If I see you chatting up a plebe girl, I’m like, ‘Dude, you’re being a creep right now.’”* —**Junior, Male**

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<sup>10</sup> Cadating is a term used by cadets to describe romantic relationships between cadets. It is a portmanteau of the words “Cadet” and “Dating.”

This special protection of the youngest students could be having unintended consequences. Some cadet participants mentioned a belief that when freshman are graduated to sophomores, they are seen as viable romantic partners. During this time, female cadets can experience overwhelming attention and can be potentially targeted, since they are no longer considered untouchable.

*“There’s also a common phrase, ‘a thirsty brass brings yuck<sup>11</sup> [EXPLETIVE].’ So, because they used to be freshmen. Now, they’re sophomores and they’re on the market now. It’s almost predatory, all the people that have been eyeballing them all year.”* —**Senior, Male**

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Sports teams are a unique area where cadet participants indicated the fraternization rules are applied differently. Focus group participants shared that interactions between genders and class years are subject to less policing within sports teams. More specifically, there is more leeway for interactions among cadets on the same team, which makes it possible for senior and junior cadets to develop more casual relationships than they would otherwise. Some cadets expressed that this has occasionally led to problems, causing teams to change policies about who can participate in certain roles, such as banning female managers on male sports teams.

*“And, there’s also fraternization rules. You can’t date or be friends with upperclassmen, and there’s kind of gray areas on teams. Because the team rules are different, because you can technically be friends with them, but still be kind of professional.”* —**Junior, Male**

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### **Door Closure Policy**

Some cadet participants stated that open door rules that are in place to attempt to protect cadets and ensure a safer environment are seen as overly intrusive or inconvenient and are often ignored or skirted in some way.

*“I feel like the open door though—if you keep your door at 90 degrees when somebody’s in your room, first of all, nobody in my company actually does that, but if you keep the door wide open, it’s like, first of all, that’s really weird, and second of all, you’re notifying essentially the whole company that that person’s in your room. It just feels super uncomfortable to me, and if you’re sitting there doing homework, a lot of people are going to come in if your door’s open. So, if there’s somebody else in there, like if you guys are sitting down watching a movie, even though your door’s open, it’s still like, ‘Oh, you guys are watching a movie.’”* —**Sophomore, Female**

*“We have not adjusted policy to a female population that is now a quarter of the corps of cadets, which means – males and females together want to relate, and they have to be in a room with an open door together. They can’t be in a room together with a door closed. And so it’s this pre-step to bigger problems because*

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<sup>11</sup> A “yuck” is a Sophomore student at USMA.

*the baseline rules are not being enforced. But the baseline rules are antiquated, right? I mean, these kids want to be social.” —Faculty Member*

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Being forced to keep doors open also contributes to the rumors that frequently follow female cadets at the Academy. Some female cadets suggested that if they had a male cadet in their room, everyone would know.

*“I don't think it's really the official rules that a lot of this comes from. I think it's more of like if somebody sees a guy in your room, it's not an official rule, but everybody's going to know about it. Somebody sees a girl in your room, nobody's going to blink an eye really. I think it more comes from the social implications of being close to guys versus close to girls.” —Sophomore, Female*

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Some members of the Trust Committee also spoke about experiences with the door closure rules. They expressed the opinion that the policy was often unequally enforced when cadets of different genders were involved. This led some female cadets to feel like they were being treated differently.

*“Now it depends on if your company enforces it or not, but as a plebe, I had a team leader, and then he had-- I had a plebe twin, so he had two plebes, and the other one was a guy. And our rooms were all very close together, so whenever he'd come in my room, he'd put the trash can in the door and come and talk to me about whatever. And he never did that with the other one. People can interpret it different ways, and I don't think his intention was malicious or-- but I don't know. It kind of felt like I wasn't part of it. And just because there are more guys, you see that kind of, but there's people that do that no matter whatever gender. There's a lot of different things. But I just felt kind of outside of it a little bit.”*  
—Trust Committee Member

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### **Physical Training Standards**

PT standards were another topic of interest. Male and female participants stated that differences in these standards cause a strain on relationships between male and female cadets. As noted previously, many male cadets expressed that they view the female standards as easier and feel that male cadets have to work much harder to simply pass. Female cadets expressed understanding that the differences frustrate male cadets, but they did not believe they should be blamed for the policy. Female participants said that this dynamic causes female cadets to feel like their accomplishments are undervalued and that they are often seen as a burden where physical challenges are concerned.

*“I know that there's a lot of frustration with guys at least because of the different physical standards for girls. The girls' pass time on the [Indoor Obstacle Course Test (IOCT)] is the same as our fail time. Or their max time is the same as our fail time, and that's something that comes up a lot in discussions like these. And I think that all of those things—girls are inherently different, right? And I think that a lot of people get frustrated with the fact that they get benefits on these*

*things—perceived benefits on these things, and so there's a lot of sexism that's a result of that.” —Freshman, Male*

*“My relationship with men here has stemmed from a lot of the physical standards. For example, when we take the [Army Physical Fitness Test (APFT)], there's a different level of what women score rather than men. And I know that's a huge point of, I don't know, contention I guess. A lot of people, a lot of men that I've spoken to, they're like, 'Oh, well, of course you maxed the APFT. Your standard is so easy. It's so much easier.' And it's the same with our obstacle course, the IOCT. There's a different standard for women. So, I think a lot of what they were bringing up, it's like that system, that there is a different standard for women, makes people think, 'Oh, well, yeah. They have an easier standard. They're lesser than us,' I think. And so I think that's where a lot of the ideas come, that they're like, 'Oh, women are lesser in a sense, physically.'” —Senior, Female*

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## Passing Down Rules and Culture

The cadet participants mentioned a number of sources from which they learned many of these cultural beliefs and rules. Specifically, participants believed that many of the rules were passed down from cadets, especially upperclassmen, while others pointed to military members in middle-level leadership roles. In the faculty groups, participants talked about the role social media plays.

### Upperclassmen

The culture at West Point is shaped by interactions among cadets. Peers, as well as upperclassmen, impart beliefs to each other through their frequent interactions. Upperclassmen pass down company-specific cultural beliefs, either positive or negative. Younger cadets may learn some toxic beliefs about gender from older students, especially when it comes to views on sexual harassment and sexual assault. Some younger cadets who participated in the focus groups stated that upperclassmen frequently make jokes or try to make the issues sound less severe. However, others said they believe that upperclassmen also play a large role in fostering the sense of community and togetherness.

*“The upperclassmen—me, specifically—just hearing them talk at the lunch table and stuff, the only thing I've really learned from them is that they're immature and haven't really grasped the full depth of this problem, because they're still making jokes about stuff and they're still talking about it like it's not a problem and it's not something that needs to be dealt with. And, blaming the [superintendent] and stuff and the comm and everything for losing privileges and stuff. Everything that might happen.” —Freshman, Male*

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### Middle-Level Military Leaders

Military staff members, such as Company Tactical (TAC) officers and other military members at the Academy, also play a role in influencing culture. However, TACs vary in their own experiences and beliefs and can have a positive or negative effect on cadets. Cadet participants

expressed that many TAC officers impart knowledge that they learned while serving in the U.S. Army and set good examples regarding the issues of sexual assault and sexual harassment. Other TAC officers set poor examples and inadequately engage their cadets when it comes to sexual assault and sexual harassment.

*“I kind of want to take it back to in Beast and when we’re picking out our branches and stuff, and there’s kind of female branches and then there’s male branches. And it’s all support and logistics and stuff like that. And, a particular instance that I had is one of my teachers is an [Adjutant General (AG)] officer and is a male. And during his introduction he’s like, ‘Ha, ha, ha. I’m AG. Bet you didn’t expect that. Never seen a male.’ And he said that to the class, and I was like, ‘What do you mean? Anyone can be an AG officer.’ It doesn’t matter that you’re a male. But kind of along with the physical fitness thing, it’s like people don’t expect girls in certain roles, and there’s a lot of women here that want to be infantry...” —Junior, Female*

*“It comes down to the professionalism of TAC. So my TAC’s really professional to cadets, and he draws a hard line with this. So I think he would handle it well. But I know some friends’ TACs, they’re just kind of creepy, where they’re socially awkward or what. And so they definitely wouldn’t trust them as much to handle these properly.” —Junior, Male*

## Social Media

Social media usage is also one way that beliefs are perpetuated. Anonymous platforms, such as Jodel, allow the people of West Point to publicly discuss many topics. Many faculty and staff participants said they worry that students do not recognize the implications of their online communications.

*“Well, I think it numbs them to how to treat people because there’s this interface between them and a person all the time. So, they interact through some kind of device whether it’s an iPod or iPad or phone or something. They don’t have personal contact. And so, they share these explicit things. Certainly, on a number of boards of misconduct and things like that where when you start looking at their Instagram accounts and the information that they’re sharing with each other, it’s explicit and it’s graphic and there is reciprocation from one party to the other in the explicit nature of it. And I think that, a lot of times, can make people think and do things that they infer things from that that aren’t appropriate a lot of times.” —Faculty Member*

## Perceptions of Sexual Assault and Sexual Harassment

Cadets expressed that the “boy’s club” and the being “one of the bros” mentality helps normalize casual sexual harassment, such as “locker-room talk” and offensive gestures, as something that should be accepted. Further, some cadets suggested that the lack of rule enforcement on door closure, professionalism, and fraternization by Academy peers and middle-level leadership

creates an environment where behaviors such as inappropriate touching, gestures and, language, that are not considered truly harmful are allowed to continue.

*“I think the one thing we struggle with though is conversations, table talk, locker-room talk, whatever you want to call it. Demeaning, maybe not at people, right, but publicly enough with our friend-groups maybe. Everybody I think has heard or been a part of a conversation, potentially, where there's something that, definitely, other people would find sexually charged and offensive if they were to have heard it. And I think that would be our one major and proof that sometimes we don't necessarily place ourselves upon as much.”* —**Senior, Male**

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### **Perceptions Held by Female Cadets**

Female cadet participants indicated feeling like they have to remain vigilant around male cadets to protect themselves from ending up in a situation that could lead to sexual assault or sexual harassment while simultaneously needing to protect their social standing. They are expected to act a certain way—they simultaneously have to conform to traditional gender norms by smiling and acting friendly, but when they show too many feminine traits, they are degraded or shunned.

*“And it was a weekend this past year, and I was wearing a sundress. I was going out to brunch. And your TAC officer came up to me very angrily and was like, ‘Why are you in this building?’ I was like, ‘Excuse me, sir?’ And he was like, ‘Are you a cadet?’ And I was like, ‘Yes, sir.’ And he was like, ‘Then what company are you in?’ ...And I was like, ‘Sir, I’m a cadet. Do you want to see my CAC?’ And so, then he turned [to] your TAC too, and he was like, ‘I did not think she was a cadet. She looks too pretty.’”* —**Junior, Female**

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### **Perceptions Held by Male Cadets**

Male cadets stated that within this environment, male cadets learn to be afraid of being accused of SHARP violations through rumor and confusion on what is considered appropriate. While the “bro culture” remains a prominent feature of Academy culture, some male cadets also expressed being hyper vigilant around female cadets to avoid doing something that could be considered offensive and often treat the female cadets with caution or try to limit their interactions as much as possible. A tension exists at the Academy as students try to balance adapting to a “bro culture” while being sensitive to gender-related issues. In some cases, this results in male cadets avoiding female cadets rather than navigating the nuances of appropriate opposite-sex relationships.

*“When I was a team leader and I had a—plebe was a girl. I definitely have been told to, ‘Be careful how you act around them, but not the same way when you talk to male plebes.’ But yet, they’re like, ‘Just be sensitive. Don’t be going to their room too often. Stay away from them as much as you can. Just kind of be hands-off approach,’ which is not always the best approach.”* —**Junior, Male**

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## Conclusions on Academy Culture

The culture at USMA is one that accepts and normalizes lower level unwanted gender-related behaviors that are by definition behaviors in line with sexual harassment. While previous focus group findings suggested that the telling of sexual jokes and unwanted touching in the form of horseplay were persistent at the Academy, this year the cadets gave this culture a name. This “bro culture” creates a hostile environment for female cadets in which they feel that they must accept these unwanted behaviors from their peers or be shunned. Additionally, gender discrimination is common. Many male cadets believe that female cadets have an easier time at the Academy that comes largely from the differing PT scores and the belief that leadership quotas are placing female cadets in undeserved positions of power. This creates an atmosphere where female cadets are less respected and their accomplishments are minimized. Prior research points to the link between sexual harassment, gender discrimination, and sexual assault by way of the continuum of harm (Davis et al., 2017; Davis et al., 2019; Breslin et al., 2019). The culture of accepting sexual harassment as a reality of being a cadet at West Point and negative attitudes toward female cadets may contribute to a higher risk for experiencing sexual assault. These views are perpetuated by more senior cadets and middle-level leaders who have internalized beliefs that may be contrary to the values espoused by Academy senior leaders and taught in SHARP trainings.

## Prevention at the Academy

Prevention efforts are an important priority for the DoD and the Service Academies in reducing the occurrence of unwanted gender-related behaviors. Participants were asked about sexual assault and sexual harassment prevention efforts at the Academy. While discussing prevention, participants in the groups participated in a bystander intervention activity, discussed the bystander training they receive, and provided perceptions on senior leaders’, peer leaders’, and middle-level leaders’ involvement in prevention efforts.

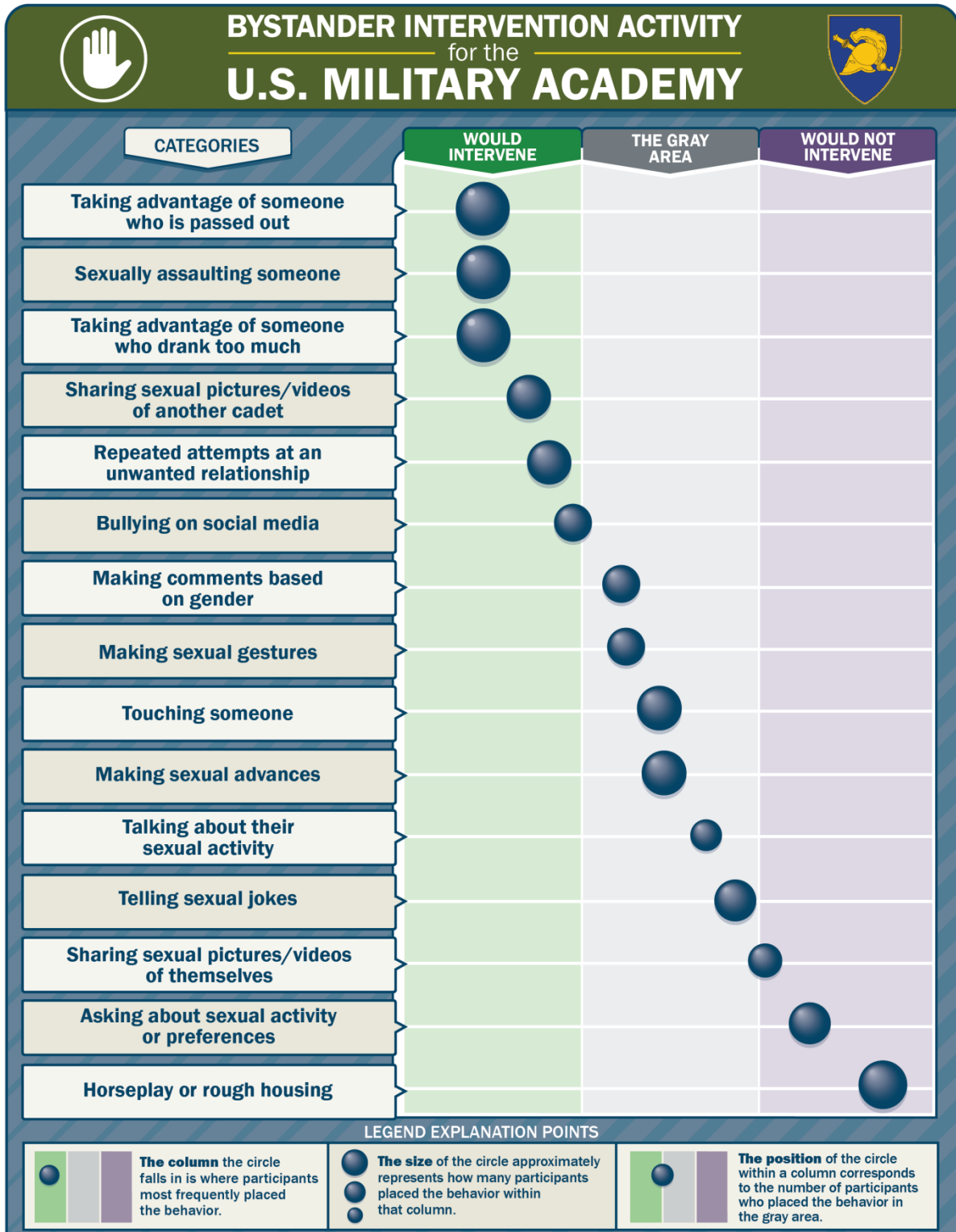
## Bystander Intervention and Training

During the course of the focus groups, cadet participants were asked to identify whether or not they believe they would intervene in a number of problematic behaviors they could potentially witness between a variety of people. Participants were also given the option to identify these behaviors as being in the “gray area,” a term used to indicate that the participant was unsure how they would react. Participants were given a set of stickers representing a range of behaviors aligned with, or increasing risk for, sexual assault and sexual harassment and were asked to place them on a continuum where one end signified “would definitely intervene,” the other end signified “would definitely not intervene,” and the middle of the spectrum signified a “gray area” where intervention was uncertain. The behaviors ranged in severity from verbal jokes and comments to sexually assaulting someone. Because cadet opinions differed on the choice to intervene, the behaviors could appear in multiple categories. Participants then discussed specific situations that they would or would not intervene in, what contributes to the decision to intervene, and the techniques they use when intervening. Figure 3 displays where cadets at USMA indicated behaviors they would and would not intervene in as well as which behaviors fell in the “gray area.” Cadets were asked to discuss their rationale for placing behaviors where

they did on the continuum. The resulting discussions illuminated several factors that contribute to reasons for intervening and not intervening in risky behaviors.



**Figure 3.**  
*Bystander Intervention Activity at the U.S. Military Academy*



### **Cadets Would Intervene**

Cadet participants place behaviors they perceived to be clearly unwanted, severe, lacking consent, or violating the agency of the victim into the category of “would intervene.” These behaviors included sharing sexual pictures and/or videos of another cadet, repeated attempts at an unwanted relationship, taking advantage of someone who is passed-out or drunk, and sexually assaulting someone. Cadet participants described these behaviors as obvious situations, pointing to the obvious malicious intent of these behaviors, often citing that they are illegal and clearly wrong.

*“Regardless, someone can’t give consent if they’ve drank too much and passed out, so. If you’re taking advantage of someone, obviously, I’m gonna step in and make sure that that person’s okay. And hopefully, they get to a safe place, because I don’t know that person. And that person might know them, but I don’t. And from what I’ve seen, I’d rather myself help that person than somebody else that I don’t trust.”* —**Sophomore, Male**

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Many cadets discussed methods that they would use to intervene. Those methods included verbally calling out inappropriate behavior, pulling peers aside who were doing something they did not approve of, asking people that looked uncomfortable if they were okay, and physically separating two people involved in a risky situation.

### **Cadets Would Not Intervene**

Cadet participants placed behaviors they perceived to be less serious, harmless, a part of the Academy culture, or as none of their business into the category of “would not intervene.” First, the behavior that the participants most often agreed they would not intervene in was horseplay and roughhousing, and this was the case for both male and female participants. Horseplay seems to be a common occurrence among cadets, especially among male cadets. Many cadets expressed that they think horseplay is just innocent fun and there is no reason to get involved.

*“But horseplay and roughhousing is the only thing I would definitively not intervene on just thinking they’re buddies [EXPLETIVE] around.”*  
—**Senior, Male**

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Members of the Trust Committee also talked about this tolerance of roughhousing or horseplay, but did suggest that they are less accepting of these behaviors now than in the past. However, they expressed that these behaviors are very common and often construed as an expression of affection among cadets.

*“You just see that a lot. I have so many videos of just-- and it probably sounds bad, but just drunk cadets coming back and because we have the combatives company teams coming back and wrestling in the corner, and I remember there's times where I've been like, ‘Okay, is that necessary?’ And then it just-- it doesn't seem like any foul play. That's just kind of seen as-- and a lot of people in*

*company use that as closeness. That's how they hang out."*

—**Trust Committee Member**

Unique to freshmen that participated, they expressed that they did not think someone sharing explicit pictures of themselves with someone else was a behavior that they would intervene in. Participants in both groups of freshmen expressed that they would not stop a cadet from sharing sexual images of themselves with someone else. They indicated that they believe that it is either none of their business or that a consenting person of age is free to share sexually explicit images of themselves as long as the recipient is also a consenting adult.

*"The 'Sharing sexual pictures of yourselves' once again, that's your own prerogative. If that's what you choose to do, then that's what you chose to do."*

—**Freshman, Female**

### **The "Gray Areas"**

Cadet participants indicated that a large number of the problematic behaviors they were asked about would tend to fall into the "gray area." Frequently, both male and female cadet participants stated the need for more information to make decisions on whether or not to intervene in situations such as seeing someone touch another cadet or hearing a cadet make a sexual joke or gesture. Two major factors that were frequently discussed were the context in which the behavior occurs and the reactions of the target of these behaviors.

**The role of context.** Many participants agreed that contextual factors surrounding the interaction are the most important part of how they could determine if they would or would not intervene in a situation. Several factors were mentioned, including where the interaction takes place, how well they know the people involved, whether or not they are in uniform, the presence of others, and the gender of the people involved.

One major factor of consideration was where these behaviors take place. Many participants indicated that if they were to see or hear an interaction between two cadets occurring in their quarters in the barracks versus in the mess hall or on the campus grounds, they may have very different reactions. This was often related to the other people around who might overhear or see the behaviors. Male cadets expressed practicing and expecting more restraint in more public areas and being a bit more willing to let things slide in more private settings.

*"I think the environment also changes though. When I'm with just my roommates in our room, I'm going to say things to them I'm not going to say at the lunch table, where there's mixed classes and genders."* —**Junior, Male**

The topic of uniforms and regulations was brought up by some female cadet participants. Some expressed that they have found it easier to intervene in situations that they know are against Academy rules such as seeing a cadet do something that they believe is problematic while in uniform.

*“A lot of this would also be dependent on whether or not they’re both wearing their uniform. And I think that the line of whether or not you’re wearing the uniform because it’s an Army regulation, you’re not allowed to just—PDA is against Army regulation. It’s a lot easier for cadets to justify intervening in a sense that you’re breaking a reg. Knock it off. If they’re both in a relationship and touching, whatever on the scale of PDA they were doing, I’d be like, ‘Hey, you’re in uniform. Don’t do that. Even if you don’t think you’re being watched, people are noticing.’ If they’re in a relationship at the Firstie<sup>12</sup>, if they were just sitting close to each other, I don’t think I’d intervene per se, knowing that they’re in a relationship, but it’s in civilian clothing. But I mean, it’s still an Army regulation because we’re at a military installation, you’re not supposed to be doing it, but personally, I wouldn’t see the harm in people in a relationship with arms flung around each other.” —Senior, Female*

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Other participants mentioned that knowing the people involved in the situation could affect their willingness to intervene as well. Some said that knowing those involved would allow them to better know when the boundaries for what is acceptable have been crossed.

*“I would [be] more likely to intervene with some of my friends, because I’m like, ‘Dude, you’re a better person than that. Hold yourself to a higher standard. Stop talking like that. Stop taking advantage of that person. Stop making jokes like that.’—And so, I would be more likely to call my friends out because I hold them to a higher standard, I know they hold themselves to a higher standard of behavior. So, it’s really important to me that I do my part in helping them be a better person.” —Freshman, Female*

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Others disagreed and said that it would be harder to step in if someone they know well is involved. Some participants expressed concerns about potentially alienating friends and facing negative social repercussions as reasons they would be hesitant to step into a situation in which someone they know well is involved.

*“I’d probably be more likely to go up to somebody I didn’t know, because then there’s no repercussion in my mind. I’m not going to have to deal with them ever again. I might never even see them again. Whereas it’s my friend, I’m going to probably let them like, ‘Okay, whatever. I don’t want to make things weird between us, since I’d probably see you 10 minutes from now. I don’t want to make it awkward.’” —Junior, Male*

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Finally, some male cadets who participated in the focus groups expressed that interactions between one male cadet and another male cadet are viewed differently than interactions between a male cadet and a female cadet. Some of the sexually charged jokes and gestures are seen as humorous when two male cadets are involved but would be seen as inappropriate if a male cadet were to do the same thing with a female cadet.

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<sup>12</sup> The Firstie is what cadets call one of the on-campus bars at the Academy.

*“Between two guys, it’s usually pretty common. ... It’d be a little creepy, I don’t know, not creepy. I just know that it’d probably be between a guy and a girl. I don’t know, out in public, especially.” —Sophomore, Male*

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**The role of non-verbal cues.** A second major factor cadet participants thought would impact their decision to act in a “gray area” situation was the reaction of the potential victim. Frequently, the cadets talked about the topic of looking at a person’s facial features or body language to determine whether or not they were receptive to an interaction. If the cadets could determine that the victim appeared to be comfortable, they would not step in, but if they thought the victim looked uncomfortable, they would intervene.

*“I think it’s still situationally dependent. Read body language. If one of them looks super uncomfortable, then it’s probably not a good situation. Or if one of them is falling over drunk, then maybe it’s not a good situation. But if they both seem into it and seem fine, then I don’t think you need to intervene.”*  
—Senior, Female

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### **Bystander Intervention Training**

The participants were asked about their perceptions on the training they received on bystander intervention at the Academy. Many were able to cite training programs and techniques that they remembered and felt were helpful. Others said they thought their training was either non-existent or lacking in many ways. One topic that came up frequently was the concept of consent, how it could be misunderstood, and how cadets thought they needed more clarity. A second topic was fear of mislabeling a situation as problematic and attempting to intervene when the people involved did not want or need them too.

**Well-trained areas.** Many of the participants were able to identify specific things they thought the training they received had taught them well. Some male cadets expressed that they felt the training they received did a good job of pointing out to them how they could intervene in a risky situation. Some male participants specifically referenced the role-playing training on bystander intervention as informative and a good use of time. They expressed that getting hands-on practice with these types of scenarios was helpful and would make them more likely to intervene in a real-life situation.

*“But they did do a good job talking about bystander methods. Like, ‘Oh. Hey, yo. Go say that—hey, you got to help the girl find someone.’ Or pull them apart from each other and work as a team to do that. Or go say that someone was looking for them and that way you can get an excuse to bring them away from you, or away from a guy that’s talking too much or something.”*  
—Sophomore, Male

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Several female cadet participants echoed this sentiment, stating the training they received prepared them to step into situations they assessed as dangerous in ways that would keep both the potential victim and themselves safe. They talked about removing people from dangerous situations, giving a potential victim “an out” by talking to him or her while a potentially

unwanted interaction was occurring, using other cadets as back up, and staying in groups if out at a party.

*“Let’s say at the end, just not being afraid in a situation to walk up to somebody and say, ‘Hey, how are you doing?’ Or maybe not necessarily as obvious, or ‘Are you okay?’ because you might not want to alert a perpetrator with that but just, ‘Hey, how’s it going? How is your day?’ ...And then just kind [of] check-in, not be afraid to do that.” —Sophomore, Female*

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**Areas to improve training.** Many cadet participants said they felt the training they were given did not adequately engage them, if they remembered receiving training at all. According to some of the participants, one of the main training methods for bystander intervention at the Academy is a mandatory online program. Several participants mentioned that the program allowed them to just click through or to put it on in the background while doing other work, which results in failure to absorb the information it is meant to portray.

*“The very briefest thing they do is there was an online thing that they made us start doing last year where they list a bunch of different methods that you can go through and then there’s a video that is mandatory to watch. But I would say most cadets do what I did when I did that training, where I have another thing that I was working on while that training was running in the background and then I would check it and click next to fill the box.” —Senior, Male*

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Some participants indicated they felt the training they received was focused too much on preventing a final act of sexual assault instead of teaching people to address problematic behaviors early in order to prevent people from being in situations in which sexual assault is a possibility. They indicated they believe that if the Academy empowered people to step in early to shift the way their peers think, sexual assault could be better prevented.

*“If it gets to the point where it’s like, ‘Hey, this is something that happens inside of society, that if you don’t say something, then it goes down the line.’ Because nobody just decides to be a rapist one day. It’s realizing that you can get away with it over the course of progressive actions. That then leads to that final event. And we’re only addressing it at that watershed moment of, ‘Did you ask for consent?’ rather than, ‘Hey, did you take steps to change the culture, change what’s acceptable?’ Empower people to say, ‘Hey, maybe you shouldn’t make a hot or not list of girls in your company. You shouldn’t make, Best Looking Plebes.’--The fact that that happened, that I know it’s happened, and I’ve heard it happen, and I haven’t said anything, not because I wasn’t empowered, but because it didn’t even cross my mind to say something. The training should focus on pushing that intervention.” —Junior, Male*

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**Clarifying consent.** Consent was discussed as an area of training that could be improved. Female participants often mentioned that male cadets at the Academy frequently do not recognize what constitutes consent and what does not, especially when alcohol is involved.



*“I think that, in terms of sexual assault and sexual harassment at West Point, this is one of the most important ones. Taking advantage of someone who drank too much. Because I think generally the guys here agree rape is bad. The problem is they don’t really understand the nuances of consent and rape. So, I feel if you ask most guys, you’re like, ‘Oh, is it okay to have sex with someone if they’re drunk?’ They’ll be like, ‘Okay, yeah.’ And then we don’t talk enough about well, what is actually consent? If someone is drinking too much, should you maybe not try and hook up with a drunk girl? Is that wrong? And I feel like we don’t teach that enough. We don’t talk about—we just look at consent as black and white. Like well, I’m not raping her because I’m not physically restraining her. Or she’s not being like, ‘No,’ so it’s okay. I feel like this is something that I think, of the sexual assault at West Point, I would say happens a lot.” —**Junior, Female***

Some male participants validated the beliefs held by some female cadets by expressing their own misunderstanding of what constitutes sexual assault. Some male cadets in the focus groups indicated they feel that much of what is considered sexual assault comes from a misreading of signals or a misinterpretation of the ability to consent.

*“I’m going to be brutally honest. I don’t know the statistics all that well of how much sexual assault wasn’t misunderstanding versus how much was a malignant sexual assault. I would say though that any training that they would give us would be how can we stop a malignant sexual assault. A sexual assault where a predator goes out and says, ‘I’m going to sexually assault somebody tonight.’ I would say that that’s not prevalent at the Academy. I would say it’s more likely to be a misunderstanding between peers of what messages are being sent. And I would say that you can’t really train that. You can’t really sit down and say, ‘Okay, Corps, if she touches your arm, if she touches your hand, you’ve got to ask’—I don’t think that would be effective.” —**Freshman, Male***

**Addressing fears about misreading risky situations.** Another reason cadet participants said they are hesitant to intervene revolved around the idea of misinterpreting a situation and intervening when not appropriate. Male and female participants both seemed to feel that they could damage their social standing or make things potentially uncomfortable if they misread a situation. Some expressed that they need to be taught to better recognize when they need to step in.

*“I feel like a lot of the time the intervention techniques that I would feel comfortable using are more along the lines of trying to figure out if intervention needs to happen. Like sometimes I see stuff like, ‘Oh hey, are you ready to go?’ All the girls are leaving and then the girl’s like, ‘What are you even talking about?’ I’ve asked somebody if they were okay and if they needed help and they were like, ‘This is my boyfriend, and this is just how we act with each other.’ So, it was kind of like I was the weird one and if I did something like ask if they were ready to leave it would be even kind of weirder. So, that puts you in a potential situation of being super uncomfortable.” —**Sophomore, Female***

Some faculty members echoed this hesitance to address potential misconduct among peers. They framed this as cadets being unclear about what is right and difficulty knowing when a conversation crosses a line that they should address.

*“I think a lot of times though the feedback on the behavior is your lack of confidence in what you're doing yourself, right? I think people don't want to turn people in because they know that they're not doing things perfectly, kind of like somebody who drives over the speed limit. You're technically breaking the law, so now we're going to turn somebody else in as breaking a law that may be more severe but they're going to turn around and say, ‘Well, you're breaking the law too. You saw me while you were speeding.’ And so a lot of these things, I think, there's this lack of—‘I don't know what right is,’ a lot of times. And so they're afraid to challenge what [is] right...” —Faculty Member*

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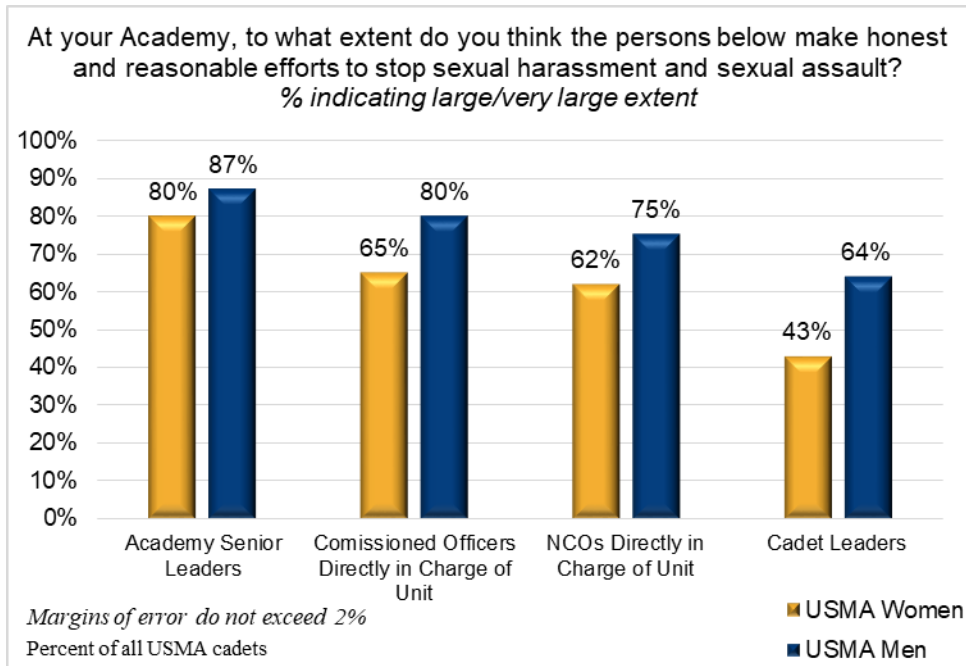
## Leadership and Prevention

Another important factor in preventing sexual assault and sexual harassment is cadets’ perceptions on how leadership at all levels address these issues. Cadets were asked about their perceptions on how their peer, senior, and middle-level leadership handle issues of sexual assault and sexual harassment. Unique to USMA, a Stand-Down Day was called for after the release of the results of the 2018 SAGR survey. Many opinions of the cadets on their leadership were greatly influenced by this event.

Results from the 2018 SAGR survey detailing students’ perceptions of the extent of these leaders making “honest and reasonable efforts to stop sexual harassment and sexual assault” at their Academy supplement the findings from these discussions. The 2018 SAGR results are illustrated in Figure 4 and provide a baseline of how USMA cadets perceived cadet leaders, Academy senior leaders, and middle-level leaders in 2018. Because the 2019 SAGR collected data through qualitative focus groups, findings regarding perceptions of leadership cannot be quantified. However, the data in Figure 4 were collected from the 2018 SAGR survey and are available for further review in the 2018 SAGR report.



**Figure 4.**  
**USMA Cadet Perceptions of Leadership (2018 SAGR)**



### Senior Leadership

Senior leaders are top policy makers at the Academy and set the tone for the entire Corps. Their roles are very impactful and they are often in the cadet and public eye. Cadets were asked to specifically consider the Superintendent, Commandant, Vice/Deputy Commandant, and the Dean in their discussions.

**What they do well.** Many cadet participants expressed a belief that senior leaders take sexual harassment and sexual assault very seriously and are on the right track to make positive changes. Some participants referenced senior leader’s total support for the SHARP program as a clear sign that these issues are very important. Some cadets noted that senior leadership has become increasingly focused on sexual harassment and sexual assault over time.

*“Especially the past two months from the senior leadership, and I think even over the course of four years, it’s been unwavering support for the SHARP program. And they’re very open and honest with us, and I’ve never ever interacted with a member of the senior leadership who kind of discredited the program or discredited anyone who is involved with it. I mean, seeing that throughout my four years just kind of reaffirmed in my mind that they do care, and I never questioned how much they care. And there is a lot of support for the programs, and I think that maybe there’s issues with the way that we implement the programs. And maybe down on the lower levels, things can be miscommunicated or misconstrued, but at least the broad general strokes of it—from the very beginnings of my plebe year, have always known that this is a serious topic, and I’ve visibly seen their support for the program, so.” —Senior, Female*

*“I’ve only been here for two years – I’ve worked at other institutions where they don’t do anything for sexual assault and harassment, like no education on it. I grew up and went to college and had zero education on it, had no idea. And then I get here and I’ve learned more about it...than I ever have in my entire life. That’s pretty cool to me.”* —**Faculty Member**

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**Areas to improve.** Both male and female participants discussed the topic of transparency. Many said they feel that senior leadership needs to better communicate the number, location, and results of sexual assault and sexual harassment cases. They also indicated the outcomes of cases that appear similar in nature are often unclear or unequal, adding to cadets’ desire for more transparency. Many participants indicated a desire to be more informed about what is happening as a result of the reporting process.

*“I just feel like in terms of the actual punishments, the cases that are like what are you actually doing? You can talk all you want about, ‘Oh, we care so much about this.’ But are you actually punishing it when it happens? Are you actually enforcing what you’re saying?”* —**Junior, Female**

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Some participants indicated they believe that senior leadership is too reactive and not proactive enough. Several mentioned that senior leaders make a large public spectacle because they are under scrutiny and need to take measures to make improvements without having to wait for pressure from Congress to force them. Many cadet participants said they want leadership to take further measures after saying sexual assault and sexual harassment are a top priority—they want leaders to provide tangible ways forward to address these issues.

*“I think for the most part, our time here, they’ve only really just talked about their briefs to the Corps like, ‘These are your friends and family that you guys are hurting. Don’t do this.’ It’s not until recently that we started taking it seriously, after that congressional testimony. There really hadn’t been any policy changes, significant policy changes that have addressed sexual assault and sexual harassment. And then now that we had this whole thing going on, we haven’t seen anything since. Although, it’s been a short time...They know it’s a problem. They have addressed it. They named it the number one priority. They have done little actual substantial change to address it though.”* —**Senior, Male**

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Many female participants noted that when senior leaders speak on the topic, they are not always sensitive to victims of sexual assault. Several female cadets mentioned that some of the harsh language and real-life examples that are pulled to illustrate points are often deeply triggering to some of their peers, especially those that may have had past experience with being sexually assaulted.

*“... people were supposed to be given a heads-up before the brief that if they didn’t want to go to it, it was not mandatory for them to show up. If it was personally going to affect them...There were tons of people that didn’t have this information, and then to go into that brief and hear rape, rape, rape, it was super triggering for some people.”* —**Junior, Female**

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## Middle-Level Leadership

The cadets were asked for their opinions on how their TAC officers and non-commissioned officers (NCOs) were handling sexual assault and sexual harassment. TACs play an integral role in the mentoring of cadets at the Academy and act as a guide for how to act in the Army, as they are generally the military member that cadets interact with most often. However, some TACs are perceived as being better leaders and setting the appropriate tone than others.

**What they do well.** Some cadet participants said that TAC officers and NCOs are easy to talk to and relatable. Many male cadet participants said they feel that their middle-level leadership does a good job of taking these issues seriously. Some female cadet participants echoed the open nature of their middle-level leadership and said that they feel their TAC officers are willing to listen to their feedback and actually use it to make improvements.

*“...our TAC has been much more involved, and he’s much more relatable, and he’s more—easier conversation compared to—I feel like if you have a TAC that—they’ve used the excuse in the past, where you don’t feel comfortable in talking and sharing about certain things with the TAC in the room. That’s why they pushed for cadet leadership for a bit... this year, with our current TAC, he’s very relatable and we will talk with him. I feel like he cares for us a lot more.”*

—**Sophomore, Male**

**Areas to improve.** The most common point of discussion in regard to middle-level leadership was the varying effectiveness of TAC officers and NCOs. Many participants expressed that they had great experiences with one leader and terrible experiences with other leaders. Participants indicated that their TAC’s prior experiences and unit culture heavily influences their leadership style and stances on issues of sexual assault and sexual harassment and, thus, impacting the culture and beliefs within the company they lead.

*“My TAC, personally, he’s really, really good about it. You can tell that he’s actually really passionate about it. But I’ve heard from other people their TACs are way less receptive. When we had the Stand-Down Day, I know one girl who said that their TAC was in the room with her—or in their room, and someone shared a really personal story, and he just looked at them, and then walked out because he was like, ‘I can’t handle this.’ And I think it’s really unfortunate because one of the chains that you can go through to report these things is the TACs, and it’s totally dependent upon your TAC’s attitude about SHARP cases, and just how your TAC feels about it. And it’s kind of really obvious sometimes, their standpoint on things, and whether they’re going through with Stand-Down Day in SHARP training because they actually believe in it, or because they’re being told from higher that they have to.”* —**Senior, Female**

*“It comes down to the professionalism of TAC. So, my TAC’s really professional to cadets, and he draws a hard line with this. So I think he would handle it well. But I know some friends’ TACs, they’re just kind of creepy, where they’re socially awkward... And so they definitely wouldn’t trust them as much to handle these properly.”* —**Junior, Male**

There was a perception among many cadet participants that the TACs who do a poor job handling these types of issues are often much less involved in the discussions and training that the cadets receive on these topics.

*“The TACs are really not that involved. We’re doing CCEP and its cadet lab, but we have a captain right outside the door. Why doesn’t he lead this thing? I didn’t come here expecting to be an expert on sexual assault, and I don’t think most cadets are expected to have expertise in that area. So it would kind of be nice if we had a TAC or a captain who had some experience in that area come in...”* —**Sophomore, Male**

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Further, some female cadet participants expressed that even when TACs are included in their trainings, they are not always sensitive to the issues they are talking about.

*“She was sexually assaulted. And they put her case up on the slides and didn’t tell her. And she left the room crying. This is the same TAC team. And they wanted to fast-forward through the slides and be like, ‘We don’t want to read those.’ So you want to put it up there, completely trigger this girl...”* —**Junior, Female**

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### **Cadet Peer Leadership**

Cadet peer leaders are generally upperclassmen at the Academy. They are cadets who are higher in the cadet chain of command and may hold formal positions of power over other cadets. They are often seen as mentors to younger students and those they oversee.

**What they do well.** Many male cadet participants feel that peer leaders take issues of sexual assault and sexual harassment seriously. Many said they believe they are doing everything in their power to make sure that their peers know what is right and make efforts to correct negative behavior.

*“The first is that we’ve been told by really, really highly powerful people around here that this is our problem that we’re creating, and I feel like part of owning that is saying that we’re bad at this stuff. But I think, in reality, every cadet...is very much opposed to this issue, and the context where it’s appropriate to talk about it, we do. And we talk about it seriously. I know my company definitely takes it extremely seriously, and my leadership’s been great about expressing within the context to these situations like, ‘Hey, clearly, this stuff is unacceptable. We’re out here looking out for each other. This isn’t the kind of stuff that we can allow to happen.’* —**Senior, Male**

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Female cadet participants were less positive in their perceptions of cadet peer leaders than men, but some said that peer leaders may be moving in the right direction. Recognition and willingness to speak up when an inappropriate situation occurs were seen as positive moves in the recent past.

*“...we had this [Cadet Character Education Program (CCEP)] session where the mentor said something super [EXPLETIVE] up. And even all the guys in the room were like, ‘That’s wrong. I want to say something.’ And that was really positive and encouraging for me, to see that every single male in that room was like, ‘That’s messed up.’ So it’s still on the lower end, but I hope that we’re heading in the right direction.” —Junior, Female*

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**Areas to improve.** Some male and female participants agreed that oftentimes peer leaders behave in a way that is inconsistent with the messages they communicate about sexual assault and sexual harassment. They expressed a belief that peer leaders are not taking the issues as seriously as they should and often make harmful jokes during trainings or in their private lives. Cadet peer leaders appear to be more willing to look for another entity to blame for the problems than to try to fix them themselves.

*“We talk about it and they have their discussions and get a talk and then really they keep making jokes about it or whatever, and they don’t actually see it as an issue. They blame command. They blame West Point and stuff, and they just—I don’t see them making much change. And it’s not that it’s so much their fault as it’s a cultural thing that needs to change at West Point.” —Freshman, Male*

*“They’ll say what they’re supposed to say during the training, and then at the lunch table, they’ll say terrible things and just talk about the system and how bad it is, and say things that are just completely unacceptable. And these are people who are [Platoon Leaders (PLs)], [Commanding Officers (CO)], in leadership, cadet leadership positions, and go through the training and everything’s fine, and then when we’re not in the training, when we’re between classes or at lunch, they just say terrible things that are completely not okay.” —Senior, Female*

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Other cadet participants said they believe that peer leaders would be able to do a better job if the roles were different. Some male cadets in peer leadership said they believe that they are unable to effectively combat these issues because they have no formal ability to do so.

*“I think it’s because I don’t have actual legal authority. I’m just told to lead my peers. And so certain peer problems are compartmentalized when there’s legal action involved, which I am not privy to at all. So, I mean, it’s not from a lack of trying. It’s that things happen all the time, and I’m not entitled to know, therefore I don’t get to know.” —Senior, Male*

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Some female cadet participants suggested that a restructuring or redefining of the role would be helpful in encouraging peer leaders to work harder on the issues of sexual assault and sexual harassment. Suggestions regarding more support for these types of roles and making them a graded position that would improve their military career if done well were discussed.

*I would say more people, and make it graded positions, and you counsel them, you do the same kind of things, you do these operational positions in company. You have your TAC counseling them, they’re counseled by their grader, there’s*



*actual grading going on, it's going in the system, it's affecting their military grade, and there's just more legitimacy. Right now it's like, do a good job because it's the right thing to do, and we need to do this, and if you don't, you're a bad person, but whatever. That's kind of what it is right now. There's just not enough accountability of it."* —**Senior, Female**

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### **Stand-Down Day at USMA**

Following the results of the 2018 SAGR survey, USMA announced a Stand-Down Day to be held at the Academy on February 25, 2019. During this day, all regular duty was cancelled and the entire Corps of Cadets were asked to attend a series of briefings and presentations regarding sexual assault and sexual harassment led by Academy leadership. Breakout sessions were also scheduled, during which students were able to talk in small groups about the topics of sexual assault and sexual harassment amongst peers. This day had a profound effect on many cadets at the Academy.

Cadets who participated in the focus groups expressed that there seemed to be two types of reactions to this event. The first reaction was one of a broadening of their understanding of sexual assault and sexual harassment, recognizing the scope and severity of the issue, and seeking to create positive change. Many male cadets said they were completely unaware of how serious and severe the issues were at the Academy and the Stand-Down Day helped to put much of that into perspective for them.

*"After the Stand-Down Day happened--after this survey that came out about this big problem—I realized to myself, 'This is pretty frigging terrible.' And so my view of women has changed—my eyes are more open to it now. Because back home, did it happen? Yeah. Did I hate it? Most definitely. But here, I think they put more of a stress on it. Especially with the honor code and everything, living by—living to be a type of person. So after the Stand-Down Day, I decided that I'm going to do what I, as an individual, can do to help change."*  
—**Sophomore, Male**

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Many participants expressed that the conversations were very helpful and believed that these kinds of discussions were a much more effective tool for educating people on these issues. Several participants expressed feeling that now people are much more aware and are able to ask questions they were not able to before. Further, some expressed that all of the discussions helped them identify previous interactions as sexual assault or sexual harassment that they were unable to identify before the Stand-Down Day.

*"I think, in general, the discussions that we had on the SHARP Stand-Down Day were so much more productive than any other cadet development trainings that you bring a cadet in and you just click through the PowerPoint and talk to us about it. I thought it was a lot more productive to actually sit down and have a conversation."* —**Sophomore, Female**

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*“I think that if we talked about what [sexual assault] actually is more, then not only do people know about it beforehand, but I think that, especially with the Stand-Down Day, so many people actually understood what happened to them. It’s kind of like, ‘Okay, I do need to report this.’ Or like, ‘This did happen to me. I’m validated in the fact that this affected me the way that it did.’”*

**—Freshman, Female**

On the other hand, cadet participants said that some of their peers reacted by making jokes and continuing to believe that issues of sexual assault and sexual harassment were not that serious. Male cadets in the focus groups expressed that they heard from some of their peers that the event was pointless or that it was a joke that should be laughed off.

*“I think that a lot of people took the Stand-Down Day and saw it as an opportunity to create positive change here, and then a lot of other people, in probably equal number and probably equally vocal, were like, ‘This is the stupidest [EXPLETIVE] we’ve ever done. Why the [EXPLETIVE] am I wasting a whole day doing this? I’m not part of the problem. Why the [EXPLETIVE] am I—why do we have to do this?’ ...I think there’s enough people here in leadership roles that are kind of dismissive about it, and I’ve heard plenty of upperclassmen, even coming into my room and just kind of making jokes about it and just being like, ‘So what did you all think about this day? What do you all think about this?’ in a condescending tone. Just trying to get us to laugh it off. And to me, that shows that there’s at least some people in leadership positions that want their subordinates to laugh it off and treat it like a joke.”*

**—Freshman, Male**

Some of the female cadet participants said the messaging was brash and narrow. They expressed that the language used was purposely inflammatory to get a reaction out of people and that it could have been delivered with a bit more tact. Some said that everything was far too focused on eliminating the aggressors at the Academy instead of supporting the victims who need help the most.

*“I think that while the Stand-Down Day was great, and us as a Corps taking action and having these conversations is a great start, I still feel like it was more geared towards the—you’ve got to get no more sexual assault, no more rapists in the Corps, and it was very directed at the aggressor as opposed to supporting the people that have been victimized by sexual assault/sexual harassment. So I think there’s room to improve.”* **—Sophomore, Female**

Many participants in the focus groups expressed the desire for more to result from the Stand-Down Day. They want to continue the conversations to keep the issues at the top of everyone’s mind and expressed the need to have more events in a similar spirit to the Stand-Down Day. Some female cadet participants expressed that having more face-to-face discussions help cadets to connect with those affected by these issues and help them to empathize. They said they believe that these types of communication are an effective tool in keeping people informed on

the issues of sexual assault and sexual harassment, inspiring the cadets to make changes and helping prevention efforts.

*“I think having something similar—not a whole Stand Down Day but maybe just a faculty luncheon monthly or twice a month where the faculty comes and everyone sits around a table and they give a facilitated discussion or just a free discussion that cadets totally focused on this particular topic, would be definitely more helpful as opposed to do twice a month do a training like a slideshow from a cadet and nobody really wants to be there, and everybody’s got homework to do, and they’re thinking about other things... It makes it more real, I think, than a bunch of PowerPoint slides. His video put a face to a bunch of it and people were like, ‘Oh my god, I know him and I had no idea that that was going on.’ So it turns it from a paperwork nightmare problem that we just think we’ll have to deal with Soldiers in the future to something that you look around and you’re like, ‘This could be one of my friends going through this.’ It makes it more real for people and in that sense, they start to internalize the fact that there needs to be a change and it can come from them.” —Sophomore, Female*

*I think just more giving cadets the opportunity to do this stuff in a social environment might facilitate social change. But I think that it’s also something that we should spend more than just one minute at the end of big conversation talking about. And one of the things that I think I’ve been most frustrated with this is on the Stand-Down Day, we each had a lot of good conversations about what things we could do to lead to this change, but that was the only time. And I don’t think we’ve ever talked in-depth, other than a time about what we can do to change the problem. And I think we need to more of that overall.” —Junior, Male*

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## Conclusions on Prevention at the Academy

Responses from the bystander intervention activity support the conclusion of the existence of a “bro culture” from the discussion on culture at the Academy. Cadets often indicated that they would not intervene in behaviors that they considered lower level sexually harassing behaviors that are normalized at the Academy. This finding, along with how relatively few cadets could describe what they would do to intervene in many situations, point to cadets’ limited ability to handle day to day issues around sexual assault and sexual harassment. The lack of understanding of bystander intervention contributes to perceptions of leadership treatment of sexual harassment and sexual assault. Senior leaders are often perceived as taking a serious approach to, and trying to solve the problems of, sexual assault and sexual harassment. However, their message is lost as it moves down the chain of command. Some middle-level leaders and cadet peer leaders do not espouse the same messages coming from senior leadership and continue to see these issues as either not serious, normal behaviors that are to be expected, or something to mock or make fun of. With middle-level leaders and cadet peer leaders being the individuals’ cadets interact with on a day-to-day basis, it is important that they are setting the appropriate tone with regard to how serious sexual assault and sexual harassment are at the Academy.



Unique to USMA was Stand-Down Day, which was viewed by many participants as a major accomplishment by the Academy that deeply affected many cadets and helped some victims recognize that what they experienced was something that should be reported. While the majority spoke of the successes of Stand-Down Day, some cadets expressed that some of their peers did not see the Stand-Down Day as particularly effective and openly made jokes or complaints about it. Despite these differences, many participants noted they would like to see more events like Stand-Down Day to keep the conversation going at the Academy.

## Reporting Sexual Assault and Sexual Harassment

Reporting experiences of sexual assault and sexual harassment is an important step toward ensuring that victims get the support and services they need and that perpetrators are brought to justice and are prevented from offending in the future. The rate of reporting tends to be much lower than the rate of experiencing both sexual assault and sexual harassment (Breslin et al., 2019). Beliefs about the SHARP office and its personnel play a role in cadets' willingness to report. Further, a number of barriers to reporting that prevent cadets from coming forward were discussed in the focus groups. These barriers included many cultural, logistical, and psychological reasons.

### Perceptions of the SHARP Program

The participants expressed a variety of opinions about the SHARP office. They were asked about their awareness of SHARP resources and the office itself, how much they trust the SHARP office personnel, and the people they would go to for support if they ever experienced sexual assault or sexual harassment.

### Knowledge of SHARP Office and Resources

Many cadets expressed that the SHARP office does a good job at making sure the resources they offer are disseminated well. Several participants expressed that there is a requirement to place a copy of the SHARP resources and phone numbers on the inside of the door to their quarters. Others expressed that they had been required to physically go to the SHARP office to retrieve a specific flyer as a homework assignment to make sure they were familiar with where the office is and to ensure they had the resource information on hand.

*“...they force us to print out the sheets... to put on your door that has phone numbers and everything else on there. It cost nothing to me, and I have to have it on the back of my door, so whatever. But I’ve actually been in a situation where I’ve been like, ‘Holy crap. I need to talk to somebody.’ And I’ve looked on there...”* —**Sophomore, Male**

Other cadets expressed differing opinions. Some did not know who they would go to or call if they needed information, and several participants mentioned being unsure as to where the office is located. Participants noted that this lack of knowledge could be related to the location of the office—its location seemed odd to some with it being far out of the way, having only one entrance to access it, and appearing uninviting.

*“I feel like the location of the office is also kind of a weird spot. I understand that it’s meant to be more isolated for folks and it’s kind of above the chaplain’s office, sort of, but it’s going straight to a stairwell. It’s on the second floor near the mess hall kind of. It’s not a well-travelled road. It’s a weird location. And really, the only times I’ve gone through there is when I’m cutting through to get to the mess hall because they closed another door. I think it’s a weird location as far as somebody who’s never reported or anything, I still think of that location as like, ‘This is kind of hide and seek game to me.’” —Senior, Male*

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### **Trust in the SHARP Office**

There was a distinct divide in the level of trust that cadets had in the SHARP office based on gender. This seemed to stem largely from the amount of interaction the participants had with the office themselves or what they learned through the interactions of their peers with the office.

Male participants often indicated that they would trust the office if they ever needed to seek help for a SHARP-related incident. Some referred to the SHARP office as a place where the professionals are there to do a job and they had no reason for not using the office.

*“I’ve never talked to anyone one of them, but I would feel comfortable bringing somebody there or a question if I ever came into a situation. I think most people have never actually spoken with them. There is that implicit trust with that office that I don’t know how they earned [laughter]. I mean, in my perspective. But I think they are generally trusted because they are supposed to be the professionals...” —Senior, Male*

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Several male cadet participants conceded, however, that there is a stigma surrounding going to the office. Some mentioned that people often do not go to the SHARP office unless something very severe has happened that must be addressed. Some expressed that this perception made them feel that going to the office just for information might not happen as frequently, since people are afraid it will be assumed that they experienced an unwanted event and contribute to false information via the rumor mill.

*“If you go to the SHARP everyone’s like, ‘Wow, that must be a big deal.’ There’s no like, ‘Oh, I’m just going to go and get some advice.’ I think as soon as someone learns that you went to go see someone like that, they automatically, they assume like, ‘Oh. Something big went down.’ Not that that’s bad, but that’s just one thing I’ve noticed. One thing I think to myself. Because if I hear someone went to a counselor, I’m like, ‘Wow, something must’ve really bad happened.’” —Sophomore, Male*

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Female participants, however, more often expressed a lower degree of trust. Several female participants noted they had heard of many instances from peers in which the SHARP office response was not adequate or helpful. Some said that people were turned away from the office when they were trying to seek help, while others expressed that cadets simply do not want to go in the first place, because they believe that the SHARP office will not help them.

*“Not one of my friends, but a friend of a friend went to report a complaint, and they essentially got told, ‘Can you come back in a month? Because the investigating officer’s not here.’ And it’s like, ‘What do you mean, come back in a month?’ That’s just 100% unacceptable. And so I think the faith in the system is depleted really quickly when you hear stuff like that.”* —**Senior, Female**

*“I would say not at all. I have multiple other friends who’ve told me, ‘Oh yeah, such and such happened to me over the weekend and I’m not going to go to the SHARP because they’re not going to do anything about it anyway.’”*  
—**Sophomore, Female**

Faculty and staff member participants expressed trust in the SHARP office. Although some said they feel that it could be challenging for a cadet to decide to come forward to get help after experiencing sexual assault or sexual harassment due to the impact on reputations of the people involved in the incident, there is still a level of trust from faculty that cadets would get what they need from the SHARP personnel.

*“...sending someone to the SHARP office is like, uh-oh, now you’re kind of putting them up there by themselves on an island, and I think we have to be better than that and make it discreet—and is that hard to do? Hell, yeah, it’s hard to do. That’s wicked hard to do, but if that’s how we want to handle this and we want to make sure that the person claiming that they were sexually assaulted is not ostracized and doesn’t subject themselves to popular opinion or group think or Jodel or whatever else it is, then I think then you have to be better, you have to come up with these sophisticated ways to deal with it.”* —**Faculty Member**

### **Trust in SHARP Staff**

Even though many male participants expressed their comfort with the SHARP office, both male and female cadet participants expressed that SHARP personnel would often not be the first person they would consult if they were to experience sexual assault or sexual harassment. Many participants also agreed that their chain of command would not be who they would seek advice from. Most cadets indicated that the first person they would go to if they needed help would be one of their peers, most often a close friend or a peer leader they know they could talk to. Some female participants expressed discomfort in talking SHARP personnel as they do not know them well or do not have an established relationship with the staff.

*“But I think in terms of compassion, about caring, about people that have been affected by it, I would say that I would be much more likely to tell a peer and believe that a peer would actually get something done for me, or for any other victim that, not—this is hypothetical—but if something were to happen to me—I would much rather go to my peer and be like, ‘Hey, I need help. How do I get help?’ I’d be more confident in them actually helping me than I would be in a TAC helping me. Or just by nature of knowing the person more personally, as well as just having that empathy between, you’re not just a cadet that’s trying to get attention or whatever it may be. You’re my friend. Even though you’re in a*

*leadership position, you respect me as a human. We all have this shared struggle through our four years here...* —**Senior, Female**

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Many male participants echoed the urge to speak to a friend first. However, for male cadets, it seemed often to be focused on sorting out the internal strife they may experience after a sexual assault without having to escalate the situation to an authority. Further compounding this effect, and similar to female participants, some mentioned they had never seen a Sexual Assault Response Coordinator (SARC) or Victim Advocate (VA) in person, and they would not feel comfortable confiding such sensitive information in a stranger.

*“...this is something that defines you, in a way. And it’s just really uncomfortable to talk about, and so you kind of want to keep it internal. Hopefully, talk to your friend and you can work it out, make yourself feel better. That’s usually the goal and not prosecuting someone. It’s, ‘How do I comprehend this? How do I just get my mind around what happened?’”* —**Junior, Male**

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Some cadets mentioned they would go to the SHARP office after sorting through their thoughts and finding out where to go from friends and peers. In fact, some female participants who decided to report their unwanted experience expressed very positive interactions with the VA.

*“I would recommend if any of you have issues, I would try your best to get to the Victim’s Advocate. Because I think he is the best person in the process here.”*  
—**Freshman, Female**

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When further prompted for who else they would seek help from, a common response was the Academy chaplain, often regardless of a cadet’s religion or level of belief. The chaplain was viewed by participants as a confidential resource that cadets are familiar with, from frequent interactions and positive relationship building.

*“That’s the reason we all liked [the chaplain], is because she had a really big, good presence. She was always—sometimes she’d bring her dog to the barracks, and she was always around during formation. So she had a really good, positive presence that made a lot of people really comfortable around her.”*  
—**Junior, Male**

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## **Barriers to Reporting**

Rates of reporting are often much lower than rates of experiencing sexual assault and sexual harassment (Breslin et al., 2019). Cadets were asked to describe some reasons they and their peers would choose not to make a formal report if they were to experience sexual assault or sexual harassment.

### **Sexual Assault**

Cadet participants described a number of factors that may prevent them or their peers from coming forward with a formal report of sexual assault, including damage to social standing,

damage to their own self-perception, challenges with the reporting process, and Academy opinions about false reporting and victim blaming.

***Social consequences and the rumor mill.*** Many cadet participants expressed that social stigma plays a large factor in the reasons they would not report. Rumors and gossip are incredibly common among cadets, and information travels fast within the Corps. People are quick to take sides and attempt to construct a narrative of events that may or may not have happened. Some participants said they feel that victims do not see reporting as an option since it will damage their social standing.

*“So I feel like if one person were to accuse another cadet of sexual harassment or sexual assault, the accused will probably tell his or her friends about it. It just becomes common talk. Because whether we’re walking past somebody, you’ll just point out... ‘Oh, that’s the boy or girl who’s reporting this boy or girl. It’s total BS.’... ‘It’s impossible that happened.’ ‘We all know the guy or the girl. She wouldn’t do that.’ So it’s all small talk and conversation that would discourage somebody from going to the SHARP office who already has a problem with accepting reports.” —Senior, Female*

Focus group participants voiced a belief that victims are afraid to report due to serious consequences for the alleged perpetrator. Many alleged perpetrators are peers who the cadets know. Some cadets expressed the opinion that social pressure from other cadets forces victims into silence because they do not want to be the person who ends a peer’s career or sends someone to prison. This type of protection of peers out of a sense of toxic loyalty and an obligation due to shared experience, despite the possibility that the alleged offender should be punished for an alleged offense, is a barrier to reporting.

*“So with the rumor mill—it becomes a story line. So we start hearing the little talks about, ‘Oh, this happened, this accused this.’ But then it always becomes—there’s just so much at stake... I don’t know how public schools are ran—it becomes, ‘Oh, yeah. That kid got kicked out. He has to pay back his whole entire West Point tuition, or he’s going into the Army. Oh, we feel so bad for him. He’s in jail for the next 20 years.’ I just feel like this atmosphere, we all talk about team building and everything, so if coming forward to report, it could be hard for somebody because—they’re upset that it happened, but they know that so much is on the line for the other person, and that person’s friends know that, ‘Hey, because you’re reporting this, this person can’t graduate.’ We had a panel yesterday, and one of the big questions was, ‘this person can’t do air assault. This person can’t do summer training because he or she is flagged, so it becomes a whole story because so much is on the line.’ So that’s why it becomes like pointing fingers.” —Senior, Female*

***Damage to masculine self-perception.*** Both female and male participants indicated that damage to masculine self-image is a major barrier to reporting for male cadets at the Academy. Male cadet participants cited a number of reasons for this perceived lessening of masculinity, including that it would make them look weak or unable to protect themselves.



*“It would be almost impossible for a guy to admit they were actually sexually assaulted. Because in their minds, there is a huge idea that, ‘I am in control of my body and I’m a strong dude. So nobody can just control me in that way.’ I think that’s something—I’ve never heard them address that.”*

—**Sophomore, Male**

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The gender of the alleged offender impacted participant’s perceptions of how male victims of sexual assault would respond to their experiences. Participants said that they think a male victim would go to greater lengths to justify a sexual assault situation as something less severe or even consensual in the case of a female alleged perpetrator. However, if a male victim were assaulted by another male, several male cadets stated they would resort to violence against a male perpetrator before reporting the incident.

*“We’re just like, ‘Hey, remember the time that cadet X was at Army–Navy and blacked out and got [EXPLETIVE] by the girl?’ And it’s like a joke now. And then on the other side, if it’s a guy who was sexually assaulted by another guy, I think we’d be too prideful to admit that. I honestly don’t think that I would be able to testify that it ever happened. Would I try to maybe take some sort of physical act of retribution? That would be a lot more likely than me reporting it, I can tell you that.”* —**Freshman, Male**

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Female participants acknowledged there is a drive for male cadets to display a hypermasculine, “macho man,” persona that would be broken by reporting. However, female cadet participants indicated they do not see gender as a barrier to reporting for female cadets.

*“And I feel like that’s a deterrent for men to not report. Definitely not as much of a deal for women. I think it’s other issues for female cadets to decide not to report. It’s issues with the system and not so much with the fact they’re women.”*

—**Sophomore, Female**

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***Fear of consequences from the Academy.*** Cadet participants discussed collateral misconduct as a common fear if they were to report a sexual assault. Several participants expressed uncertainty about whether or not they would get into trouble for reporting a situation during which other rules were broken, such as drinking (especially under-age drinking) and uniform violations.

*“I think education...just knowing to what threshold you’re safe, right?—Who’s actually going to get in trouble there? Are you safe for underage drinking? Knowing that and maybe—saying that, ‘Yes, everybody in that will be safe for whatever happened, whatever underage drinking happened or whatever not in the right uniform happened,’ just so that we can encourage people to report things that are actually wrong, so they’re not afraid of getting in trouble, getting 100 hours because they were in a wrong uniform or something like that.”*

—**Junior, Male**

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Another barrier surrounded the idea of backlash on cadets who report. Some participants noted that some of the messaging about zero tolerance for sexual assault and sexual harassment and a

desire for rates to reflect zero percent left some participants feeling as though they received mixed messages about whether they should be coming forward.

*“It can be potentially toxic when we drive the number zero. Because when you have a lieutenant general screaming zero in your face, you don’t want to be the guy that ruined that goal. Okay. He said zero so many times. He mentioned it once or twice, we won’t share it. So to his credit, he did say, ‘We want you to report when these things happen.’ But I think that it can be kind of unhealthy when you emphasize zero.”* —**Senior, Male**

This perception also drives a feeling that reporting unwanted experiences causes undue hardship and loss of privileges for the cadets.

*“But now we see that the—now, us being an honest institution with ourselves and actually making a fair number of reports, that’s something they inspire for us to be reviewed congressionally and we need to determine whether the Academy is a valid way of commissioning people.”* —**Senior, Male**

*“‘Oh, we want your report, but if we get more reports, we’re going to take away privileges.’ And people are like, ‘Well, how does that work? Why is that? You’re trying to work against us, too.’”* —**Sophomore, Male**

**Challenges with the process.** Many cadets expressed that they do not know how their reporting options affect what happens after they report. For example, several cadets did not understand the role they are expected to play in the investigation process and the steps involved. Many suggested that if there was more clarity about what the next steps were after making a report, people would be more comfortable coming forward.

*“Well, the brief yesterday, the captain was saying that the victim can choose. And I guess this is more of a question. But she said that the victim can choose how involved they’re in. I feel like most people would choose not to be very involved, but I guess that’s still not the case if a lot of your time is being taken up. So when do you get to—or what do you get to choose to not be involved in and how?”* —**Senior, Male**

Members of the Trust Committee shared this sentiment that their peers often could feel like the investigation process is puzzling. Some members expressed that cadets would be afraid to enter into a process that they felt was not clearly defined. Further, it seemed that some members included themselves when talking about confusion around the investigation process despite members of this committee generally being considered knowledgeable about sexual assault and sexual harassment concerns by their peers.

*“I would also say a barrier to reporting is just how little we know about what happens afterwards, which is a big reason why we started doing those panels, but I still think that there’s so much that we don’t know about investigations and about what happens to you during that process, and I think a lot of people—they shy*

*away from it because we're asking them to jump in into this big, shadowy box when we ask them to report, and they don't know what's going to happen when they do.” —Trust Committee Member*

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Further, many cadets expressed that they perceive the investigation process to be incredibly stressful and time-consuming. The participants said they believe that the process could be lengthy, invasive, and requires them to spend more time and resources during an already difficult time.

*“I think part of it is at least the process. There’s a guy in my company right now that’s going through it. It’s really long and it’s really draining, and you already have so much on your plate as a cadet. So when one of these things happens to you, I’m sure it’s a thought process like, ‘Is this worth my life at the moment.’ Like, ‘Is this worth the next three to four months of my life at the Academy when I’m trying to become one of the next leaders of America? Do I take the time out of my day, every day, to go down the legal office and do all these interviews? And do I relive the trauma.’ It’s really long. It’s really invasive, right? I would say streamlining the process for the victim and not calling them in all the time and double and triple checking their statements. And then re-interviewing them and re-making sure four months later that they still remember the events and everything.” —Senior, Male*

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This seems to be a commonly shared belief at the Academy. However, some female cadets who said they went into the process with the belief that it would be stressful and time-consuming found that the SARCs were accommodating and let the victim take their time to go through the process.

Many cadets also said that they found problems with the results of their sexual assault or sexual harassment report. Many cadets said they feel that they did not see any consequences for the people who were reported for misconduct. Some mentioned that often the people they thought should be severely punished were just moved, and the issue was swept under the rug. This perception frequently led participants to express that they do not want to report because nothing will be done. Worse, some expressed that they believe victims are often forced to continue to interact with those they accused at the Academy, creating incredibly hostile environments.

*“West Point’s also unique in that, apart from the civilian rule, that when a victim comes forward and reports somebody, they’re not necessarily removed from that situation. Nowhere else in the civilian world will you find where someone will report their rapist and then have to encounter them on a daily basis.”*  
—Junior, Female

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***False reporting and victim blaming.*** There is a perception among many cadet participants that false reporting could be a large problem. For male cadet participants, language around the topic was much less direct than in prior years, unless they were prompted directly on the topic (Barry et al., 2017a). Issues such as making sure the investigation process is fair and given the right



amount of time and the fear of being falsely accused and then punished without ever having a chance to defend themselves were common themes.

*“Yeah, that actually scares me a lot. I feel like the whole SHARP process can just be used as a weapon. And I feel like I would just never win if anything ever got brought up. And that mindset is—I was dealing with that in the back of my mind anytime I ever go and have an interaction with a woman, which isn’t bad, but I don’t know. I just feel like I would just get wrecked. I feel like I would not have the chance.”* —**Junior, Male**

On the other hand, female participants frequently expressed that the belief among cadets that false reporting is a rampant problem is untrue. They did, however, tend to acknowledge that this widely held belief is pervasive at the Academy and that many of their peers are quick to assume that the accused is innocent and the victim is lying.

*“I think in my experience as well, I think I’ve always heard that they can’t believe that this person’s being reported...I feel like the initial response to a report is that the victim is lying, or—not necessarily lying. Or that it didn’t happen, or that the victim’s perceiving something that happened that actually didn’t.”* —**Senior, Female**

Female cadet participants said that this lack of belief often deeply affects their confidence in the system and their willingness to report sexual assault should it ever occur to them.

*“Man, if I ever became a victim, this is the [EXPLETIVE] that would pop into my head. Oh, no one’s going to believe me. Hey, it’s going to take 15 people to make sure that I’m good. Oh, by the way, once it’s proven—oh, by the way, it might not be. This is the [EXPLETIVE] that I’ma have to deal with. What? I’m afraid not only because this might happen but because the entire afterwards. Hey, there goes my credibility. I can’t be part of a team.”* —**Junior, Female**

Female participants further expressed that victims are met with a loss of credibility and ostracism by their peers. They said that people who report are accused of lying and then avoided because they are thought to be the type of person that would falsely accuse a person of a SHARP violation and would do it again.

*“And obviously, the victim shaming thing and people not wanting to be around somebody who’s mentioned SHARP stuff. If I were to have something like this happen to me, then—I feel like with the reaction from other stuff that I’ve seen—I feel like it would put me as an outsider more than it would put my perpetrator, especially if he was in company.”* —**Sophomore, Female**

## **Sexual Harassment**

Sexual harassment is also underreported (Breslin et al., 2019) and is often encouraged to be handled at the lowest interpersonal level before escalating up the chain to a report. Many of the

reasons for not reporting sexual harassment were largely similar to the reasons cadets in the focus groups indicated cadets would not report sexual assault. Fears around social stigmatization by their peers and that nothing would be done to change the situation even if they decided to report were mentioned. Unique to sexual harassment were the perceptions that sexual harassment is not severe enough to report and often harder to identify as a behavior worth reporting.

***Perceived to be less severe.*** In line with what participants discussed regarding normalization of lower level sexually-harassing behaviors as part of the “bro culture” at the Academy, a barrier to reporting sexual harassment is that it is not serious enough to report. This perception was held by both male and female cadet participants who often compared sexual harassment to sexual assault in terms of severity and concluded that harassment is not as bad and not as worthy of reporting. Some cadet participants mentioned that they would be more likely to handle sexual harassment at the peer level by telling the harasser that he or she had crossed a line.

*“...for a sexual harassment, a lot of people don’t feel like they need to report it as much because it’s not something really—if a harmful comment was made, yes. But it wasn’t the same thing as a sexual assault, so it’s a lot easier to maybe confront the person and say, ‘Hey, that made me uncomfortable. Can we not do that again?’ Or maybe go talk to your friend and say, ‘Hey, could you talk to so-and-so about that comment he made and make sure he doesn’t do it again?’ So you don’t really need to go as far as reporting it because you can handle the issue yourself.”* —**Freshman, Male**

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***Harder to identify.*** Further, it seemed that several cadets had trouble identifying what constituted sexual harassment. Although many participants said they feel they could definitively identify sexual assault, it seemed like the threshold to consider something as sexual harassment was much harder to find.

*“...sexual assault, I think, can be a little more explicit. So something you say is sexual harassment, someone else would be like, ‘Why are you taking it that way?’ If someone touches you—you’re not taking it a certain way if someone touched you, but I feel like with sexual harassment it can be a little harder to be like, ‘Yeah, that actually was sexual harassment.’”* —**Freshman, Female**

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## ***Improvements to Reporting***

Cadets expressed a number of ways that reporting rates could be improved. While there was one common theme, male and female cadets also had different approaches to what they thought could help.

***Improving knowledge.*** Many cadet participants expressed a need for greater education and understanding across a number of topics. Some said they think that reporting of sexual assault could be improved if cadets were more aware of their reporting options. Participants suggested that if cadets were to have a clear understanding of the differences between an unrestricted and restricted report, victims would be more comfortable coming forward to get the support they need.

*“And perhaps it’s that not just driving, though, this is the difference between restricted and unrestricted reporting, but acknowledging that you don’t have to pursue an investigation. You can file a restricted report. You get help from people who care about you. That might be a point of emphasis that we can pursue.”* —**Senior, Male**

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Others said that a better understanding of both sexual assault and sexual harassment would help people recognize when they should be going to military authorities for help. Specifically, male participants said they believe that TAC officers with Army experience should start providing more examples from what they have seen in the field and the downstream effects it had on their mission.

*“I think the TACs could just get more involved because a lot of times—I don’t know what sexual harassment is, but the TACs have actual examples of how it’s going to hurt their units and kind of disable trust. So I think if we could—in our CCEP sessions, get some real TAC expertise in that area, it’d get us to care about the issues more. And if the court cares about it, it will change so.”*  
—**Sophomore, Male**

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Female participants suggested more knowledge of what constitutes a sexual assault would help victims to better understand their circumstances. Some said that they struggled with trying to understand an unwanted event and did not realize that what had happened to them was considered sexual assault. Some cadets expressed that the discussions on Stand-Down Day were an example of a way to disseminate this information.

*“I actually didn’t report someone for something that happened until months after the fact, because I didn’t know I had a case, and nobody really—just simply, the definition of sexual assault isn’t just full on sexual contact that they say it is. So maybe just telling people that more. That trying is the same as actually doing and under the definition. And maybe that’ll help people report it a little bit more.”*  
—**Freshman, Female**

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**Increasing respect.** Male participants specifically said they believe that increasing respect would be a way to close the gap between experiences and reports. They indicated that having more respect for themselves and others and more respect for what West Point stands for would encourage people to report. However, cadets involved in the discussion did not offer any avenues to increase this sense of respect.

*“I guess if you have more respect for yourself, you’re going to want to report that. And if you have more respect for the brand, you want to protect the brand at West Point from instances like that. And then this also helps as a preventative measure. If I have more respect for the West Point brand or for somebody at West Point, I’m not going to sexually assault someone because that lessens the brand.”* —**Freshman, Male**

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**Improving victim support.** Female participants said one way to encourage victims to come forward would be to improve how they are treated after they report. Many female participants indicated that more resources need to be allocated for cadets who come forward so that they feel comfortable, are better able to recover from an experience, and to prevent revictimization as they attempt to reintegrate into the Academy. This suggests that students at the Academy do not think the current resources are adequate or are unaware of the resources currently available for such support.

*“I’m not sure exactly what happens and what kind of services—the victims get after they report or whatever. But I feel like there should be some type of counseling they could get provided or something where they don’t feel like after they share their story—and I’ve heard they have to share it multiple times over and over again, which is super emotional. And after that, just going to school the next thing. And either people know about it, or are talking about them, or people don’t know about it and they just have to act like everything’s okay when it’s not. And so I kind of just feel like if something like that were to happen to me or someone else, they’d be like, ‘Why should I, if I would just have to keep repeating my horrible story over and over again and then go back to my life that I kind of hate now because of this?’” —Sophomore, Female*

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## Conclusions on Reporting Sexual Assault and Sexual Harassment

Many cadet participants noted that the SHARP office does a good job ensuring cadets are aware of the resources available to them, citing being required to put the resources list on the door to the barracks. However, cadets in the focus groups indicated they want more face time with SHARP officials—trust in the SHARP office is minimal due to the perceived lack of rapport the cadets have with these professionals. Most cadets indicated they would much rather talk to someone they have an established relationship with first and compared going to the SHARP office to speaking with a stranger about something that is very personal to them as a victim. Going to the SHARP office is seen as a last resort that students at the Academy only take if they have already spoke with other people and have decided to report.

Barriers to reporting sexual assault persist at the Academy and are often contributed to the perception that victims falsely report and the fear of being ostracized by their peers. False reporting continues to be a barrier to reporting as heard in prior focus group efforts where participants in the groups indicated this perception is still held by many at the Academy and victims may not report because they will be perceived as not being credible or believed. Further, being ostracized in the tight-knit community at West Point is particularly salient and cadets do not want to be perceived as the person who will get someone in trouble.

Sexual harassment in and of itself is a “gray area” about which cadets are unsure when unwanted behavior experienced is sexual harassment and more unsure if it would meet the threshold for reporting. Having noted that accepting lower level sexually harassing behaviors is part of “bro culture” where these behaviors are normalized, it is not surprising that one of the main barriers to reporting sexual harassment is that it is not perceived to be severe enough to report. Cadets at the Academy are taught to handle sexual harassing behaviors at the lowest interpersonal level, but lack clarity on what constitutes sexual harassment. This ambiguity, paired with the

perception that these behaviors are tolerated at the Academy, serve as barriers to getting the help a victim may need.

## Alcohol at the Academy

Despite the many differences West Point has from a civilian college, alcohol and the culture surrounding it remains prevalent. Cadets were asked about their views on drinking at the Academy, the training they receive about alcohol, and how training could be adjusted to help them make more responsible decisions.

### Alcohol Use

There were several differing perceptions on how alcohol is used at the Academy and how the usage of alcohol affects rates of sexual assault and sexual harassment. Irresponsible alcohol usage in the form of binge drinking was a topic of much discussion, specifically by male participants. Female participants also expressed opinions on the overall drinking culture at the Academy and discussed the relationship between alcohol and unwanted behaviors.

### Binge Drinking

Drinking at the Academy often takes the form of binge drinking, where cadet participants reported that when cadets drink, they tend to overindulge. Many students mentioned that they are not given adequate opportunities to leave the confines of the Academy grounds, which results in students drinking much more and much more recklessly when given the opportunity since they view it as a rare occasion.

*“You are just stuck at the Academy for a while. And it’s really difficult to drink because it’s the work week. And then something comes up that you’re looking forward to, like a class weekend or a home football game, and then, when you have the opportunity to drink, cadets just go all out. Like, ‘Oh, my god. It’s Saturday night. This is my only chance to drink.’” —Sophomore, Male*

Some male participants pointed to cultural factors that contribute to binge drinking at USMA. Stereotypical views of what it means to be a soldier in the Army, such as perceptions of manliness and an unwillingness to be thought of as weaker than their peers, were referenced as reasons some cadets may drink heavily.

*“‘We’re soldiers. We’re the heart of this. Not going to be a [EXPLETIVE] and have two beers.’ You’re going to get a whole pitcher and do shots, and you’re going to take it like man.” —Junior, Male*

Female participants in the focus groups did not tend to talk about binge drinking as explicitly as their male counterparts. Some female cadets, however, still noted that it is a commonly held belief that if a cadet is going out to drink, their intention is to get drunk. At the same time, there is recognition about how dangerous these problematic drinking behaviors can be.



*“It’s something that makes me really, really nervous because everyone knows when we go—when people go out to drink, especially if you’re from West Point, you go to drink. And I know in high school I had a friend that got very, very sick from alcohol poisoning. I just think we need a little something about that, to mention stuff like that. What to do when someone passes out on the floor. What you should do with him instead of leaving them in the bathroom and stuff like that.” —Junior, Female*

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Despite the culture of heavy drinking, some cadet participants said they believe that they have developed a community that watches out for each other. Many suggested that they would try to help a fellow cadet if they drank too much by making sure they get back to their rooms safely and not allow them to do anything that could harm someone else.

*“I know people who drink at West Point who are of age who don’t go out to the bars—or to the bar or the Firstie, and they go to tailgates, when they come back, there’ve been issues before with people being super loud and obnoxious in the hallways. But then people will realize, ‘Oh, no. They’re being drunken fools,’ and they’ll go in and shepherd them back to their rooms and keep them there so that they don’t piss people off or do something stupid.” —Sophomore, Male*

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### **The Role of Alcohol in Unwanted Events**

Many cadet participants said they believe that alcohol plays a role in the rates of sexual assault but that it is not the root cause of the problem. As such, many participants simultaneously said that banning alcohol on campus would not solve any of the problems.

*“I feel like alcohol really just magnifies the ignorance we all have on sexual assault and harassment. It’s not like, take away the alcohol and you take away the problem because it’s people deciding to drink, it’s people deciding to—it’s all people. It’s not alcohol walking up and doing it. So that’s something that we definitely are still figuring out here.” —Sophomore, Female*

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At USMA, there are two on-campus bars that the cadets referred to as the O-Club and the Firstie. They were specifically mentioned as a good outlet for cadets of drinking age to do so safely. When cadet participants talked about fears around banning alcohol, they often said closing these bars would create more problems. Many participants said they believe that if these bars were to close and the campus were to be declared dry, cadets would find ways to circumvent the rules and smuggle contraband into the Academy. Closing the on-campus bars would result in more drinking in the barracks, behind closed doors, and in less regulated ways. Cadet participants said they believe that drinking in the barracks is much more dangerous and that sexual assault is much more likely to happen in these kinds of private drinking forums.

*“I don’t think that would change anything, to be honest. Because I mean, at least for my diagram here, I have all the issues of drinking being in the barracks because that’s where a lot of issues happen. I can’t say in general, but I’d be willing to bet not a lot of sexual assaults happen in the Firstie or in the O-club. A*

*lot of them happen back in the barracks. And so many people, so many people are drinking in the barracks. And to think that if you made this a dry campus that that would change, but I don't think so. I think it would be offsetting. It would happen more, just because those people right, the only thing holding them back is they're realizing, 'I can [go] down to the Firstie or the O-club.' Maybe they're not going to have a handle under their bed, but people who can't do that do."*

—**Junior, Male**

*"Alcohol in the barracks is definitely the most dangerous. Because if you have alcohol in barracks, you definitely have your door closed and probably have other people with you. It's more likely where you have a bed right there. That's the most private area that something can go wrong with cadet."*

—**Junior, Male**

Additionally, members of the Trust Committee expressed concerns that the alcohol trainings do not adequately prepare underage cadets to navigate potentially dangerous situations. The Trust members expressed that underaged drinkers are an especially vulnerable population because they tend to drink in less regulated and safe settings and may be afraid to report sexual assault that happens when they are drinking because of fear of collateral misconduct.

*"I feel like there's this hesitation to talk about alcohol realistically, including people who drink underage here. And there's a lot of them, and I think that population in particular is in danger more than the people that drink of age because they're not trying to hide anything. They're not worried about getting in trouble. But people who drink underage, especially during class weekends, are going together to houses and stuff. I think that's where we have a lot of problems with alcohol and sexual assault, not necessarily alcohol that's served on post or in public areas, because people are a little less responsible, and if something happens - like we were talking about collateral misconduct - I think that's a huge inhibitor, I guess. But also, there's a hesitation, like I said, to talk about like that and talk about drinking, drinking responsibly to underclassmen, which leads to problems not only while they're underage but also when they get older."*

—**Trust Committee Member**

## **Alcohol Training**

Cadets had many perceptions on training they receive during their time at the Academy on alcohol use. These opinions ranged from training being almost non-existent and inadequate to being overbearing, unrealistic, or punitive in nature. Cadets also expressed several ideas on how training could be improved to better resonate within the Corps.

### **Views on Current Training**

Many cadet participants felt that the training they receive on alcohol is not realistic and often focused on abstaining from alcohol consumption. They indicated that as college-aged students, they are going to drink and that training that is centered on not drinking or characterizing people who drink at all as alcoholics does not resonate. They viewed the trainings as answering the

correct choices to a series of questions in order to meet a requirement, not something they actually internalize or learn from.

*“We get trainings and you’re supposed to say the right thing, and everyone knows the right answer. And it’s an hour, and you walk out, and you forget it and you go do homework. We don’t have realistic settings where it’s like, ‘Okay. We know you’re going to drink. We know you’re going to have sex.’ We don’t talk about those things. We just put ourselves in this little box, and we’re like ‘Okay, so should you drink more than two beers?’ ‘No.’ ‘All right, everyone. Bye.’”*

—**Junior, Female**

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Additionally, cadet participants said they feel that West Point differs vastly from a normal college experience and that they need training tailored to the West Point environment. They indicated that the settings and situations in which cadets use alcohol are different than what a civilian college student would experience. For example, cadet drinking does not take place at a house party on a weekday like it might at civilian schools, and cadets believe that training that is more representative of drinking situations at West Point would resonate more.

*“We get the same training as you would get at a regular school. Every freshman college orientation fills out the same alcohol EDU thing. And the fact that we’re not the same as other schools, people aren’t going out on weekdays and drinking so it’s not really the same as when you get questions on the thing you’re like, ‘Oh, you’re at a house party and this happened’—that’s not what happens here.”*

—**Sophomore, Female**

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### **Areas to Improve**

Cadets expressed two major avenues for improvements to alcohol-related training that they believe could help them be more responsible with alcohol. These ideas include a more realistic, discussion-based training and providing cadets with more opportunities to drink in controlled social situations.

**Discussion-based training.** Several cadet participants mentioned that the stock training they are given emphasizes facts about the size of a standard drink and how many drinks they can have in a certain time period, which does not resonate with them. They said they find these trainings to be unrealistic, useless, and view them as a way to check a box to say that they received training. To remedy this, some cadets suggested that trainings should take the form of discussions. They said that they want to hear firsthand experience from their peers and leaders about how drinking affected their missions.

*“My TAC and CO, he just went through a situation like when he was younger and what he did, and how it related to drinking. And he was like, ‘Oh yeah, you guys aren’t supposed to be drinking. But if something occurs, this is what would happen and how to deal with it.’ So I just thought that was something we hadn’t gotten before. Especially since it was his own personal story. I mean, it’s easier to understand personal stories. Things like that or it’s more casual, just like a*



*discussion and just talking about options and what you could do if something were to arise. It was just really useful, and I never had it before here so something like that.” —Sophomore, Female*

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**Responsible drinking opportunities.** As previously mentioned, many cadets indicated they believe that problematic drinking occurs because they feel they need to make the most of the opportunity to drink whenever they have the rare chance. Cadets said that they believe that one of the ways to improve perceptions about alcohol is to allow cadets more opportunities to drink, and by doing so, they may be able to better recognize their drinking limits.

*“I think it’d be interesting to see alcohol training in the sense of, you have a beer, or the equivalent of one standard drink, and then you chat with your classmates for 30 minutes, then you take a breathalyzer test. Then you have another drink, and then you wait a determined time, and then you take a breathalyzer test. Because a lot of people I think that get themselves into more gray area—Is it harassment? Is it assault? A lot of the people I know that might put themselves in that situation probably just don’t understand how drunk they are, and because they’re so drunk, they don’t understand that they’re not getting consent, or they’re not understanding that maybe the person that isn’t involved is like, ‘Okay, it’s just easier to let this happen than it is to let—than to keep pushing them off.’ So I think it’d be interesting to see people understand legally how drunk they are, even if they feel fine.” —Senior, Female*

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Specifically, cadet participants mentioned the idea of “21st birthday training” as something that the Academy used to do and no longer does. Cadets expressed that these types of controlled drinking environments are useful tools to teach them how to handle drinking and how to properly socialize.

*“Also, when we were plebes, they used to have 21st birthday training, which most of us were probably too young to do. But basically, they would take you to a First Officer’s Club, and you’d drink until you got drunk. Then you’d know what your limit was. Maybe a little sketchy, but also kind of teach your limits. And they do wine tastings and mixology classes, which are supposed to teach you social drinking. But the problem is you can’t go until you’re 21. And some companies, even if you’re of age [inaudible] yuk or plebe, you can’t go still. So it’s in our first year, you get to learn how to socially drink.” —Junior, Male*

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## Conclusions on Alcohol at the Academy

As heard in previous focus groups, binge drinking culture at the Academy remains an issue. Many cadets expressed that the largely abstinence-based training they currently receive does not resonate with them. Given the stressors at the Academy and their full schedules, cadets rarely spend time off campus grounds. This may lead to drinking to excess in an effort to relieve stress during the short amount of free time provided to cadets. They suggest more discussion-based trainings that provide information on how to drink safely and responsibly and would like to hear

first-hand from military members and peers about how drinking can impact themselves and their mission.

## Chapter 3:

### U.S. Naval Academy

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The United States Naval Academy (USNA) is located in Annapolis, MD, approximately 30 miles east of Washington, DC, and is the home to more than 4,400 midshipmen. The Brigade of Midshipmen is organized into six battalions, with five companies within each battalion, totaling 30 companies. The Academy is a predominately male environment with a 3:1 ratio of male to female midshipmen. Between April 15 and April 19, 2019, ten 90-minute focus groups were conducted at USNA. Of the 10 focus groups, nine groups were conducted with student participants and one group was conducted with faculty and staff for a total of 90 student participants and 10 faculty and staff participants. Of the focus groups with student participants, four groups comprised all male midshipmen by class year, four groups comprised all female midshipmen by class year, and one group comprised midshipmen (men and women) who were involved with the on-campus Sexual Harassment and Assault Prevention Education (SHAPE) program.

Midshipman participants are identified by four class levels. Students in their first year at the Academy are “fourth class,” “plebe,” or “freshman”; students in their second year at the Academy are “third class” or “sophomore”; students in their third year at the Academy are “second class” or “junior”; and students in their fourth and final year at the Academy are known as “first class,” “firsties,” or “senior.” The student class levels are an important layer in understanding the structure of the student hierarchy and relationships and are a factor in understanding the differences in perceptions of Academy culture by class year.

### Academy Culture

Participants were asked to describe the general culture at the Academy. The responses included various perspectives on daily life at the Academy and the relationships that exist among midshipmen. Midshipman participants were also asked to identify the official and unofficial rules regarding gender relations at the Academy, including how rules are enforced, the perceived impacts of the rules, and how the rules are passed down. Moreover, midshipman participants discussed the general perceptions they have of sexual assault and sexual harassment at the Academy.

### Life at the Academy

Participants described life at the Academy and what it is like to be a midshipman, including the stress they experience, living in a competitive environment, and the impact of the rumor mill.

### Competition and Stress

Midshipman participants described life at the Academy as being stressful, highly regimented, and organized. Due to the strict schedule that the students follow, midshipmen said they feel they are left with little free time outside of classes and extracurricular obligations. The Academy environment was also described as being competitive, high speed, and challenging. Participants frequently expressed that many midshipmen have “Type A” personalities; however, although

there is competitiveness between midshipmen, they are like-minded people helping each other to meet their goals. Academy faculty and staff had similar perceptions of daily life for the midshipmen. Faculty and staff participants remarked that the midshipmen's main goals consist of standard readiness—acknowledging the need for midshipmen to be aware of standards for both men and women in order to be prepared for life outside of the Academy.

*“I would say, it’s super straightforward here. I mean, what do you have to do to be successful? You have to run faster. You have to study harder. There’s never a question on, ‘How do I do better here?’ It’s always just very clear-cut. You just have to do more... It’s pretty competitive here, so there’s definitely a lot of pressure to perform all the time. That was something to adjust to for sure.”*

—**Senior, Female**

*“Barring the very selective worker communities here, everyone’s working toward a common purpose... everyone’s usually trying to help each other out.”*

—**Senior, Male**

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Although midshipmen described a competitive atmosphere and similarities in personality, they also described the culture as elementary and immature. Specifically, midshipmen said they feel that they are socially immature due to limited social interactions.

*“I think the indoctrination<sup>13</sup> and plebe process reverts some people to more immature ways of interacting, or you don’t get that freshman year experience of trial-by-fire social interactions. So, I think that’s why much later in your time at the Academy, people behave in [a] way that might be considered socially immature, and there’s a lot of nuance to that.”* —**Junior, Female**

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Participants acknowledged that the ranking system creates a point of contention in interactions among midshipmen. Midshipmen described not wanting to interact with other midshipmen who are ranked low in the system and creating a separation between “bros” and “joes.” “Bros” are defined as midshipmen who put forth an effort to maintain a good ranking and receive good grades, whereas “joes” are defined as midshipmen who only do what is necessary to stay out of trouble.

### ***The Rumor Mill***

Midshipman participants described the culture at the Academy as tight knit but with an active rumor mill. Information, as well as misinformation, travels quickly among midshipmen. According to participants, the rumor mill often has a heightened impact on female midshipmen. Female midshipmen explained that due to the small number of women at the Academy, they are often under a microscope, noting that often everyone knows who they are and what they do. Midshipmen who transfer companies are also subjected to the rumor mill, as rumors spread and other midshipmen speculate that they have done something wrong to be transferred.

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<sup>13</sup>“Indoctrination” refers to the process of being inducted as a plebe into USNA. This process occurs at the conclusion of the summer training that incoming midshipmen must attend. The training in the summer before Academy attendance is referred to as “plebe summer” or “plebe process.”

*“I’ve also noticed that you can be really good friends with guys, and other guys will always start rumors about you dating. So, I know we’ve had problems with that in my company all the time.” —Sophomore, Female*

*“In general as women, because there’s a lot less of us, people always kind of know who you’re talking to, who you’ve been with.” —Freshman, Female*

## Relationships

Participants were asked to describe how men and women interact at the Academy. The conversations brought forth perceptions of how gender sometimes impacts relationships (both platonic and romantic) between men and women and the relationships between class years.

### How Gender Affects Relationships

Midshipman participants described their relationship with midshipmen of the opposite gender as fraternal and protective, viewing each other as brothers and sisters. However, there were different opinions when they described relationships with other midshipmen of their gender and relationships between class years.

With only a few women to interact with and to live with, female participants described complicated relationships with other women and that they either develop really close bonds with each other or have negative experiences. In addition to complicated relationships, female midshipman participants described women as occasionally being the harshest critics of other female midshipmen. Female participants said they feel they are already under pressure to not be seen as weak. Because of this, they described that some women are more critical of other female midshipmen. However, in doing so, they are sometimes seen as feeding the stigma that female midshipmen are weaker than male midshipmen.

*“It’s like a family... Compared to high school and other colleges, you have the cliques every now and then. But you can just relate to anyone here with all you’ve been through once you got here...” —Freshman, Male*

*“As a detailer over Plebe Summer, I had three girls in my squad and all three of them were really big criers. And even me as a female, I hate to say it, but I almost looked down on them for that. I was like, ‘Wow. They really shouldn’t be crying. They need to kind of toughen up a little bit’... I think that’s pretty easy to fall into, looking at a female and thinking, ‘Oh. Well, she’s naturally going to be slower or more emotional.’ And, you really want to try to not fall into that.” —Senior, Female*

### Class Year Relationships

Lower class midshipmen, particularly freshmen, described having a strictly professional relationship with upperclassmen. This was primarily attributed to freshman fraternization restrictions that limit social interactions between freshman and upperclassman. Among upperclassmen, there are more casual relationships. Some upperclassman midshipmen observed

that once they gained more liberties to explore and go out into the local area of downtown Annapolis, they were in an environment to have more casual interactions with other upperclassman midshipmen. As a result, upperclassmen described being more comfortable with each other. However, this comfort between midshipmen was later described as paving a way for problematic behaviors to occur, such as unwanted touching, when midshipmen are engaging in alcohol-related activities in downtown Annapolis.

*“You’re talking about going from the place where everybody has really short hair and can only wear uniforms to, now, everyone’s got longer hair. They’re in civvies, and they’re in a more relaxed environment. And you can call each other by your first name. It completely sets up people for different interactions and different relationships entirely.” —Senior, Male*

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## Gender Beliefs at the Academy

Participants were asked to describe gender relations at the Academy. Midshipmen and faculty identified gender-related perceptions as impacting Academy culture and interactions, including experiences in a predominately male environment, and similarities and differences in gender perceptions (i.e., beliefs about men and women) held by male and female midshipmen.

### Bro Culture

Among midshipmen, there is a perception that USNA is a “boy’s club,” where female midshipmen are on the outside and need to adapt to fit in with their male counterparts. Midshipman participants identified aspects of the Academy culture that contribute to what they call the “bro culture.” “Bro culture” refers to the social environment that is centered on male midshipmen culture and behaviors. For female midshipmen, “bro culture” encompasses an overarching level of acceptance from male midshipmen as being “one of the guys.”

**Locker-room talk.** One aspect that midshipmen attributed to the predominately male environment is the presence of “locker-room talk.” “Locker-room talk” is described as jokes, both sexual and nonsexual in nature, among male midshipmen. These jokes are made openly during conversations at meals, in social settings, and in the privacy of rooms or text message group chats. In general, male midshipmen perceive these jokes to be harmless. Although midshipmen who encounter these jokes often dismiss them, some midshipmen expressed discomfort with the locker-room talk that occurs.

In addition to locker-room talk, female midshipman participants identified additional behaviors that they perceive to be embedded in the bro culture that cross boundaries, including making sexual comments and unwanted touching. However, female midshipman participants remarked that they choose to put up with the behaviors in order to be socially accepted in the “bro culture.” Female midshipmen expressed discomfort when it comes to speaking up on problematic behaviors in “bro culture,” hoping to avoid social retribution and being labeled as someone that midshipmen must watch their language around.

*“Sometimes I’ll hear conversations and stuff that are like locker-room talk. And you just don’t know them, so you don’t really want to speak up or say anything, especially when they’re upper class.” —Freshman, Female*

*“A good part of girls trying to be part of bro culture is we’ll put up with stuff that’s actually sexual harassment, because we don’t want to not be one of the guys. And that’s why people don’t report it, because it’s like, ‘Oh, he touched me inappropriately, but he touches all the guys like that.’” —Sophomore, Female*

### **Similarities in Gender Beliefs Among Men and Women**

When discussing gender relations, there were some similar perceptions that male and female midshipmen identified as impacting gender relations and interactions among midshipmen, including perceptions of quotas and the ratio of male to female midshipmen.

**Equity in expectations.** Most midshipman participants indicated men and women at the Academy are perceived as equal. Some female midshipman participants remarked feeling included and that they are viewed as “one of the guys,” despite there being fewer female than male midshipmen.

*“I’m thinking in almost all aspects of the Academy, men and women are equal in terms of the academics and military aptitude, their ability to be a good leader.” —Sophomore, Female*

**Imbalanced gender ratio.** Due to the gender imbalance, midshipman participants said they believe the ratio of men to women influences the interactions they have. Midshipmen expressed the perception that female midshipmen receive more attention from men (compared to the amount of attention males receive from females) because there are only a few of them for men to pursue.

*“I think it’s pretty much understood that girls here know that they get a lot of attention. They know the ratio.” —Junior, Male*

*“There has been times where I have stepped back from attempting to get to know someone in that manner just because I feel like girls get a lot more—I don’t want to say the word harassed but they get pursued a lot more because there are more guys than girls.” —SHAPE member*

**Perception of a quota.** Midshipman participants frequently mentioned a perception of there being a quota for women admitted to the Academy and for women in leadership positions. Male and female midshipmen alike recognized the perception of a quota feeds into the belief that some female midshipmen are at the Academy in order to fulfill a quota and not because they deserve to be there. Faculty and staff also indicated encountering and trying to curtail this perception of a quota among midshipmen.



*“We’ve had representation of male or female, different racial diversity on the rate of midshipmen staff and in staff roles here—despite that, sometimes there’s a kind of counterculture of snide comments like, ‘That person only got it because they met this quota.’ That’s a rumor that I actively have to work to dispel amongst the midshipmen.” —Faculty and staff*

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### **Differences in Gender Beliefs Among Men and Women**

In addition to similarities, there were differences between male and female midshipmen’s gender beliefs that impact gender relations and interactions at the Academy. These differences include how men perceive women, how women perceive men, and how they both perceive their gender’s experiences at the Academy.

**Perceptions of women.** Midshipman participants said they feel women are treated and perceived differently than men. They also described a divide between men and women, particularly regarding the perception that women are physically inferior and less competent than men. There is an assumption that although a male midshipman can do anything that is asked of him, a female midshipman needs to prove herself. Moreover, midshipman participants described stereotypes for women that do not exist for men, including stereotyping women as “femids,” which combines the terms “female” and “midshipmen,” or stereotyping women into one of three categories: “b\*\*\*\*,” “butch,” or “slut.”

Similar observations were described as existing for female midshipmen in leadership positions. Female participants expressed that female midshipmen in leadership roles are under more scrutiny than their male peers, stemming from a belief that there is a gender quota for leadership positions. There is also a belief among male midshipmen that the ratio of men to women should guide how many midshipmen per gender should be fulfilling command positions rather than a perceived quota. Female midshipman participants also expressed that women in leadership positions walk a fine line between being perceived as a pushover and unnecessarily harsh—a line male midshipman leaders do not need to walk.

*“One of the girls told me... the upper-class females are basically like, ‘There are three categories of women here. And it’s butch, [EXPLETIVE], and slut. And you choose what category you’re going to be in, and that’s what category you are.’ And I think that’s really harsh but that was said by a female midshipman to a bunch of underclassman female midshipmen.” —Senior, Male*

*“I feel like when girls are in leadership positions, they’re much more critical. And so, if a girl does something and then a guy would do the same thing, they would judge the girl more for doing it than they would the guy.” —Sophomore, Female*

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**Perception of entitlement.** A perception held by male midshipman participants is that female midshipmen think more highly of themselves than women outside of the Academy. Male midshipman participants also expressed the belief that female midshipmen are selective of the romantic relationships they form with male midshipmen due to the scarcity of female midshipmen and perceived entitlement female midshipmen have.

*“I think girls here definitely have a higher opinion of themselves than maybe girls outside of here... I think the girls feel like they can pick and choose, which they kind of can.” —Sophomore, Male*

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**Faculty and staff beliefs.** Faculty had mixed perceptions on the Academy’s progress over the years with respect to gender relations. Although some faculty and staff participants said they feel the Academy is ahead of the curve on gender-related issues and that it needs to realign expectations on gender relations, other faculty and staff participants said they feel the Academy is behind on addressing attitudes toward gender relations due to longstanding institutions of the Academy. Faculty also expressed the belief that there is a need for more gender representation.

*“You look at what buildings are named and things like that—you don’t really see any females at the forefront, even though there’s plenty of females that we’ve had from the Naval Academy that have gone on to do great things. It’s not like we’ve done anything to kind of shift and show female midshipmen while they’re here that they can be successful once they leave here, both in the military and outside of it.” —Faculty and staff*

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## Official and Unofficial Rules Around Gender Relations

Participants were asked about rules that impact gender relations, including official rules at the Academy and unofficial rules among midshipmen. Several rules were identified that relate to formal policies on midshipman interactions, as well as unwritten rules that guide midshipman culture.

### Official Rules

The rule on door closure was mentioned frequently as an important rule for midshipman interactions. This rule requires midshipmen to keep their doors open at 90 degrees whenever there is someone of the opposite gender in the room. Fraternization rules were also important for midshipmen. Freshmen are not permitted to have romantic or platonic relationships with other class years, public displays of affection are not allowed, and midshipmen in any class year are not allowed to have romantic relationships with midshipmen in their company. Midshipmen who have romantic relationships with other midshipmen in their company must make a formal request to switch companies, which are referred to colloquially as a “love chit.” A “love chit” is not an official process, but rather a term that midshipmen use to refer to formal requests for company transfers for romantic reasons.

*“The first [official rule] that comes to mind is you can’t be in the same room, like in Bancroft Hall, with the doors shut. That’s probably the biggest one, I think, that affects interactions.” —Senior, Male*

*“You can’t have a relationship within your company, male or female, I guess. But you also can’t date a plebe.” —Senior, Female*

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## Unofficial Rules

Midshipmen claimed an unwritten rule for men is to not date female midshipmen. There is a stigma attached to dating female midshipmen that is attributed to the “femids” perception and to the fear of social consequences following a break-up or the fear of being reported for assault. However, several midshipmen stated that some men do not follow this rule. Midshipmen also claimed an unwritten rule for women is to not date or flirt with multiple male midshipmen and to keep their dating life private in order to avoid a bad reputation or rumors being spread about them.

*“Yeah, I also heard from other people—this wasn’t a lesson, just some upperclassmen talking—you don’t want to sleep with a woman here sometimes, because a lot of times people have been turned in or something for rape or something like that. And so, it’s just better to avoid it than to do it, so that’s something that I’ve heard at least.”* —**Freshman, Male**

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Midshipman participants also explained an unwritten rule that is passed down is “perception is reality”: What midshipmen perceive to be true will be seen as reality. Midshipmen expressed having to watch what they say and do because other midshipmen may perceive it the wrong way or make an incorrect assumption.

*“If we have someone’s number, just do [yourself] a favor and don’t text them. If you really want to talk to them, just email them, truthfully, because it’ll save you so much more trouble. Because here, sadly, perception is reality, and one bad text can ruin everything. Even if it’s not anything as bad as you think it is, other people might perceive it the wrong way.”* —**Freshman, Female**

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## Enforcement and Perception of Rules

Midshipman participants explained how official rules are enforced at the Academy. The official rules that midshipmen mentioned were criticized for the impacts they have on interactions between men and women.

## Fraternization

At the conclusion of plebe year, freshman midshipmen participate in the plebe recognition ceremony,<sup>14</sup> which marks their official transition to sophomores. Midshipman participants explained the freshman fraternization rules create an environment for “Shark Week” to occur, during which sophomore midshipmen receive overwhelming attention when the restrictions are lifted. They also said they feel the freshman fraternization rules create a dynamic in which freshman midshipmen feel uncomfortable receiving comments perceived as flirtatious from upperclassmen.

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<sup>14</sup>The plebe recognition ceremony, also referred to as “Herndon,” is the event in which freshman midshipmen climb the Commander William Lewis Herndon monument in order to replace a plebe hat atop of the monument with an upperclassman’s hat, marking their transition from freshman midshipmen to sophomore midshipmen and the lifting of freshman-specific restrictions.

*“I think that adds another aspect in terms of sexual harassment. Because comments that, if you receive them from a guy in another situation, would be harmless flirting. But then coming from an upper class, it makes it not okay. And makes you uncomfortable too, knowing that that’s not okay in that you’re receiving that from them. So, I think it adds another dimension.”*

—**Freshman, Female**

### **Door Closure Rule**

Midshipman participants viewed the door closure rules with contempt. They labeled them as ineffective and harmful, explaining that the door closure rules segregated midshipman genders and prevented them from maturing socially. Moreover, midshipmen said they feel the door closure policy encourages the rumor mill. When midshipmen of the opposite gender are seen in a room, it becomes a spectacle in which midshipmen assume that the two midshipmen are in a relationship or engaging in sexual activities, even if they are not.

*“I think that [the door closure rule] actually adds to any sort of perceived divide because suddenly here’s a class of people that you can’t even have in your room, like a normal human.”* —**Junior, Male**

*“[The door closure rule] just reinforces a stereotype that if a guy and a girl are hanging out together that it’s obviously sexual in nature.”* —**Junior, Female**

### **Physical Training Standards**

The enforcement of physical readiness standards is also perceived to be divisive between male and female midshipmen. Midshipman participants described frustrations surrounding a perceived need for the same physical standards between men and women, as well as the stereotypes surrounding female midshipmen as not having the same physical capabilities as men. Some participants said they feel that male midshipmen prefer to pick other male midshipmen for team activities over female midshipmen.

*“I’ve definitely heard some people say like, ‘Oh, well the physical standards for men and women should be the same because it’s not about your personal standard but it’s about what you can actually do what you can actually contribute.’”* —**Junior, Male**

### **Passing Down Rules and Culture**

When asked how culture and unofficial rules are passed down to midshipmen, participants claimed that learning unspoken rules is mostly accomplished by trial and error and exposure to Academy life. Additionally, midshipman participants acknowledged having other influences in their culture and the traditions they follow.

### **Other Midshipmen**

Upperclassmen are significant influencers to underclassmen. Participants described upperclassmen as passing down lessons learned from their own experiences at the Academy. Male freshman participants noted that sophomores are the most influential in regard to any direct teaching. Both male and female midshipmen also learn how to conduct themselves from observing other midshipmen and through the experiences of their peers.

### **Company Culture**

Rules and traditions are also passed down through the companies. Midshipman participants explained that certain companies have varying cultures and reputations, including companies that are known for being lenient on fraternization policies and companies that are stricter on fraternization policies. Some companies also have longstanding unofficial traditions that are passed down year to year.

*“There was this incident in my company where there’s this tradition that you present a brick to the person that hooked up with or slept with the ugliest female. So that happened last year, and we didn’t really say anything because we were plebes.”* —**Sophomore, Female**

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The company “brick” tradition was a point of frustration for female midshipmen who said they feel that the company tradition is inappropriate but that their concerns are not met with seriousness from the company.

*“But just the fact that the company commander and some people didn’t think [the brick tradition] was a big deal just because of prior traditions, speaks to the fact that they’re not open-minded enough, or they might see sexual harassment as one thing, right, as a party and alcohol and stuff. But this is another aspect, another facet in which they just couldn’t wrap their brains around.”*  
—**Sophomore, Female**

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### **Leadership, Alumni, and Other Instructors**

Midshipmen also learn unofficial rules from others in their lives, such as parents, alumni, and older military members. At the Academy, military cadre (e.g., chiefs, senior enlisted leaders), academic instructors, and sports coaches are significant influencers for midshipmen because of their close working and academic relationships. Outside of the Academy, midshipmen learn unofficial rules from parents, alumni, and other Service members in their lives.

*“My mom was [service] enlisted, so she wasn’t in for very long. But she was really beautiful, so she taught me how to be really careful and how to tone down everything feminine about you to try and fit in better. And I’ve spent a lot of my time trying to undo that, but at the same time, it’s also a super valuable lesson.”*  
—**Sophomore, Female**

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*“I got talked to by a colonel...And she was like ‘Honestly, you’re probably going to have to change some things about yourself. Like as a girl in the military, you probably won’t be able to wear really cute gym clothes to the gym on the base. And you probably won’t—because Marines and Sailors are going to be there. They’re going to see you...She said there’s some limitations that you’re going to have to accept being a female in the military.’” —Sophomore, Female*

## Perceptions of Sexual Assault and Sexual Harassment

While discussing sexual assault and sexual harassment, midshipman participants discussed the presence of stigmas, peer gossip in cases of sexual assault, victim blaming, and the fear of being accused.

A term that midshipman participants mentioned that is used frequently is to “SAPR” someone. There is a negative connotation associated with the use of “SAPR” as a verb and is described as an action of accusing someone of sexual assault or sexual harassment. The use of “SAPR” as a verb was identified as creating negative stigmas toward the use of the SAPR office and as a barrier to reporting.

*“SAPR is a verb here. So, the first thing that someone will say is, ‘Did you hear that he SAPR’d her? Did you hear that she SAPR’d him?’ And that’s negative. That’s negative connotation socially.” —SHAPE member*

Midshipman participants also explained that when information regarding sexual assault travels through the rumor mill, midshipmen begin to discuss the people involved and who they believe is telling the truth. Midshipmen are described as choosing sides, discussing the characteristics of the alleged offender and whether it is likely they were involved, and being critical of the victim and discussing whether or not the sexual assault even occurred. These discussions are attributed to midshipmen having personal relationships with the victims or the alleged offenders involved.

*“If cases come up, it’d be like, ‘Oh, that’s [EXPLETIVE]. That didn’t happen. I know he’s a good person. He’d never do that.’ Or people just saying things that shouldn’t be said whether it’s derogatory towards women or the other way.” —SHAPE member*

*“A lot of these cases that come up that we hear about, we don’t know all the details. But we’re friends with either side. And you tend to use those friendships to kind of make an assessment without knowing anything.” —Senior, Male*

## Perceptions of Sexual Harassment

Midshipman participants remarked that sexual harassment is not as clearly defined as sexual assault and that sexual harassment behaviors are often not perceived to be as serious as sexual assault. When sexual harassment is mentioned, midshipman participants said they believe midshipmen associate it with behaviors they believe to be less serious and not requiring significant attention, such as making sexual jokes and comments. Due to a perceived lack of



seriousness, midshipman participants also expressed the stigma that bringing up issues of sexual harassment is associated with sensitivity and weakness.

*“Because there are different levels, the term sexual harassment, usually people think of like, ‘Really? You can’t handle a catcall?’” —SHAPE member*

*“I feel like it’s kind of that stigma of if you have that big of an issue with it, you don’t have thick skin and you’re weak.” —Senior, Female*

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Female midshipman participants discussed the perception that sexual harassment behaviors are a part of the predominantly male environment at the Academy and they may dismiss them as behaviors they have to endure and move on from.

*“I think that a lot of us write [sexual harassment] off as just living in a glorified frat house. I feel like it’s just something that happens, and you either hold onto it, or you just keep rolling.” —Senior, Female*

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## Conclusions on Academy Culture

Several facets of Academy culture have cultivated an environment for sexual assault and sexual harassment to occur. While behaviors such as telling sexual jokes have been discussed in previous focus groups, midshipmen now identify a larger culture that exists at the Academy encompassing sexual harassment behaviors called “bro culture.” Bro culture includes locker room talk, making sexual comments, and physical touching that are considered typical in the predominately male environment at the Academy. Though seemingly harmless to male midshipmen, female midshipmen are uncomfortable with these behaviors, characterizing them as living in a “glorified frat house.” However, speaking up on these behaviors threatens female midshipmen’s social standing and peer relationships in an environment where some already struggle to fit in. As discussed, there are sentiments among the male midshipmen that there are gender quotas for women at the Academy and in leadership positions that are given, making female midshipmen feel their accomplishments lack value or as if they do not belong at the Academy or in leadership positions they receive. In addition to negative perceptions of female midshipmen, official rules on fraternization and unofficial rules on dating contribute to tension between male and female midshipmen. Policies dictating door closures and with whom midshipmen may interact have created social divides among midshipmen. These factors all contribute to an unhealthy climate for midshipmen at the Academy.

With peer perceptions questioning their belongingness and accomplishments at the Academy and rules creating gender divides, female midshipmen choose to ignore and to not report behaviors that make them uncomfortable, including unwanted touching, in order to avoid social reprisal and ostracism. Because of the active rumor mill, midshipmen are cautious of behaviors that might give rise to gossip and concerned about or having misinformation about them spread amongst peers. Unchecked behaviors in bro culture, a culture of social reprisal for speaking up, and wanting to avoid the rumor mill has allowed the continuation of unwanted behaviors and prevents midshipmen from having the agency to speak up on the behaviors they experience or witness.



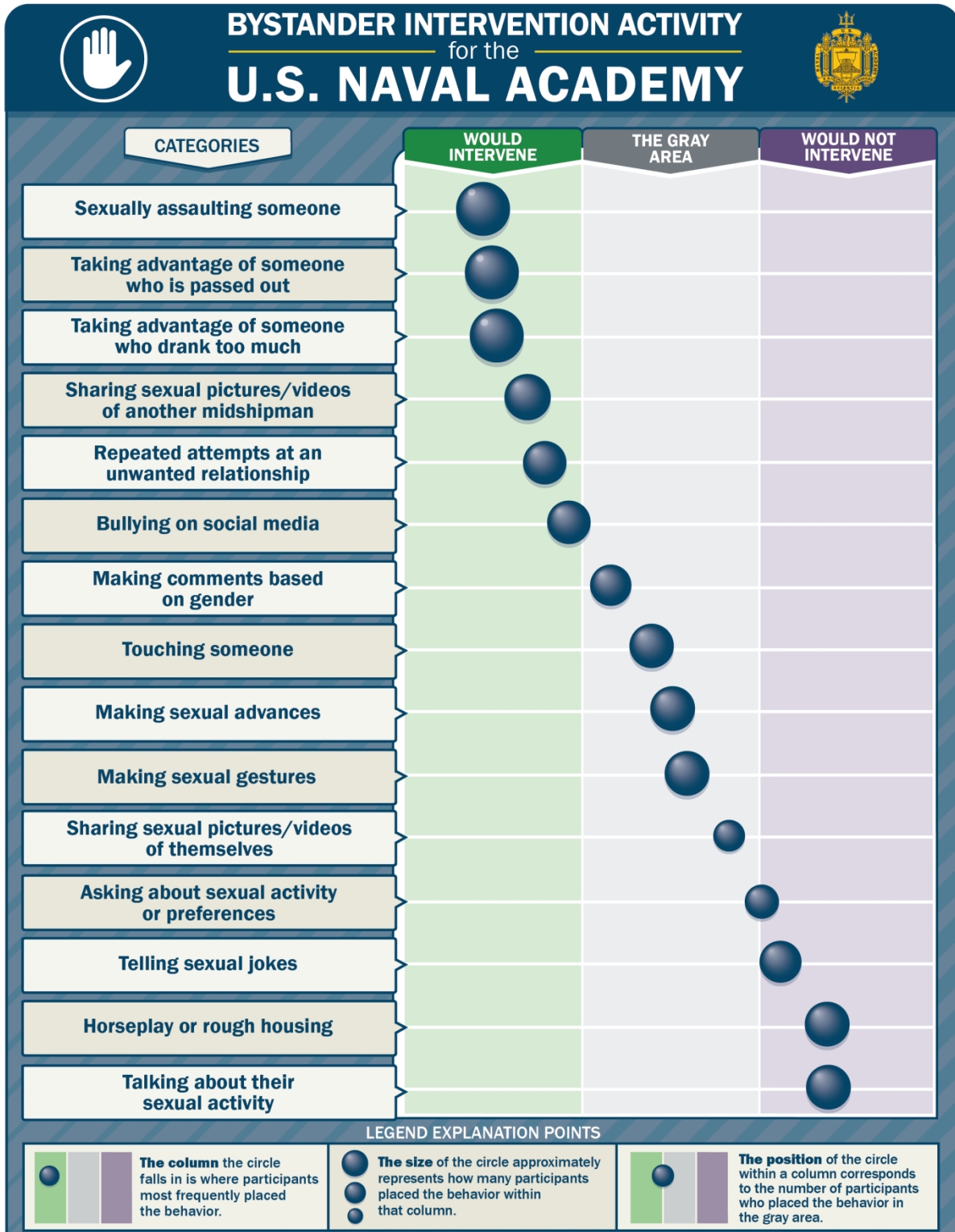
## Prevention at the Academy

Prevention efforts are an important priority for the DoD and the Service Academies. Participants were asked about sexual assault and sexual harassment prevention efforts at USNA. While discussing prevention, participants in the groups participated in a bystander intervention activity, discussed the bystander intervention training they receive, and provided perceptions on senior leaders', peer leaders', and middle-level leaders' involvement in prevention efforts.

### Bystander Intervention and Training

During the course of the focus groups, midshipman participants were asked to identify whether or not they believe they would intervene in a number of problematic behaviors they could potentially witness between a variety of people. Participants were also given the option to identify these behaviors as being in the “gray area,” a term used to indicate that the participant was unsure how they would react. Participants were given a set of stickers representing a range of behaviors aligned with, or increasing risk for, sexual assault and sexual harassment and were asked to place them on a continuum where one end signified “would definitely intervene,” the other end signified “would definitely not intervene,” and the middle of the spectrum signified a “gray area” where intervention was uncertain. The behaviors ranged in severity from verbal jokes and comments to sexually assaulting someone. Because midshipmen opinions differed on the choice to intervene, the behaviors could appear in multiple categories. Participants then discussed specific situations that they would or would not intervene in, what contributes to the decision to intervene, and the techniques they use when intervening. Figure 5 displays where midshipmen at USNA indicated behaviors they would and would not intervene in, as well as which behaviors fell in the “gray area.” Midshipmen were asked to discuss their rationale for placing behaviors where they did on the continuum. The resulting discussions illuminated several factors that contribute to reasons for intervening and not intervening in risky situations.

**Figure 5.**  
*Bystander Intervention Activity at the U.S. Naval Academy*



## Midshipmen Would Intervene

Midshipman participants placed behaviors they perceived to be clearly unwanted, severe, lacking consent, or violating the agency of the victim into the category of “would intervene.” These behaviors included sharing sexual pictures and/or videos of another midshipman, bullying on social media, repeated attempts at an unwanted relationship, taking advantage of a passed-out person, taking advantage of a drunk person, and sexually assaulting someone. Midshipman participants described these behaviors as obvious situations in which they would intervene, particularly for behaviors that they themselves would want someone to intervene on their behalf if it were to happen to them or if the midshipman were to feel that the person involved does not have a voice.

*“Taking advantage of someone who’s passed out, taking advantage of someone who drank too much, sexually assaulting someone, and I probably put making repeated attempts to establish unwanted romantic relationship. I’d say all four of those are 100% crossing the line, especially the first three... I think those are things that most everyone would have a pretty easy time going and doing something about because it’s clearly wrong, and it’s very noticeable.”*

—**Sophomore, Male**

*“It’s one of those things where you just kind of have to put yourself in the situation and be like, ‘If I was uncomfortable in this situation, what would I want somebody else to step up and do for me or do on my behalf?’”*

—**Senior, Female**

Although described as sometimes being awkward and uncomfortable, midshipman participants indicated feeling confident intervening in situations they observed. Female midshipmen described feeling comfortable intervening in situations, but do not always feel they are taken seriously when they do intervene. One female midshipman participant recounted intervening when an inappropriate comment was made by another male midshipman, but that it was disregarded. Additionally, female midshipman participants said they believe they experience more negative connotations when they intervene than male midshipmen who intervene.

*“I kind of feel like if a guy was correcting another guy, it’s like, ‘Oh, he’s a good midshipman and he’s by the rules’... But a girl does it to a guy, it’s like, ‘Oh, she’s pretty train-on<sup>15</sup>.’”*

—**Junior, Female**

Midshipman participants indicated using a variety of techniques to intervene in situations they perceived to be problematic. The techniques ranged from being subtle to more direct verbal intervention. Midshipman participants described using de-escalation techniques and creating distractions in order to intervene in situations they have observed. These techniques included asking the midshipmen involved how they’re doing, drawing attention to something else that may be going on, spilling a drink, and other subtle statements and actions to stop the behaviors.

<sup>15</sup>The term “train-on” refers to a midshipman who follows rules strictly and is perceived as less approachable. The term carries a negative connotation.

*“If someone’s touching somebody, the other person is uncomfortable, it doesn’t have to be like, “Hey, dude. Stop touching her,” or whatever. It can just be like—I’ve done this multiple times where I literally just wedge myself in between two people and be like, ‘Hey, what’s going on?’ and just kind of shift them the other way.” —Senior, Male*

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Some participants described directly addressing the problematic behaviors by speaking up and discussing why the behaviors are not okay or asking the alleged offender to stop. When speaking up to intervene, midshipman participants discussed avoiding speaking up in a manner that seemed like a lecture or parent-like tone.

*“With this age group and this environment—I’ve learned what works best is not to lecture someone... They don’t like to hear about it for the longest time so you just kind of bring it up in the lightest way possible, even though it’s a serious situation or topic. And then everyone else around you is listening.” —SHAPE member*

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### **Midshipmen Would Not Intervene**

Midshipman participants placed behaviors they perceived to be less serious, harmless, a part of Academy culture, or as none of their business into the category of “would not intervene.” These behaviors included horseplay or roughhousing, telling sexual jokes, someone sharing sexual pictures or videos of themselves, and talking about their sexual activity. Midshipman participants did not see these activities as crossing the line or, if the behaviors were crossing a line, the person involved would be capable of disengaging themselves without the need for intervention.

*“Horseplay or roughhousing—to me, that very definition means both parties are participating freely and willingly. And I know that’s also how I interact with my friends all the time, so I see nothing wrong with it, but the very way I define that is both parties playing with each other.” —Junior, Male*

*“If you’re going to intervene every time someone says a joke that’s off color, you’re that guy. You’re that person. It’s like, yeah, everyone’s going to tell inappropriate jokes now and then, and I would say for the most part, people don’t have a big issue with that.” —Senior, Female*

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An additional circumstance that contributed to deciding not to intervene was who was involved. Midshipman participants acknowledged midshipmen in lower classes do not feel comfortable intervening in situations involving upperclassman midshipmen. Female midshipmen specifically mentioned being uncomfortable intervening if there’s a male upperclassman involved. Female upperclassmen acknowledged interfering if they see a problematic situation between a male upperclassman and a female in a lower class, especially if the female lowerclassman is uncomfortable speaking up.

*“I’ve run interference before, where there’s an upperclassman guy kind of lingering around a plebe girl’s room and she’s in uniform after liberty. She obviously wants to get changed, and she obviously wants to stop talking to him. But she’s too nice or just too unwilling to tell an upperclassman to go away.”*

—**Junior, Female**

Midshipman participants also identified stigmas and potential social repercussions of intervening in situations. Participants described the stigma of being a “social justice warrior” for students perceived as being overzealous to intervene and to call out problematic behaviors. Female midshipmen identified facing social repercussions for intervening in situations involving male midshipmen, including ostracism and being perceived as annoying or as someone who will “SAPR”<sup>16</sup> another midshipman. Because of this, female midshipmen expressed choosing not to speak up about behaviors perceived as less serious in order to be taken seriously when more offensive behaviors occur.

*“I think a lot of the fear of intervening or confronting someone is because you know it’s going to be unpopular. And having the unpopular opinion is penalized in the culture. And you don’t want to be the person that’s stopping people from having fun or making the atmosphere uncomfortable, or you can’t keep up or hang in with the climate of how people are interacting, right?”*

—**Junior, Female**

*“You have to be willing to give up a couple battles with the things that make you uncomfortable if you want to have enough respect to have a voice when something really offends you.”* —**Junior, Female**

### **The “Gray Areas”**

Midshipman participants placed behaviors lacking context as to whether the behavior is unwanted or consensual, normal for those individuals or not, and other relationships between the individuals in the “gray area” category. These behaviors included touching someone, making sexual advances, and making sexual gestures. Midshipmen identified context and non-verbal cues as contributing to the decision to intervene.

*“Touching someone, is it a hug? Are they tapping their shoulder? Are they clapping them on the back? Or even, I guess, sharing sexual pictures of themselves or making sexual advances, I don’t know the situation. So, if I stepped in, I could be the good guy, but I could also be the bad guy just stepping in self-righteous about it.”* —**Sophomore, Male**

**The role of context.** For midshipman participants, context was an important factor in the decision to intervene. Touching someone and making sexual advances were described as being vague and lacking context as to whether the behavior is problematic. When midshipman participants were asked how their decision to intervene would change if they knew the

<sup>16</sup>Midshipman participants expressed the use of SAPR as a verb, such as to “SAPR” someone represents the action of accusing someone of sexual assault or sexual harassment.

individuals involved or if they knew the individuals involved were in a relationship, they became more confident in their assessment of the behaviors and if they would or would not intervene.

Knowing the individuals involved provided midshipman participants with the context to know whether the person would be okay with the behavior or would require intervention. Knowing that the individuals are in a relationship made midshipman participants less inclined to intervene for certain behaviors, including touching someone and making sexual advances. However, some midshipmen expressed that knowing the individuals are in a relationship would not make them less likely to intervene, acknowledging sexual assault may still occur between individuals in a relationship. Midshipman participants also identified location as important piece of contextual information when deciding to intervene, specifically how telling sexual jokes would be more inappropriate if it were done in public areas or in front of leadership than if it were done in the privacy of someone's room.

*“Where are you? What’s happening? What’s the situation? Are they teammates or is it one first class, one plebe? What’s going on? There are so many things that could make it go from just completely not worrying about to very not okay.”*

—Senior, Male

*“I think if people were in a relationship, I would probably not intervene for some of the stuff like touching someone. If I see people who I know are in a relationship touching each other, I wouldn’t be like, ‘Hey, you shouldn’t be touching. You can’t touch her,’ or whatever like, ‘You can’t touch him.’”*

—Sophomore, Female

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**The role of non-verbal cues.** Midshipman participants described reading non-verbal cues in situations in which they were unsure whether they required intervention. The techniques included reading the body language of the midshipmen who were involved to see if they were uncomfortable and using non-verbal signals to determine if the midshipmen would or would not like intervention. Depending on the non-verbal cues, midshipman participants said they are able to make the decision of whether or not to intervene.

*“I’ve done the thumbs-up, thumbs-down thing before if it’s somebody I vaguely know talking to somebody I don’t know super well, so kind of out of the line of sight of whoever they’re talking to... They just nod or shake their head, etc. It’s an easy way of not stepping into the situation, not making it weird, but still checking in on a friend to see if you need to pull them away or something like that.”* —Junior, Male

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### **Bystander Intervention Training**

Midshipman participants were asked what bystander intervention training they had received and what intervention techniques they had learned from training. During the conversations, midshipman participants identified areas in which they feel they lacked training and areas in which the trainings could improve.



**Well-trained areas.** Midshipman participants said they felt trainings in the form of casual conversations and trainings including real-life case studies in which they are asked how they would react or intervene were effective. Male midshipmen stated they found it effective when the case studies included situations between two male cadets, a scenario they do not often hear about.

*“What I like in the training is that it is kind of laid-back and more of just a conversation, instead of just a one-way.... And so, I think that is the most effective way to have a casual conversation with your entire class about either an intervention or sexual harassment.” —Sophomore, Male*

**Areas to improve training.** Midshipman participants said they felt the bystander intervention training was sometimes not concrete or not very helpful. Some midshipmen expressed that they felt they lacked training in specific intervention techniques and that the training videos that were used were unrealistic. Participants described being trained on intervention techniques that are not effective or are not realistic for the situations they encounter, as well as mainly receiving training on more serious situations and not situations that are less serious yet still warrant intervention.

*“I think that they only teach us the serious ones or that’s already happened, not what you do to help them. I think the small, little events that lead up to actually when someone can get hurt is like this huge vacuum of education in prevention... everything could have been like ‘I intervened,’ but I don’t know the tools. I don’t have the education to intervene in some of those smaller less serious incidents.” —Sophomore, Female*

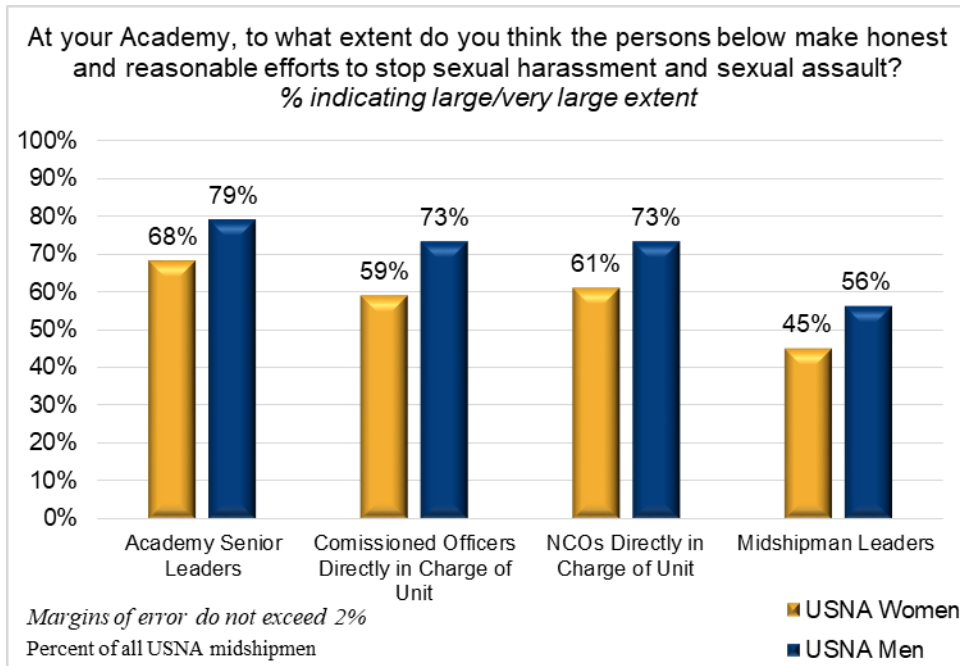
## Leadership and Prevention

Participants were asked to give a letter grade on their peer leadership and their senior leadership to evaluate how well they handle issues of sexual assault and sexual harassment. In discussing the grades, participants were asked to explain their grading and to elaborate on their perceptions of peer and senior leadership.

Results from the 2018 SAGR survey detailing students’ perceptions of the extent of these leaders making “honest and reasonable efforts to stop sexual harassment and sexual assault” at their Academy supplement the findings from these discussions. The 2018 SAGR results are illustrated in Figure 6 and provide a baseline of how USNA midshipmen perceived midshipman leaders, Academy senior leaders, and middle-level leaders in 2018. Because the 2019 SAGR collected data through qualitative focus groups, findings regarding perceptions of leadership cannot be quantified. However, the data in Figure 6 were collected from the 2018 SAGR survey and are available for further review in the 2018 SAGR report.



**Figure 6.**  
**USNA Midshipman Perceptions of Leadership (2018 SAGR)**



### Senior Leadership

Participants in the focus groups participated in a grading exercise for their senior leadership at the Academy, including the Superintendent, the Commandant, the Vice Commandant, and the Dean. During these conversations, midshipman and faculty and staff participants discussed senior leadership's transparency with midshipmen, their messaging, and their ability to take action on issues of sexual assault and sexual harassment.

**What they do well.** Midshipman participants said they believe Academy senior leadership take issues of sexual assault and sexual harassment seriously and are proactive in their messaging and publicly identify prevention as a priority. Participants also acknowledged senior leadership's efforts in promoting conversations about sexual assault and sexual harassment and providing trainings.

*"[Sexual assault]'s very stressed, brought up all the time, and it's almost like they make sure we have the right trainings I guess because we have a couple SAPR trainings a year... They make sure we know about it"—Freshman, Male*

*"I think [senior leadership] do a good job in terms of at least coming out and speaking on the issues and making it known that a lot of these things that we deal with aren't acceptable." —SHAPE member*

**Areas to improve.** Midshipman participants indicated that they feel senior leadership is not transparent on their handling of sexual assault and sexual harassment and treat discussing sexual

assault as an obligation for the Academy. Midshipman participants also identified senior leadership as lacking tangible action and implementation of policy changes on issues of sexual assault and sexual harassment. They explained that although senior leadership may mention sexual assault as an issue, midshipmen do not see any real changes occurring. When actions are taken, however, male midshipmen discussed that different punishments are given depending on the social status of the cadet.

*“[Sexual assault] feels like a check in the box almost for leadership. It’s like, ‘All right. Sexual assault. What can we do? Let’s send [midshipmen] to some trainings, and let’s do this. Let’s do that. And, it’ll be great.’ It’s like this is a way for them to brief their higher ups, maybe it’s Congress or whoever they have to answer to say, ‘Here’s what we’re doing to address it.’ And, I mean, it feels like that’s the purpose of it, not necessarily to come down and interact with us on a personal level.”* —**Senior, Female**

With current policies that exist to mitigate sexual assault and sexual harassment, specifically fraternization rules, some midshipmen said they feel senior leadership is too heavy-handed on these policies in a manner that is ineffective in combating sexual assault and sexual harassment. They explained that senior leadership’s enforcement of fraternization policies creates a culture of assumptions that when two midshipmen of opposing genders are hanging out, it involves fraternization. Participants in SHAPE provided policy suggestions in the form of proposals and memos, including adopting the Safe to Report policy<sup>17</sup> that was implemented at the U.S. Air Force Academy and removing the door closure policy. However, SHAPE participants expressed that they are met with disregard from senior leaders or are rejected with little explanation as to why.

*“There’s kind of this overarching culture that’s kind of given to us by the leadership directly, ‘Oh, if a guy and a girl are hanging out, and they’re really good friends, we got to make sure they’re not doing anything, they’re not frating or doing anything sexual because we have to make sure that they’re abiding by all the rules.’ Where you could just be really good friends with someone. And by some of the rules that the Academy lays out, it’ll be almost suspicious that you’re hanging out with this person. And you could find yourself in a problem.”* —**Sophomore, Male**

**Faculty and staff perceptions.** Faculty and staff participants expressed that senior leadership set the tone on gender-related issues. Although midshipmen bring with them to the Academy preexisting ideas on gender relations, faculty and staff said they feel that there are generational gaps in ideas and biases that exist between midshipmen and the faculty and staff. Faculty and staff participants viewed some gender biases among older generations within the faculty as negatively impacting Academy culture. In addition to perceptions of generational bias, faculty and staff participants stated that leadership does not adequately address gender issues, such as faculty and staff diversity and midshipmen’s treatment of faculty women and that leadership dismisses these issues when they are mentioned.

<sup>17</sup>The U.S. Air Force Academy’s Safe to Report policy allows cadets to report sexual assault and to get the help they need without fear of punishment for minor collateral misconduct, including fraternization and underage drinking.

*“For me, personally, the Cold War generation told us [women] would never be good enough, fast enough. We’ll never be able to fight a war in combat. And 19 years later, now we’re just fine. But it’s always been like that, and that never is really thought about, but I’ve heard it within Bancroft Hall. I’ve heard it amongst the staff, ‘Oh, well, this generation—’ and they lay out five or six things that they speak negatively upon this generation for, instead of realizing that they’re going to do just fine and step into the roles, just like they always do. And that’s a bias.”*  
—**Faculty and staff**

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### **Middle-Level Leadership**

Midshipman participants acknowledged the role middle-level leaders, such as senior enlisted leaders (SEL) and high-level company leadership, have in handling sexual assault and sexual harassment. Middle-level leadership’s role in sexual assault and sexual harassment prevention and response was described as unstandardized, operating differently from leader to leader. One midshipman participant stated that this makes it difficult to report instances of sexual harassment due to the uncertainty of whether or not it will be taken seriously. Midshipman participants indicated perceptions of middle-level leadership vary depending on the leadership you have. Midshipmen may receive an SEL who is perceived as good or an SEL who is perceived as bad, which can have an important impact on their life at the Academy. Some midshipman participants also described their middle-level leadership as unapproachable with gender-related issues, whereas other midshipman participants said their middle-level leadership is very approachable.

*“It’s a little bit of a gray area as to which things you should let go, when it’s worth standing up for yourself or confronting it... Then it’s like who do you trust if you’ve got a teacher that makes comments that are suspicious or a company officer, an SEL doesn’t always play by black-and-white boundaries of what’s okay and not okay to say. Then who are you even going to report [sexual harassment] to?”* —**Junior, Female**

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Some midshipman participants did not attribute the lack of effectiveness in how sexual assault and sexual harassment is handled at the Academy to senior leadership but instead they attributed it to middle and lower level leadership and their peers. Participants explained that senior leadership can only make so much of a difference and that middle and lower level leadership and midshipmen need to buy-in for changes to occur.

*“[Senior leadership are] doing what they can. They can’t come to every company and make sure everything’s running smoothly. They have a job to do and their job is at that upper level. It is not at the company level. That’s why we have [commanding officers]. That’s why we have SELs, company commanders, [executive officers]. That’s their job and they’re failing. It’s not the senior leadership.”* —**SHAPE member**

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## Midshipman Peer Leadership

Midshipman and faculty and staff participants provided grades on midshipman peer leadership. The conversations about peer leadership brought forth discussions on their effectiveness, how peer leaders handle conversations about sexual assault and sexual harassment, and ways midshipman peer leadership can improve handling issues regarding sexual assault and sexual harassment.

**What they do well.** Some midshipman participants said they feel peer leadership is effective at handling issues of sexual assault and sexual harassment. They also said they feel peer leadership, specifically SAPR Guides and their company peer leadership, take situations seriously. They described instances in which they alerted peer leadership of an issue regarding sexual assault or sexual harassment and their peer leadership took adequate action to resolve the situation, including taking steps to have the alleged offenders removed from the Academy.

*“I had an issue my plebe year where a guy went through my underwear when I wasn’t there, the [Company Mate of the Deck], an upperclassman midshipman. He also did something to my roommate—not to her, but to all her stuff. So, we went to our training officer, who was a male, and pretty much everyone in our company totally supported us, especially the guys. And they’re like, ‘That’s not tolerated.’ He’s not here anymore.”* —**Senior, Female**

**Areas to improve.** In general, midshipman participants indicated that they perceive a lack of faith in their peer leadership. Peer leaders are perceived as sometimes treating sexual assault like a joke and not recognizing it as a serious issue. Participants also indicated that they perceive peer leadership as not being knowledgeable or comfortable talking about or confronting issues of sexual assault and sexual harassment. Midshipmen addressed SAPR Guides directly, expressing that SAPR Guides do not make their presence known and that many participants had heard of situations in which SAPR Guides did not take midshipmen’s concerns seriously.

*“Something with the peer leadership thing is that a lot of times, the conversation of sexual assault is turned into a joke, but not intentionally because I think the brigade as a whole can agree that sexual assault is bad and wrong and stuff. But it’s just things that you hear, like if you see two people talking or whatever, you’ll hear someone say, ‘Don’t get SAPR’d’ ... You can’t joke around about this stuff because that, I think, inhibits the conversation.”* —**Junior, Female**

*“I have seen a few cases where people do go to some SAPR Guides about something that happened to them. And yeah, they do come to you and they check up on you on how you’re doing. But the reason why I gave a D [grade] is just because they’re not really too open about who they are. And, like I said, I can’t even name the people in my company who are the SAPR Guides.”* —**Freshman, Male**

Midshipman participants discussed the role that peer leadership plays in the rumor mill. Similar to midshipmen’s perceptions of sexual assault and sexual harassment, participants described instances in which peer leaders engaged in conversations regarding situations of sexual assault or

sexual harassment. Peer leaders were described as discussing details of cases, discussing whether or not the alleged offenders were “guilty,” and giving opinions on whether they believe the people involved told the truth. Midshipman participants stated that they believe peer leadership should work to end rumors and conversations surrounding cases of sexual assault instead of engaging or perpetuating potentially harmful language.

*“These issues come up and everyone takes a side. And even if they’re trying not to take a side, you know what side they’re on because a lot of times—they just have a hard time remaining unbiased and not gossiping about it.”*

—**Senior, Male**

*“[Peer leadership] should squash any rumors, squash conversation, negative or positive, just squash it. And they should be well quipped to help these people to go to real professionals. Don’t be a listener and just keep it there. You should be walking them down to the SAPR office.”* —**Senior, Female**

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Participants also said they perceive that peer leadership is powerless with regard to sexual assault and sexual harassment. Midshipman participants said they feel peer leadership has little to no training or ability to handle situations themselves and instead, merely report incidents up the chain of command to senior leadership. Midshipman participants attributed powerlessness among peer leadership to not being allowed to fail in their positions and being “babied” by senior leadership.

*“The higher up you go in [midshipmen chain of command], it’s kind of the less power you actually have in affecting change because you’re kind of just passing downward from higher ups. If you’re a squad leader, you have more interaction one on one with people. But if you’re like reg commander, do you actually enact that much policy that changes things? Maybe not. I think some people might also be kind of passive about it just because they’re like, ‘Oh, I’m a midshipman. What could I actually do to change things?’ So, they might just be content with just letting things happen.”* —**Junior, Female**

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**Faculty and staff perceptions.** Faculty and staff participants said they feel that the effectiveness of peer leadership is dependent on the individual. They expressed that peer leaders vary in terms of their comfort level and ability to effectively discuss and confront sexual harassment and sexual assault. Similar to midshipman participants, faculty and staff participants also mentioned the perception that midshipman peer leadership are not allowed to fail or be held accountable, which some faculty and staff said inhibits them from growing as leaders. Although midshipman peer leaders are able to address issues on less difficult topics, they often struggle with being able to address more difficult and serious issues relating to gender and sexual assault.

*“You’ve got JV peer leadership, where they’re going peer to peer as their friend... Gender or biases. Whatever the conversation is. They’re comfortable with that. They do okay with the JV side. The varsity side is where they will not—they fail. They will not engage in a difficult conversation, whether that’s in a*



*gender conversation, a sexual conversation, or a uniform standard conversation. They will not engage.” —Faculty and staff*

## Conclusions on Prevention at the Academy

Midshipmen have the knowledge to intervene in situations of sexual assault and other severe behaviors, but bystander intervention trainings do not fully inform midshipmen on how to handle less severe and more routine situations they experience at the Academy such as gender-based comments, sexual gestures or advances, and other behaviors that overlap with behaviors identified as part of the “bro culture.” These behaviors are a “gray area” for midshipmen, where they have difficulty differentiating between the choice to intervene and to not intervene, and more often than not, they choose not to intervene due to this uncertainty. Situations where the midshipmen do not know the people involved are particularly conflicting for midshipmen and they are much less likely to intervene. In addition to knowledge, midshipmen must also have the comfort to use the intervention techniques they learn. Comfort in intervening is hindered in situations where class year differences and opposing genders are involved. Having the confidence and comfort to intervene in these situations despite the class year and gender of those involved is especially important for midshipmen to be able to intervene in behaviors they witness, especially when encountering gray area behaviors.

Leadership is an important part of prevention at the Academy, with middle-level leadership playing a key role in setting the tone for midshipmen. Academy senior leaders are acknowledged as taking sexual assault and sexual harassment seriously. However, this approach is not always carried down the chain of command to midshipmen due to a disconnect with middle-level leaders and peer leaders not being equipped to effectively handle issues related to sexual assault and sexual harassment. Further, middle-level leaders are not standardized in their handling of sexual harassment. While one SEL may take a midshipman’s disclosure of sexual harassment seriously, another SEL may disregard it. The lack of standardization has left some midshipmen uncertain in the response they may receive when bringing sexual harassment to an SEL’s attention, and therefore choose to not to disclose their experiences. Peer leaders approach sexual assault and sexual harassment similarly, often not taking the issues seriously or not having the concern or ability to effectively confront and discuss these issues. It is important that midshipmen be able to trust that concerns around sexual harassment will be met with seriousness no matter the middle-level leader they choose to discuss them with, and peer leaders must be better prepared and more willing to handle sexual assault and sexual harassment.

## Reporting of Sexual Assault and Sexual Harassment

Improving sexual assault and harassment reporting is a top priority in the efforts to eliminate sexual assault and harassment at the Academies. Reporting sexual assault and harassment helps ensure victims receive the support they need and that perpetrators are held accountable for their actions. Participants were asked about their familiarity with the SAPR office, who they would go to for issues of sexual assault and sexual harassment, and the perceived barriers to reporting that exist at the Academy. During the discussions, midshipman participants discussed having a lack of knowledge of the SAPR office and resources, utilizing the Midshipmen Development Center (MDC), as well as the perceived barriers to reporting sexual assault and sexual harassment.



## Perceptions of the SAPR Office

Participants were asked about their awareness of the SAPR office, its location, and how comfortable midshipmen would be to go to the SAPR office. Midshipman participants indicated low levels of knowledge about SAPR resources and that they did not typically perceive the SAPR office as the first stop in dealing with sexual assault.

## Knowledge of SAPR Resources

Midshipman participants were asked if they thought most midshipmen knew the SAPR office's location. In general, midshipman participants did not know where the SAPR office is located, and some midshipmen did not know that there is a SAPR office at the Academy. Participants in SHAPE were aware of the SAPR office's location but remarked other midshipmen would more than likely not know the location.

*"I think a lot of people don't know where [SAPR office] is at. Because I don't."*  
—**Freshman, Female**

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Some midshipman participants also discussed not having much knowledge of the SAPR resources available to them. Although they explained that they perceive the SAPR office as a place to report sexual assault, and while they know of the existence of unrestricted and restricted reporting, they were not largely aware of additional resources available, including knowing which personnel are and are not mandatory reporters.

*"I think [SAPR office] is talked about a lot, but I don't think it's actually talked about what they do or how helpful they can be, if that makes sense. And I don't mean that in a mean way, because I know I had some friends go through the SAPR office for various reasons, and they would come back and tell me about the resources they got. And there were just so many times where I was like, 'Oh, wow. I didn't know you could do that,' or 'I didn't know that's how that worked.'"* —**Senior, Female**

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## Trust in the SAPR Office

Midshipman participants indicated they are not likely to go to the SAPR office in the event of experiencing sexual assault. In general, midshipman participants indicated that they perceive the SAPR office as a place where midshipmen go if they want to make an official report, pursue a legal option, or as the last stop in dealing with sexual assault. Some midshipman participants said they are uncomfortable with going to the SAPR office due to uncertainty in confidentiality. Female midshipman participants mentioned that the use of "SAPR" as a verb gives a negative connotation to the SAPR office and that they believe it makes the SAPR office unapproachable for midshipmen.

*"I feel like the SAPR office is like the last step in that process. You can talk to your friends. Then maybe they'd tell you to talk to a chaplain. And then maybe you'd go see a therapist at MDC. And then finally, last step, if you're fully comfortable with it, would be to go to the SAPR office. If someone asked me that*

*was in that situation, I would not say, 'Go to the SAPR office right now.' I wouldn't.*” —**Junior, Female**

*“[Midshipmen] turned 'SAPR' into a verb, like, 'You're getting SAPR'd. You're getting in trouble.' You're getting attacked by the SAPR office almost. It's not even you did something wrong. It's kind of used negatively when it's used as a verb instead of looked at as a resource.”* —**Junior, Female**

### **Trust in the SAPR Staff**

Participants identified who midshipmen feel are the go-to people for issues of sexual assault. Instead of speaking with SAPR office personnel, midshipman participants indicated they are more likely to speak informally to someone they trust or have a relationship with, such as friends, midshipman leadership and peers, or teachers. Midshipman participants frequently mentioned the chaplain as someone they would go to for issues of sexual assault, explaining that the chaplain is the one person they believed would maintain confidentiality and is perceived as more approachable. Midshipman participants also explained going to a chaplain meant that they do not have to be seen going into the SAPR office and can avoid assumptions from other midshipmen.

*“I know, personally, if I had an issue like that the only person I would go to is probably a chaplain. We know they are 100% confidential. And I know it's kind of stressed that they're the only ones that are 100%. So, I would personally only go to one of them.”* —**Freshman, Male**

*“You have different excuses to like, 'Oh, why are you going to the chaplain?' It's 'Oh, I had some question about some religious thing,' ... whereas if you're coming from the SAPR office, it's kind of harder to play off like, 'Oh, I was just going to shoot the breeze.'”* —**Senior, Female**

Faculty and staff participants indicated that they are comfortable with sending midshipmen to the SAPR office. Similar to perceptions among midshipmen, faculty and staff participants also acknowledged some midshipmen may prefer to speak with a chaplain or to seek resources at the MDC instead of going to the SAPR office.

*“I think some midshipmen are very comfortable with the SAPR office...Some midshipmen prefer a chaplain, some prefer an MDC, some prefer kind of more tough love, and SAPR office is very touchy-feely, in a good way, but that doesn't always resonate with midshipmen.”* —**Faculty and staff**

### **Barriers to Reporting**

Participants were asked about the barriers to reporting sexual assault and sexual harassment at the Academy. Participants identified a variety of barriers to reporting, including gender-specific barriers among other barriers to reporting sexual assault and reporting sexual harassment.

## Sexual Assault

Midshipman and faculty and staff participants discussed barriers relating to career impacts and backlash, social repercussions among midshipmen, stigmas surrounding reporting and visiting the SAPR office, and not identifying experiences as sexual assault.

**Negative career impacts.** Midshipman participants explained that there are fears that reporting sexual assault will negatively impact the career of the victim or the alleged offender. More specifically, midshipman participants expressed fears that reporting sexual assault may affect their commissioning and their careers after the Academy. The unwillingness to report due to fear of negative career impacts for the alleged offender demonstrates a level of toxic loyalty, where being loyal to other midshipmen influences a victim's willingness to report their experience. Rather than file a report, midshipmen feel the need to protect their offender on the basis of them being a fellow classmate and believing they must remain loyal to them.

*"You just don't want to affect anyone's service selection. And we have so much at stake being here that a lot of people try to seek out that lowest level possible because they don't necessarily want to make a big deal or threaten someone's career with something that they may view as fairly insignificant."*

—**Junior, Female**

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**Fear of consequences from the Academy.** Participants identified the fear of backlash as a barrier to reporting sexual assault. With respect to Academy leadership, the fear of getting in trouble with leadership when reporting sexual assault was discussed. The fear is attributed to perceptions of creating bad publicity for the Academy when reporting instead of handling it at a lower level. It was further explained that bad publicity from a sexual assault report would anger Academy leadership.

*"Publicity. I think that's what everyone fears is publicity whether it's in the media or within your own company or in the Naval Academy. And I think that's what leadership fears too. Sometimes you get the sense that they even get mad at you if you got someone in trouble, just kind of jumped the gun and got someone in trouble without keeping it at the lowest level."* —**SHAPE member**

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In order to avoid backlash, midshipman participants indicated choosing not to elevate issues of sexual harassment. However, midshipman participants also said they believe the Academy urges handling issues at the lowest level, and midshipmen apply this language to issues of sexual assault as well. Midshipman participants explained that the perception of handling issues at the lowest level deters midshipmen from reporting, instead choosing to discuss the situation with peers or to handle the situation themselves.

*"They always tell us, 'Handle it on the lowest level possible.' So instead of maybe reporting, you talk to your friends and maybe you have your friends talk to the perpetrator as opposed to making it into some sort of official or even unofficial report."* —**Freshman, Male**

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***Social consequences and the rumor mill.*** Midshipman participants described a variety of social repercussions as perceived barriers to reporting sexual assault. Midshipmen identified the rumor mill as a barrier to reporting and discussed that they fear being a topic of conversation among other midshipmen if they are seen going into the SAPR office. Moreover, midshipman participants identified fearing the possibility that details of their report would circulate among midshipmen and that they would receive poor treatment from peers. They also reported fearing that their report would create misinformation and fuel speculation that the victim is not being truthful.

*“I feel like a lot of people are afraid to report [sexual assault] and then somehow everyone hears about it, and everyone has their own story that they heard or that they tell people and then most of the rumors are half truthful and half just rumors and stuff. But like everyone hears about it and knows about it.”*

—**Sophomore, Female**

In addition to the rumor mill, midshipman participants identified social retribution and ostracism as barriers to reporting as well. They identified the perception that midshipmen who report will be excluded or will lose friends due to perceptions that the victim will report others or had reported the alleged offender with an intention to hurt them.

*“I think just kind of like social ostracization. You’re just the outcast like, ‘Oh, don’t mess with that person. They might report you for something,’ or ‘They tried to screw someone over,’ or something like that.”*

—**Senior, Male**

***False reporting and victim blaming.*** As previously mentioned in regard to midshipmen’s perceptions of sexual assault, midshipman participants recounted instances of other midshipmen blaming the victim for consequences that the alleged offender experiences, and conversations in which midshipmen speculate whether the victim is telling the truth about the reported sexual assault. Midshipman participants identified these perceptions among midshipmen as barriers to reporting for victims of sexual assault.

*“There’s going to be friends of the person you’re reporting that are going to be mad at you, or people that think that you shouldn’t have reported it or that you’re overplaying the situation. And the worst thing possible I can imagine, if you’re already a victim of that kind of circumstance is feeling like other people are mad at you for it.”*

—**Junior, Female**

*“There are two sides to every story, so let’s say you go report something and then there’s another side to it and that person’s going around giving their side of the story. And then now, there’s this big debate and a divide, and that sticks with you the whole time you’re here because, like I said, it’s a small place and things spread fast.”*

—**Freshman, Male**

***The process.*** The reporting and investigation process were identified as barriers to reporting. Midshipman participants discussed the strain that victims of sexual assault experience when reporting and moving forward with the reporting process and how the strain deters midshipmen

from choosing to report. They described the reporting process as lengthy, sometimes lasting more than a year, and requiring victims to have to relive their experiences for long periods of time.

*“So, just talking with people that have been sexually assaulted, a lot of them don’t want to bring it up or talk about it because then they have to deal with it, and not just deal with it mentally but deal with the whole process like the court martial... In some people’s minds, the person not being brought to justice does not cost as much as just them not having to deal with it.” —Senior, Male*

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**Social stigmas.** Midshipman participants identified the stigma surrounding gender and seeking help as a barrier to reporting sexual assault. Female midshipmen expressed that midshipmen who are seen going to the SAPR office or to the MDC are assumed to be getting help for a serious issue and that there is a stigma surrounding getting help and being seen as weak. Previously mentioned as bringing a negative connotation to the SAPR office, female midshipmen also discussed how the use of “SAPR” as a verb is perceived as a barrier to reporting for women, as they want to avoid being labeled as someone who will “SAPR” another midshipman.

*“There’s also a weird stigma, too, if you do go [to MDC]... If my friends who live in eighth wing see me in eighth wing, they’ll always ask what I’m doing there. And then I’m like, ‘MDC,’ and they freak out. And they just stop asking any questions, because they just don’t want to know.” —Senior, Female*

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Midshipman participants described that the stigma around masculinity has created barriers to reporting sexual assault for men. Participants discussed the perception that men cannot be sexually assaulted due to differences in physical ability and that men being sexually assaulted does not fit the bounds of masculinity. Midshipmen also discussed how those perceptions of masculinity are stronger at the Academy and in the Military, where they feel men are expected to be particularly strong and able to handle anything.

*“I think the strongest stereotype against men reporting is the one that’s always existed... which is that how can you get raped by a woman? How can you be assaulted? Was she stronger than you? It’s almost seen as defeat, like how were you not man enough to resist?” —Junior, Male*

*“Everybody here is supposed to be so strong and you’re a man in the military. You should be able to handle everything. I think the problem is just even bigger here.” —Sophomore, Female*

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**Failure to identify.** Midshipman participants indicated that a victim’s failure to identify their experiences as sexual assault is a barrier to reporting. Male midshipman participants mentioned how, for men, it is not typical to directly identify their experiences as sexual assault, and discussing their experience of sexual assault is either dismissed jokingly or met with negative comments from peers.

*“People hear the words like sexual assault and don’t think it happened to them. And then when you phrase it in the way of actually what happened, they say, ‘Oh, yeah. That happened. But I don’t view it as sexual assault,’ ... It’s like they might view themselves as weaker for being the victim or something...”*

—**Senior, Male**

Similarly, female midshipman participants indicated other female midshipmen may downplay experiences of sexual assault, talking themselves out of identifying their experience as sexual assault. Female midshipmen said they believe downplaying the severity of their experiences and the fear of being perceived as overreacting deters midshipmen from reporting sexual assault.

*“You might have to talk down a situation. You’re like ‘Well, this happened. This happened.’ And, almost justify what happened to talk yourself almost out of it regardless of how you felt, whether you felt uncomfortable or you felt like you were taken advantage of, to kind of be like, ‘Well, if you look at a situation, we were both doing this. And this was definitely wanted. I kind of led him on that way.’ So, it’s kind of like almost justifying it to the point where you’re like, ‘Well, I’m being unreasonable.’”*

—**Senior, Female**

## **Sexual Harassment**

When asked if there are barriers for reporting sexual harassment that do not exist for sexual assault, midshipman participants described not being able to clearly identify sexual harassment and don’t see it as severe enough to report.

**Harder to identify.** Midshipmen discussed not always knowing what behaviors and situations are considered sexual harassment. They also discussed how sexual harassment behaviors, such as sexual comments, happen frequently and are embedded in their culture. Because of this, midshipman participants indicated choosing to dismiss or ignore sexual harassment behaviors because of the uncertainty and the frequency with which they experience these behaviors.

*“Most of the time the guy’s kind of a creep and you’re like, ‘Is this harassment? I don’t really know if this counts. I don’t really know if anyone can do anything about it because there’s no proof, really.’ So, most of the time that’s where it gets—and then after a while the harassment gets kind of normalized.”*

—**Sophomore, Female**

*“I feel like sexual assault is pretty easy to recognize, but it’s the sexual harassment that everyone downplays and doesn’t want to overreact over.”*

—**Sophomore, Female**

**Perceived to be less severe.** Midshipman participants described the perception that sexual harassment is less serious than sexual assault and that most midshipmen believe they can handle sexual harassment themselves by ignoring the behaviors. Due to the perceptions that sexual harassment is less serious than sexual assault, midshipman participants indicated reporting or



discussing sexual harassment they've experienced can lead to negative comments from peers or the midshipman being seen as overreacting.

*"I think in terms of harassment, it's like 'Really? You're going to make a big deal about that? Really? It's not that bad.' ... Things like that, of just feeling like we're being told that harassment isn't a big deal because it's not assault. Like we should be grateful that it wasn't worse. So, I think that harassment is actually handled much more poorly than assault." —SHAPE member*

*"The barrier is almost thicker for harassment, because it can get played off like a joke more easily than sexual assault can." —Junior, Male*

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## Improvements to Reporting

While discussing the barriers to reporting, participants elaborated on ways to close the gap between the number of sexual assaults and the number of official reports. Midshipman and faculty participants alike expressed that improving midshipmen's trust in the system may improve reporting. Midshipman participants explained that reassuring they will not be punished through the conduct system or honor system, ensuring they will not have to have contact with their offender, and improving communication between midshipmen and leadership would help build trust and faith in the system. Faculty expressed improving the ability to adjudicate cases and the ability to move alleged offenders and victims while the case is under review would help improve midshipmen's faith in reporting cases of sexual assault.

*"I definitely think they need to find a way to make sure the conduct system and the honor system aren't out to get you. I definitely just feel like there's a stigma that they're out to get you. They're hunting you type of deal." —Freshman, Male*

*"The manpower, the money, the ability to quickly adjudicate. What that turns into is zero faith in the system from the midshipmen, COs, and SELs alike in the hall because all we see is it takes 6, 9, 12 months for NCIS and the rest of the adjudicating authorities to get through a case." —Faculty and staff*

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Faculty and staff participants also expressed that other ways to get more midshipmen to report include making reporting more socially acceptable among midshipmen, bringing more awareness to the reporting options that are available, and bringing more awareness to the personnel who are not mandatory reporters.

*"If we can find a way to make it socially cool or somehow more appealing to someone—because right now, you've got restricted and unrestricted... Then I think we might see a bridge in the gap there for the numbers of—again, getting everyone's buy-in on why it's important to come forward." —Faculty and staff*

*"I also think that the mids have it in their head that there are only a few people they can talk to. If they aren't comfortable talking to just anybody, I think they have to know that it doesn't have to be just the one person you can go to." —Faculty and staff*

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## Conclusions on Reporting at the Academy

Midshipmen generally have weak, and sometimes non-existent, relationships with the SAPR office. Many midshipmen do not know the location of the SAPR office and have limited knowledge of the resources available. In addition, there is a negative connotation associated with being seen at the SAPR office. Overall, midshipmen do not prefer utilizing the SAPR office in the event they experience sexual assault or sexual harassment. Midshipmen instead discuss experiences of sexual assault and sexual harassment with peers, trusted staff members, and chaplains. Midshipmen have little awareness of who is and who is not a mandatory reporter, and are choosing to confide in chaplains rather than SAPR personnel because of the known guarantee the chaplain conversation will remain confidential.

Beyond a lack of rapport with the SAPR office, reporting sexual assault and sexual harassment is negatively impacted by a perceived emphasis on Academy reputation and handling issues at the lowest level. Fears of punishment from leaders for creating bad Academy publicity if they report sexual assault or harassment are pressuring midshipmen to handle sexual assault and harassment amongst themselves or to never address them at all, and being told by leadership to handle issues at the lowest level before bringing them up the chain of command is another justification for doing so. While some sexual harassment behaviors may be handled at the lowest level, Academy leadership should encourage midshipmen to report incidents of sexual assault to ensure alleged offenders are held appropriately accountable.

## Alcohol at the Academy

Participants were asked to identify the culture surrounding alcohol use at the Academy. Participants discussed alcohol use, the close proximity of downtown Annapolis, areas where problematic behaviors occur, and perceptions of the alcohol training they receive. Midshipman participants also described how Academy pressures coincide with alcohol use, areas of alcohol training that work well, and areas to improve.

### Alcohol Use

Participants identified alcohol use among midshipmen as primarily binge drinking, discussed Academy pressures and why they engage in binge drinking, and identified the locations on- and off-campus where alcohol use occurs.

### *Binge Drinking*

When asked to describe the drinking culture at the Academy, midshipman participants described it as excessive, heavy, and glorified. Midshipman participants explained that binge drinking, particularly on the weekends, is a part of the general culture at the Academy. Over their time at the Academy, midshipmen receive more privileges and are allowed to leave the Academy on the weekend, giving them the opportunity to engage in more social activities outside of the Academy. Midshipman participants expressed how the alcohol use restrictions—particularly as a freshman when alcohol use is prohibited—do not allow them to have the same alcohol-related experiences as other college students who engage in binge drinking and learn lessons about

alcohol use during their freshman year. Instead, midshipmen engage in binge drinking later in their Academy years.

*“Trying to make up for the whole week and like you’re saying—overtime or like in three years here—I think that leads people a lot of times, second class and first year, to turn into binge drinkers, where they just go out not for the purpose of using alcohol as for social means or have a good time, but really just to black out and drink as much as possible.”* —**Junior, Male**

*“You don’t have that freshman experience... You have a couple bad binge-drinking experiences. And then, it grows old on you, and you kind of clean up your act and commit yourself to cleaning up the mess you made. You are so restricted that first year... And then all of a sudden, you’re allowed to have a small 24-, 48-hour window of freedom, and people all of a sudden don’t know how to act anymore.”* —**Sophomore, Female**

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**Alcohol use and Academy pressures.** Participants attributed binge drinking on the weekends to having a regimented and stressful schedule at the Academy. Midshipman participants expressed that they do not have outlets to release stress during the week. They explained that binge drinking is midshipmen’s way of dealing with the stress they experience during the week and their way of releasing this stress in a short-time period before returning to the Academy for another week of activities, homework, and other pressures of Academy life.

*“There’s a lot of stressors here so people rely on that. And then two, you’re locked up here like a prison for a week, and you get the weekend off, and so, it’s like, ‘Oh, I got to get all the alcohol from the weekend.’ All your friends go to a normal college, you see it on social media, and so, you go out and it’s like ‘Oh, well I got to have a good time too.’”* —**Freshman, Male**

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### **Location of Alcohol Use**

Midshipman participants indicated alcohol consumption primarily occurs off-campus in the downtown Annapolis area (DTA), at bars, at on-campus events when permitted, and at sporting events. Additionally, midshipman participants indicated that alcohol consumption occurs when midshipmen visit nearby colleges and universities.

*“I feel like the most popular non-Annapolis-related spot for Academy people is just colleges around the area. And you’ll hear some weird stories about mids that are not in DTA and go out to these colleges and just have completely outlandish stories about what they did when they were drunk because they think, like, “Oh, I’m away from the Navy. We’re not going to get in trouble.”* —**Sophomore, Male**

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Midshipman participants also indicated that alcohol consumption occasionally occurs on campus in Bancroft Hall and in locker rooms, despite strict rules against it. Some midshipman

participants attributed alcohol consumption on-campus to the Academy placing restrictions on alcohol at certain on-campus events, such as the Superbowl party.

*“People just go back to the rooms and drink, where they’re not supposed to drink. So, when you take away these places where they’re supposed to drink and then restrict that, they just go drink someplace else where they’re not supposed to drink. And then they get in trouble.”* —**Senior, Male**

### ***The Role of Alcohol in Unwanted Events***

Midshipman participants indicated that alcohol plays a significant role in unwanted behaviors, especially in the surrounding downtown Annapolis area. Female midshipman participants described a culture of avoiding male upperclassmen during late evenings in which they return to campus from alcohol-related activities, specifically being told by female upperclassmen to lock their doors. The culture stems from the idea that male upperclassmen will try to engage with female underclassmen while intoxicated.

*“Certain Naval Academy events where the upperclassmen are allowed to drink and stuff, the plebe girls are told to lock their rooms at night. So, when the firstie guys come back they don’t try to mess with you or anything.”* —**Sophomore, Female**

When identifying places where situations may get out of hand, midshipman participants identified downtown Annapolis and other nearby cities as locations that are potentially unsafe and as environments where unwanted behaviors could occur. However, some midshipman participants attributed the dangers of unwanted behaviors to locations they go to following alcohol consumption where they are removed from the public eye, including house parties, sponsored homes,<sup>18</sup> and Airbnb’s.

*“I think that most of what goes on in terms of, I guess, gender relations, even dating or unwanted sexual contact, happens outside of the Academy, whether it’s in [downtown Annapolis area], DC, places that just aren’t here.”* —**Sophomore, Male**

*“Every midshipman is assigned a sponsor family which is like a little family in Annapolis where it’s just they can go to on the weekend and stay there. And some people choose to use them more than others. But it’s really just where it ends up from there.... There’s always somebody downtown, but as soon as you start to move out from there is where it gets more dangerous.”* —**Junior, Male**

As previously discussed, some upperclassman participants described the downtown Annapolis area as an environment where midshipmen can have more comfortable interactions with each other. When describing how the drinking culture may impact gender issues, one midshipman

<sup>18</sup>Civilians within a 30-mile radius of the Academy have the opportunity to sponsor a midshipman. Civilian sponsors provide a home for the midshipman to stay when allotted and serve as an additional support system.

remarked the level of comfort between midshipmen may contribute to unwanted advances when engaging in alcohol-related activities.

*“I think people here are very comfortable with each other, and we know a lot of people. And so, when we go out and drink, a lot of people are more comfortable around each other, which sometimes can lead to unwanted advances, when in the civilian world—I don’t know. This is just what I’ve observed—people are more hesitant to approach you and to upset you.”* —**Senior, Female**

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## **Alcohol Training**

Participants were asked to describe the alcohol training they receive at the Academy, revealing positive perceptions of the alcohol training and areas where the training and peer-level efforts could improve.

### **Positive Perceptions**

Midshipman participants expressed that the alcohol training and messaging centered around safe alcohol usage and helping someone in need is better received than alcohol trainings focused on not consuming alcohol. Midshipman participants also explained that an effective method of promoting responsible alcohol use is companies’ Midnight Teachable Moments, where midshipmen within a company gather at midnight and engage in discussions on real-life scenarios, skits, and the impact that alcohol has had in their life or in other’s lives.

*“Every company has to do this thing called a teachable moment. And my company did it a little different this year. Usually, it’s skits that are based on real scenarios, but my company had people talk about how their lives have been affected by misuse of alcohol or drugs. So, having real scenarios that have affected people we know was a lot more effective than these corny skits and then analyzing them.”* —**SHAPE member**

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In addition to Academy trainings, midshipman participants described the Guardian Angel program and ShipMe resources as particularly helpful for midshipmen. The Guardian Angel program involves midshipmen who volunteer to be responsible for other midshipmen on liberty and ensure their safety. ShipMe is a service in which midshipmen within a certain radius can request transportation back to the Academy.

*“We have the Guardian Angel program where they go with ShipMe and they’ll take you back to your room and make sure you don’t do anything silly on your way back. So, there’s a lot of resources here. And they definitely teach you a lot about responsible drinking.”* —**Freshman, Male**

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## **Areas to Improve**

In general, midshipman participants indicated that they do not believe midshipmen take the alcohol training seriously. Midshipmen perceived the alcohol training, specifically referencing

“0-0-1-3”<sup>19</sup> and Alcohol Awareness Week, as ineffective, stating the idea of midshipmen not drinking at all was unrealistic. Due to perceived unrealistic expectations, midshipman participants indicated that the alcohol policies are not strictly followed.

*“There’s the Alcohol Awareness Week right before spring break, and that kind of seems like too much. I feel like there’s a lot of stuff that’s just kind of shoved down our throat... And it’s so much about like, ‘Oh, don’t over drink,’ or ‘These are the dangers of drinking,’ and all this other stuff, that they almost demonize it.”* —**Senior, Female**

*“I think you could preach that 0-0-1-3 all you want, but we all laughed because it’s kind of ridiculous.”* —**Sophomore, Male**

Midshipman participants identified areas where they believed alcohol training could improve. In general, midshipman participants said they believe there should be more of a focus on how to drink socially and responsibly. Some female midshipmen expressed that binge drinking is not addressed as being a problematic behavior and that trainings and discussions are centered on steps to take when drinking gets out of hand. They remarked that alcohol training should address why binge drinking occurs and should include coping mechanisms for stress. Midshipman participants expressed not knowing how to manage the stress from Academy pressures and wanting to receive more training on how to deal with the stress they experience.

*“I think the trainings are more garnered towards, ‘Okay, it is a culture of binge drinking.’ ... It’s like, ‘If you need help though, you have my number. Call me when you’re binge drinking.’ It’s not like we’re not going to try to change the culture of binge drinking, we’re just trying to cope with it. So maybe something actually related to the fact that we have a problem instead of how to deal with the problem we already [have] at hand.”* —**Freshman, Female**

While discussing alcohol training, participants also discussed peer-level areas of improvement for promoting a safe alcohol culture. Midshipman participants said they perceive upperclassmen as setting the tone for the alcohol culture at the Academy and believe they should steer the culture away from binge drinking as a weekend activity. However, some midshipman participants said they believe underclassmen may perceive upperclassmen as hypocritical when enforcing rules about underage drinking.

*“You want, for example, the plebes to see that the firsties can drink on the yard and then not be fools stumbling back to their rooms absolutely drunk on the weekend, because that’s normally what you do see.”* —**Junior, Female**

*“There’s like this attitude of the underclassmen of like if you’re an upperclassman enforcing no underage drinking, you’re a massive hypocrite, and they hate you for it.”* —**SHAPE member**

<sup>19</sup>The “0-0-1-3” rules refers to a set of rules for responsible drinking. The rules consist of zero drinks if someone is under 21, zero DUIs, a maximum of one drink per hour, and a maximum of three drinks per night.



## **Conclusions on Alcohol at the Academy**

Binge drinking continues to be the alcohol activity of choice on the weekends for midshipmen. Locations like Airbnb's, previously unmentioned locations in prior focus groups, have been identified as areas when alcohol use and unwanted behaviors occur. Unwanted behaviors do not always occur at the alcohol-related event, but rather at events and smaller gatherings following the alcohol-related event. Locations like Airbnb's give midshipmen the opportunity to leave public areas, such as bars, and have more private spaces for alcohol use and other activities. These private off-campus locations are additional potentially dangerous locations where midshipmen may experience unwanted behaviors since there is no supervision and no public bystanders. Many aspects of the current alcohol trainings do not resonate with midshipmen, and do not address how to cope with the Academy pressures and stress midshipmen experience that drives their binge drinking behaviors. Alcohol trainings are centered on abstaining from alcohol completely (particularly while underage) rather than drinking responsibly, and are generally ignored or viewed with contempt. Open conversations regarding alcohol use and the experiences of others are more positively received by midshipmen than trainings or lectures on abstaining from alcohol use.

## Chapter 4:

### U.S. Air Force Academy

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The United States Air Force Academy (USAFA) is located approximately 10 miles north of Colorado Springs, CO, and is home to over 4,000 cadets. The Cadet Wing is broken into four groups of approximately 1,000 cadets, which are each then further broken out into approximately 10 squadrons of approximately 100 cadets each. The Academy is a predominately male environment with a 3:1 ratio of male to female cadets, although the proportion of women increases with each passing year. Between April 9 and April 12, 2019, ten 90-minute focus groups were conducted at USAFA. Of the 10 focus groups, nine groups were conducted with student participants and one group was conducted with faculty and staff for a total of 86 student participants and five faculty and staff participants. Of the focus groups with student participants, eight groups were separated by class year and sex for the purpose of homogenizing groups (i.e., female freshmen) to better explore similarities and differences among these groups of cadets, and one group comprised cadets (men and women) who were involved with the Academy support and referral program, Personal Ethics and Education Representatives (PEER).

### Academy Culture

Participants were asked to describe the general culture at the Academy. The responses included various perspectives on daily life at the Academy and the relationships that exist among cadets. Cadet participants were also asked to identify the official and unofficial rules regarding gender relations at the Academy, including how rules are enforced, the perceived impacts of the rules, and how the rules are passed down. Moreover, cadet participants discussed the general perceptions they have of sexual assault and sexual harassment at the Academy.

### Life at the Academy

Participants spoke about their perceptions of life at the Academy, touching on the general culture, day-to-day activities, and how they interact with others.

### Competition and Stress

Cadets indicated that everyday life at the Academy is dictated by rigorous scheduling, a high degree of pressure for strong academic and military performance, and little free time, culminating in a highly stressful environment. This stress is compounded by cadets' general inability to regularly leave the Academy. Cadets noted this inability to leave the Academy as being isolating and limiting their ability to de-stress and "blow off steam." Further, some cadets identified the Academy as occupying multiple roles simultaneously: their home, place of work, and academic institution. These different settings were perceived to place sometimes conflicting expectations on cadets. Due to these stressors and their perceived lack of agency, many cadets endorsed a cynical outlook. Although cadets were generally openly cynical with peers about Academy events, they were often proud to display their Academy membership to outsiders.

*"You just kind [of] work where you sleep, where you relax, where everything is. There's no separation here. I wake up. I didn't come from my home, and I*

*walked across the block. It's just everything is intertwined, and there's no separation.*" —**Senior, Male**

*"It's even worse because you can't escape it... The officers...or the enlisted; they can be here, work, and then go home, and they're back in their environment. They're at home. We work and live in the same place, and we don't really get that distinction."* —**Sophomore, Female**

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### **Cadet Wing Rumor Mill**

Participants claimed that this tight-knit culture also provides a rich environment for the robust rumor mill that exists within the Cadet Wing. The rumor mill was described by participants as peers spreading rumors to others rapidly and pervasively, often twisting the truth or being wholly inaccurate. Many participants remarked on the pervasiveness and speed of the rumor mill, going so far as to say things one would communicate in the morning would circle back to the individual by the evening of the same day. Participants noted that the rumor mill affects their decision-making, as they need to remain cognizant of what information they do not want to be known by the friends, colleagues, and leaders that they are in constant contact with. Cadets are not only wary of what their peers may know, but also how the rumor mill may impact their reputation. Cadets viewed how others perceive them and their reputation in general as significant to their success at the Academy and their Air Force career as a whole, noting that individuals' reputations will often stick throughout an Airman's career. In addition to a reputation's perseverance, many cadets claimed reputations are also established early in one's time at the Academy.

*"Yeah, [he/she] doesn't treat this person correctly. You better believe that's probably going to make it around the wing very quickly."* —**Senior, Male**

*"With the population being so small, any hit to your reputation is going to be known by everybody here. And, your reputation plays such an important role in every aspect of the future in terms of what position you want in squad and what job you want to work. If people know you have a bad name, you're not going to get top position in the squadron. If you want a graduate school program, I mean, even that can be kind of tarnished if you have a bad reputation because everyone's going to know about that."* —**Junior, Male**

*"A lot of this place... is about how you're perceived by others...It's a hard lesson to learn and not one that I necessarily agree with, but unfortunately how you're perceived is whether or not you sink or swim here. And with us being girls it's especially true in my opinion."* —**Junior, Female**

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### **Squadron-Specific Culture**

Some cadets noted that although the Academy has an overarching culture, positive and negative experiences with regard to gender relations are also impacted by their squadron culture, which is referred to by cadets as "squad culture." Due to the Academy's highly regimented structure, the

40 Cadet Wing squadrons<sup>20</sup> form basic units in which approximately 100 cadets of all four class years interact with each other on a close and recurring basis to “live, eat and take part in military training” (USAFA, 2019c).

*“Within our squad, that’s how it is, because I think we have a great culture of respect between all the members in our squad.” —Sophomore, Female*

### **AOCs Impact on Culture**

AOCs are active duty USAF officers attached to Cadet Wing groups and squadrons who are “responsible for the health, morale, and welfare of each squadron,” according to the USAFA website (USAFA, 2019a). AOCs serve as role models for cadets and help set the tone for culture within a squadron, both because of their official designation as a leader in charge but also because of the respect many cadets have for relatable Active Duty officers. Cadets noted that AOCs who lead by example help define the culture of their squadron, especially by having zero tolerance for behaviors aligned with sexual harassment and gender discrimination. However, some AOCs were said to lack the leadership skills to set a good example for officer behavior, or even in some instances, AOCs were said to endorse toxic behaviors.

*“I know my AOC last M5 actually the second that joke was made immediately jumped on it and said, ‘No, you’re talking to me after. That was not okay.’... I didn’t even [know] what the significance was, but my commanding officer knew and immediately jumped on.” —Sophomore, Male*

*“It’s really dependent on the individual because our current AOC and AMT<sup>21</sup> have been really, really good about it. But our previous AOC got a lot of heat for the way that she handled sexual assault within our squadron.” —Sophomore, Male*

### **Relationships**

Cadets discussed the varied ways they relate to each other in Academy life, touching on how they interact as peers, how class year impacts their relationships, the effects of the fraternization rules, romantic relationships between cadets, and gender differences when it comes to bonding.

#### **General Relationships**

When asked about their relationships with other cadets, many participants spoke about the familial bonds they have within the Cadet Wing, frequently viewing other cadets as brothers and sisters.

*“For me coming here, I didn’t have a strong girl presence in my freshman and sophomore squadron, so I automatically became friends with a larger group of guys. And for me, it was like I adopted a hundred new brothers throughout being*

<sup>20</sup> The majority of the squadrons have existed since 1970, but some date back to the founding of USAFA in 1955.

<sup>21</sup> Academy Military Trainers (AMTs) are noncommissioned officer Academy cadre

*here because a lot of the men that I know here would have my back no matter what.” —Senior, Female*

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**Tight-knit community.** Cadets perceived the USAFA community as tight knit because of its relatively small size of approximately 4,000 cadets and the close quarters in which they live. The hierarchical structure of the Cadet Wing forces cadets into recurring and close contact with others in their unit, especially through basic cadet training (BCT) in their first year, which is referred to as “Beast.” Consequently, cadets often share tight bonds with one another throughout their time at the Academy and frequently anticipate maintaining these relationships long into their careers as Airmen.

*“This place is a pressure cooker, and there’s a lot of competition... but at the same time you don’t survive here without someone helping you. You may not get along with everyone all the time, but when push comes to shove and you need to come together, you can very easily.” —Freshman, Male*

*“I just want to be fair about the impression of what I see on a daily basis because I do see a lot of positive things and I have a tremendous amount of respect for cadets that are doing the right things and cadets that really care for each other.”  
—Faculty/Staff Participant*

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### **How Gender Affects Relationships**

The majority of participants said that they do not view gender as relevant to their interactions with other cadets; rather they view each other as equals and treat others of the opposite gender similarly to those of the same gender. However, the imbalanced proportion of male and female cadets was perceived to impact how cadets act.

**Academy gender ratio.** The Cadet Wing’s gender makeup impacts culture at the Academy, as roughly three-quarters of the cadets are men and one-quarter are women. This imbalanced gender ratio was described as having a degree of culture shock for some cadets coming from high schools where the student body was equally composed of male and female students. Some male cadets remarked on having their first exposure to strong female leaders at the Academy, and some female cadets commented on their time at the Academy as being their first experience with being in the gender minority. Further, many women said they feel the need to modify their behavior in order to get along with male cadets because of the gender ratio. Similarly, some female cadets believed they needed to work harder to prove themselves to those who believe women do not belong at the Academy.

*“I feel like before I came to the Academy, growing up with some older brothers, I’m obviously kind of used to being around a bunch of guys. But coming to the Academy in freshman year, I felt like I had to prove myself 10 times more than our guy counterparts.” —Senior, Female*

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Also due to the skewed gender ratio of cadets at the Academy, many women indicated seeking out friends in a different manner compared to their male peers. Namely, because there are so

few women, female participants noted making efforts to make connections with other women at the Academy for the purpose of building a more comprehensive support system.

*“I remember looking around and being shocked by the lack of diversity. I knew it was going to be a lot of white males, but it was still a lot... and really, it hit me... I had to almost teach them how to interact with a minority female. I had several people tell me that I’m the first [race] girl that they’ve ever talked to—they’ve ever seen. And that was really unique for me, because I come from a very diverse family back home.”* —**Senior, Female**

*“Especially in a squadron level, I feel like you have to learn, I guess. There’s a lot of guys, and so, sometimes you’ll be treated like a guy, just like jokes and humor and that stuff. And, it’s easy to get used to. It’s just like having a brother or something but it won’t always be like what you expect. There’s not all your girlfriends in your hallway. So you’ll just get used to having more influence of males and kind of how they speak and talk.”* —**Freshman, Female**

### **Class Year Relationships**

The Cadet Wing is organized parallel to the hierarchy of a USAF wing, in which seniors act as officers, juniors act as senior non-commissioned officers (NCOs), sophomores act as junior NCOs, and freshmen act as junior enlisted Airmen. However, because the cadet chain of command exists at the Academy as a learning tool and not as the USAF as a whole, relationships between upperclassmen are generally equitable and respectful.

Although the upperclassman cadets—also referred to as “upper three”—are typically strongly united, freshmen are generally isolated from other class years. This is due to Academy regulations that restrict the persons and types of relationships that freshmen are allowed to have.

### **Gender Beliefs at the Academy**

Participants were asked to speak about their beliefs on gender relations at the Academy, specifically regarding how men and women interact and their perceptions of Academy men and women.

### **Bro Culture**

Men and women perceived what makes someone “a bro” differently. Female participants noted that “being a bro” sometimes means turning a blind eye to behaviors that make them uncomfortable, such as sexual jokes and talking about sexual behavior. Male cadets agreed that the sentiment of “being a bro” is prevalent among cadets, but view the issue as neither gendered nor problematic. Male participants instead typically defined “being a bro” as being trustworthy, loyal, and overall a good friend. This difference remains a source of tension between Academy men and women.

*“You just have to be a bro. I hate to say it, but if you are the girl, you kind of have to be the bro because you’re under a spotlight.”* —**Junior, Female**



*“I think a good way to put [it] is somebody who’s your bro is somebody who actually cares for your well-being, and by doing that, that means if they see you doing something wrong or illegal or something like that, they’re not going to go behind your back and do something to get you in trouble. They’re, one, going to make sure you’re okay, and two, they’re probably just going to talk to you about it and make sure that your mind is in the right place and then...actually making sure you’re going to go.” —Junior, Male*

*“[Women] feel like they have to be part of the bros at all times and identify as...one of the bros. But I mean... even though bro is a gendered term, I don’t think it necessarily has to be gendered. It’s just kind of the friend group.” —Junior, Male*

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### **Similarities in Gender Beliefs Among Men and Women**

**Equity in expectations.** Men and women’s initial responses to questions about how men and women interact at the Academy were similar, often discussing the fraternal attitudes they have for one another and how the standards to which they are held are the same regardless of gender. Participants commonly cited BCT as a point at which all cadets are treated equally and held to the same standards. Many participants also noted that they do not view cadets of the opposite gender any differently than they do peers of their own gender.

*“I mean, yeah, you go through basic training; you’re all in the same level there. You’re all expected to perform the same, so you come out of that as equals. So, I feel like you start, at least, on a relative playing field.” —PEER Participant*

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**Imbalanced gender ratio.** Both men and women cited that the imbalanced gender ratio impacts gender relations at the Academy, but there were different understandings of how it specifically impacts peer gender relations. This is similar to how the perception of being a “bro” was acknowledged by male and female cadets, but their understandings of what it means to be a “bro” differed.

**Perception of a quota.** Many participants of both genders also noted there is a perceived gender-based quota for leadership positions based on the history of leadership. Although both male and female participants noted this perception, the idea of a quota appeared to engender more negative reactions among male cadets, such as frustration about the notion that some leaders were not chosen on merit or that some female cadets were admitted to the Academy in place of more qualified male applicants.

*“When it comes to picking people for leadership jobs, I guess sometimes—and I guess this is squadron dependent—but certain squadrons feel obligated to pick somebody just on the basis of, ‘Oh, they’re a woman, so I should give them that chance.’ Or, ‘Oh, they’re a woman and a minority. I should give them the chance to X or to have this position.’” —Senior, Female*

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*“With the wing commanders, if you look back in our time, at least, and before, there’s a clear pattern... I’m not making assumptions. But I’m pretty sure it went white male, black male, female, white male black male, female...”*

—**Sophomore, Male**

### **Differences in Gender Beliefs Among Men and Women**

Participants discussed other beliefs about gender that were prevalent at the Academy. The noteworthy topics that were raised included the perceptions of female cadets, self-censorship of male cadets, and the idea of perceived entitlement by some cadets.

**Perceptions of women.** Some participants noted negative beliefs about female cadets at the Academy, namely that women were perceived as less capable than men and that female leaders indicated feeling judged as either a pushover or pushy based on their leadership style. Participants noted this belief affects many female cadets in leadership positions, as they were said to receive more criticism and second-guessing from other cadets than their male counterparts.

**Self-censorship among men.** Many participants perceived male cadets to self-censor around female cadets out of fear that what they might say could offend females. This was perceived by both male and female cadets and was not limited to cadet leaders, but it was said to be somewhat prevalent among male cadets in general. Additionally, some participants noted male cadet leaders were deficient in their handling of female subordinates, sometimes referring them to female cadet leaders when they did not know how or were uncomfortable giving direction on a matter.

*“Watch your mouth. Watch what you say around girls...There’s certain jokes of guys that do [sport] that you obviously can’t do it here with other guys, too, but you definitely can’t do it around girls because that’s a good way to leave.”*

—**Junior, Male**

*“In general... I think guys are much more willing to yell, really get in the face of other guys than they are of females, just because that may come off as...I think you just look more like a jerk if you’re making some female do 100 pushups and yelling in their face.”* —**Freshman, Male**

*“I will have to say I think there is kind of an unwritten rule for guys in regards to being sensitive towards other females and not making offensive comments, and I think that’s actually a really powerful culture change that we’ve had that...I think culture-wise, USAFA has changed. I don’t want to say night and day because I don’t think that’s fair to USAFA, but this place has changed so much since I was a four-degree, which is very inspiring. And being able to see that culture has been amazing.”* —**PEER Participant**

**Perception of entitlement.** Finally, some male cadets said that some Academy women have an unwarranted sense of self-worth that is driven by the relatively few women at the Academy,

which results in disproportionate attention from male cadets and is referred to by cadets as “Golden P\*\*\*\* Syndrome,” or GPS.

*“Essentially, what [GPS] is, is that because of the ratio of males to females at the Academy, people have this perception that females tend to think of themselves higher than they would if they were at a normal civilian institution. And so, I think in general, male cadets perceive that, and that makes them wary of pursuing relationships with female cadets in general, especially because there’s so many of us. If you make a dumb mistake or something, they could easily just drop you and then move on to whatever’s next.” —Junior, Male*

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## **Official and Unofficial Rules Around Gender Relations**

Cadets were asked to describe rules that affect gender relations at the Academy, both official rules at the institution and unofficial rules not found in policy.

### **Official Rules**

Cadets identified several official rules that impact their interactions with cadets of the opposite gender, specifically the fraternization rules surrounding freshman students, physical fitness standards, the dormitory door closure rules, and grooming/uniform standards. With regards to the rules on class year relations, the Academy has codified rules around cadet interactions with freshman students that strictly forbid unprofessional relationships between freshmen and cadets of all other class years. Unprofessional relationships include romantic relationships and friendships, but do not usually include interactions on sports teams. The Academy also has policy in place around how cadets must leave dormitory doors open contingent on the class years of persons in the room: if a freshman is in the room with someone of the upper three class years, the door must remain open. As for official rules with gender-specific standards, physical training standards at the Academy mirror those found in the Air Force at large and contain different scoring criteria based on the subject’s sex. Additionally, male and female cadets are held to different grooming and uniform standards per USAF regulations. Specifically, female cadets discussed how the grooming and uniform rules for male and female cadets differ and were perceived to be enforced differently based on gender.

### **Unofficial Rules**

Cadets also identified a number of unofficial rules they follow while at the Academy. Male and female cadets discussed the common unofficial rule called “be smart about being stupid,” or essentially have a plan when it comes to breaking the rules. Another prevalent rule that was discussed was that Academy men should avoid dating Academy women. Although dating within one’s squad is against regulations and referred to as “squadcest” by cadets, dating within the wing is allowed but strongly discouraged for men by their male peers. Participants said that the rationale behind this rule is that because of the tight-knit nature of the wing, breakups are messy and undermine unit cohesion. Some participants claimed that the rule exists because the female cadet will get you in trouble. Men noted that although this is an oft-repeated rule, few follow it. Women were largely aware of this rule but did not feel the same rule existed with regard to them dating a male cadet.

*“I think one of the most widely spread advice is ‘be smart about being stupid,’ so which kind of feeds into the whole be cognizant of where you’re doing stuff and who’s around. And if something’s a bad idea, either don’t do it, or make sure you’re careful with who you have around when you do it.” —Junior, Male*

*“Even if the relationship were to just end normally, you still have to see that person... You’re probably sitting two people over from them in your capstone class, or in your SocSci, which has 25 people in it... It’s just a little bit of a different dynamic where, should things go bad, even if it doesn’t turn into getting you in trouble, you still have to interact with that person on a daily basis.” —Senior, Male*

## Enforcement and Perception of Rules

These official and unofficial rules were believed by participants to have impacts on Academy gender relations, ranging from self-policing behavior by upperclassmen when interacting with freshmen to undermining accomplishments of peers based on their gender.

### Fraternization

Participants perceived that the fraternization rules are typically taken seriously by cadets, and thereby strictly followed. These rules were said to effectively isolate freshman cadets, as they can only socialize with other freshmen, although they may interact in professional settings with upperclassmen such as participation on sports teams, academics, and military studies. For upperclassmen, the strictness of the fraternization rule can create uncomfortable interactions with freshmen because of the hyper-professional nature of the relationship.

*“You definitely can’t have unprofessional relationships with underclassmen, especially females.” —Senior, Male*

*“I definitely think as a freshman girl, especially, there’s that level of respect. And since we’re not allowed to frat with anybody, they are all super protective of us. So, we haven’t really—besides those few upperclassmen who might be intoxicated—most people are pretty respectful of us.” —Freshman, Female*

**Shark Week.** One consequence of the fraternization rules is the concept of “Shark Week.” First identified in the 2017 SAGR report, “Shark Week” refers to the period of time when freshmen are recognized as sophomores, and thereby, are allowed to develop personal relationships with other upperclassmen (Barry et al., 2017b). Lifting the restrictions on social interactions with this class year exposes these cadets to an influx of social attention, both romantic and platonic. Although, in the past, “Shark Week” was noted to be centered on upperclassmen targeting newly recognized sophomores with romantic and sexual attention, a few participants stated that the term is also used to describe platonic friendships that naturally developed during one’s freshman year.

*“The freshmen are people you can’t touch when it comes to the social interaction—anything outside of training—and then maybe once they become*

*recognized, then kind of that's all solved. But then there's the upper three classes of social interaction."* —**Senior, Female**

*"I know I've gotten a lot of stories from people about right after frat is no longer a thing. There's a lot of upperclassmen that basically attack the newly available fresh meat, or however you want to say that. And it's not good in a lot of cases. Sometimes it's the people you want to be friends with, you can finally say, 'Sweet, we're both upperclassmen, and we can have a more personal relationship, and it's totally fine.' But then there are definitely some upperclassmen that will DM<sup>22</sup> the whole squad and see what they can get."* —**PEER Participant**

*"For the most part, the Shark Week is like, 'Oh yay, I can be friends with the... four degrees now.' It's, for the most part, it's nowhere near bad intentions. It's like, 'Hey... you seem like a cool person I'd want to hang out with, but I couldn't last year because of the training and divide.'"* —**PEER Participant**

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### **Door Closure Rule**

The dormitory door closure rule for cadets at the Academy has an impact on students. USAFA's rules on door closure in dormitories are more liberal than those at other MSAs, and cadets noted this permissiveness as a reason for fewer gender-related impacts, although some participants claimed that the rules are handled differently for men and women, with male cadets being more careful around entering women's rooms.

*"If I'm going to another guy's room, I'll knock maybe once and sometimes you wait for a response. But I've noticed too, if I'm going to a girl's room, I'll knock twice, be like, 'Hey, it's [name]. Is it okay to come on in?'"*  
—**PEER Participant**

*"You can talk to my friends in the Naval Academy. [At the Naval Academy] if you're the one female that's going in there to watch a movie on a Friday night, and you know they can shut the door if you're not there, there's going to be social pressure to just leave. And it just changes how much you interact. So, I think [not having that rule is] really something that we have that's great,"*  
—**Junior, Female**

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### **Physical Training Standards**

Cadets raised physical fitness standards as a significant point of contention between men and women at the Academy, citing several factors. Some male participants perceived that they are held to a double standard in which men's failing scores are considered "passing" or "high performing" for women, regardless of physical and biological differences. For some men in the focus groups, this perception drove a feeling of resentment toward being "held back" by female cadets, a sentiment that also affects women's attitudes and behaviors. In turn, female cadets indicated that they feel discriminated against, unwelcome, and unappreciated by many of their

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<sup>22</sup> DM is short for Direct Message, a form of online communication typically on social media

peers, as negative comments effectively undermine legitimate accomplishments of Academy women such as excelling in physical training, attaining leadership positions, or even admittance to the Academy. Female cadets consequently often perceive that it is necessary to compensate for this perception of being less capable by working harder to excel.

*“[Male cadets] think that their physical fitness test is way harder and that we should have the exact same sort of test even though they’re proportionate to our biology. And they’re just like, ‘Well, girls shouldn’t be here because of that,’ or, ‘You’re not good enough because you’re not doing the same amount of work as me,’ is what I kind of get sometimes.”* —**Senior, Female**

### **Class Year Differences**

Aside from Academy rules around fraternization with freshmen, a few class year differences exist within the Cadet Wing generally, for seniors, and for freshmen. With regards to Academy culture around class year, a degree of deference is typically given to higher class years, but cadets noted that generally, once someone is recognized as a sophomore, they are considered to be an upperclassman and accepted into the group.

*“So, hundred’s weekend, it’s pretty much no upperclassmen around, and a lot of sketchy stuff happens... It’s just a really sketchy time because it’s the only time you get freedom for freshman year before recognition.”* —**PEER Participant**

*“It’s like you’re a regular college, once you’re past recognition.”*  
—**Sophomore, Male**

**Seniors.** Seniors enjoy more privileges than other class years, such as ownership of televisions and vehicles, unlimited leave from the Academy, and they also command the most respect from other cadets. Notably, seniors were said to act cautiously when approaching graduation in an effort to avoid any potential trouble that could interfere with their timely commissions as officers in the USAF, especially during “hundreds weekend,” the period during which the senior class is 100 days from graduating and spends the weekends off Academy grounds.

**Freshmen.** Participants noted that because of the division of class years, with freshmen being generally isolated, freshmen often try to make their presence known as little as possible. Participants indicated that freshmen often try to get by while keeping their heads down in an effort to make it to recognition as a sophomore.

### **Passing Down Rules and Culture**

When asked about how they learned the unwritten rules, participants identified several avenues. Most often, cadet participants stated that they learned these lessons either firsthand or by observing peers’ behaviors and consequences of those behaviors. Some cadets claimed that upperclassmen had taught them these rules, especially sophomore cadets when they were freshmen.



### ***Passing Down Rules to Women***

Many female cadet participants noted that some of the rules and culture that were passed down to them were unique from the rules passed down to cadets overall. Female cadets claimed that they were warned to stay away from certain sports teams or individuals who were suspected within the Cadet Wing of endorsing negative behaviors. Additionally, some women also claimed that their female leaders taught them that they will need to work harder to prove themselves to others.

*“And she was yelling at us and she’s like, ‘You are a minority... you will be treated like one here... You have to put out your very, very best just to be seen as equals and you have to know that going into it... They will look for every single thing to discount you and then judge every other girl because of it based off of your actions.’ And so that was kind of like an eye opener type thing for me.”*

—**Freshman, Female**

*“In my squad, a lot of the upperclassmen are female, they’re just going to stay away from certain group of guys here, like certain sports team stuff. Just be careful, which I thought was pretty interesting. And, it’s not like one person... multiple people saying about the same group, like, ‘Stay away from them.’”* —**Freshman, Female**

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### **Perceptions of Sexual Assault and Sexual Harassment**

Although there were many differences between male and female participants with regard to their perceptions of sexual assault and sexual harassment, participants of both genders believe that social ineptitude is a driving force behind some of these incidents of sexual harassment and sexual assault. Cadets, faculty, and staff participants believe that because cadets are generally academically high performing, they also lack mature social skills to navigate the complex environment of the Academy. In other words, some cadets were perceived as lacking “street smarts” like knowing how to get along with others because they were so “book smart.”

### ***Perceptions Held by Female Cadets***

When discussing cadet perceptions of sexual assault and sexual harassment, several differences between Academy men and women were identified. Many women asserted that male cadets are openly defensive over accusations of sexual assault and that such attitudes drive a wedge between men and women. Female participants cited frustration with these attitudes, stating that some male cadets would defend individuals even when found guilty in legal proceedings. These attitudes were said to impress on female cadets that their male peers do not prioritize these issues, which are perceived as particularly damaging coming from close peers. Some women also indicated experiencing similar negative attitudes from male peers. When asked about changes over time, some women noted that their experiences since entering the Academy were actually worse when it came to discrimination by men and that they had no idea inequality was as much of an issue until they came to USAFA.

*“All of the male cadets are saying like, ‘Oh, it’s like this guy is guilty until proven innocent instead of the other way around.’ I don’t know if you’ve ever heard that.”*

*But they're just trying to give the victim support, but they end up making it about all the woman's fault anyway." —Senior, Female*

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### **Perceptions Held by Male Cadets**

Although few Academy men explicitly endorsed victim-blaming attitudes, many male cadets claimed that they feel collectively blamed by others, including Academy senior leadership, for a handful of incidents of sexual harassment and sexual assault. Male participants expressed their frustration that despite not taking any indecent or illegal action themselves, they feel as though they are held responsible. Some participants indicated that male athletes feel this to a greater extent. Similarly, some men perceived that in regard to sexual assault incidents, public attitudes treat alleged offenders as “guilty until proven innocent,” citing damage to an individual’s reputation as inevitable when accused of sexual assault, regardless of evidence of innocence. Consequently, many men indicated feeling afraid of being falsely accused of sexual assault and/or sexual harassment and identified false reporting of sexual assault as a problem. Furthermore, many men were not sure how they could improve Academy sexual assault and sexual harassment prevention efforts, as they did not perceive it as an issue at the Academy. Academy men struggled to prioritize sexual assault as an issue if they had no connection to the matter; men who personally knew, or knew of, a victim of sexual assault appeared to more frequently claim that prevention efforts are important for the Academy.

*“It bothers me because it’s the whole innocent until proven guilty thing. And a lot of times I think the way that we tend to handle things at the Academy, especially at the squadron level, kind of portrays the person as already being guilty, even though there hasn’t really been any type of process that’s led to any verdict.”*  
—Junior, Male

*“The biggest challenge with knowing how I can do my part in preventing sexual assault and harassment is we always have these briefings and education about sexual assault and how to prevent it and everything, but I mean... We don’t see it going on. Where is the harassment? Where are the derogatory comments to the woman? Where is this happening? ...It might be happening behind closed doors that we don’t see, but...maybe I’m just not ever in that environment...but it’s really hard to relate because I don’t see that ever.”* —Junior, Male

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### **Conclusions on Academy Culture**

“Bro culture” remains a significant aspect of cadet culture at USAFA that influences attitudes towards women at the Academy, including female cadets’ behavior. While the label of “bro culture” is new, the concepts behind it have been seen in prior focus group efforts at the Academy. “Bro culture” appears to influence negative attitudes as well as discriminatory behaviors against high-performing female cadets. “Bro culture” also appears to encourage female cadets to tolerate behaviors they may otherwise consider unwanted in an attempt to fit in with others and be perceived as a “bro.” As it stands now, the “bro culture” currently drives resentment between male and female cadets and undermines the Academy’s culture of respect. Additionally, because unhealthy workplace climate is a driver of sexual assault victimization risk

(Grifka et al., 2018), the unhealthy aspects of this “bro culture” may also impact the prevalence of sexual assault at USAFA.

Middle-level leaders, particularly AOCs, play an important role in establishing healthy culture. With regard to acceptable workplace behavior, inconsistencies between AOCs reactions to unhealthy behaviors they witness may model disparate ideals of officer conduct to cadets. Some of these unhealthy behaviors include perpetuating stereotypes around reporting incidents of sexual harassment or sexual assault, as well as unacceptable behavior and speech. AOCs continue to be influential figures among cadets due to their relatability with regards to age and the respect they command from cadets as USAF officers.

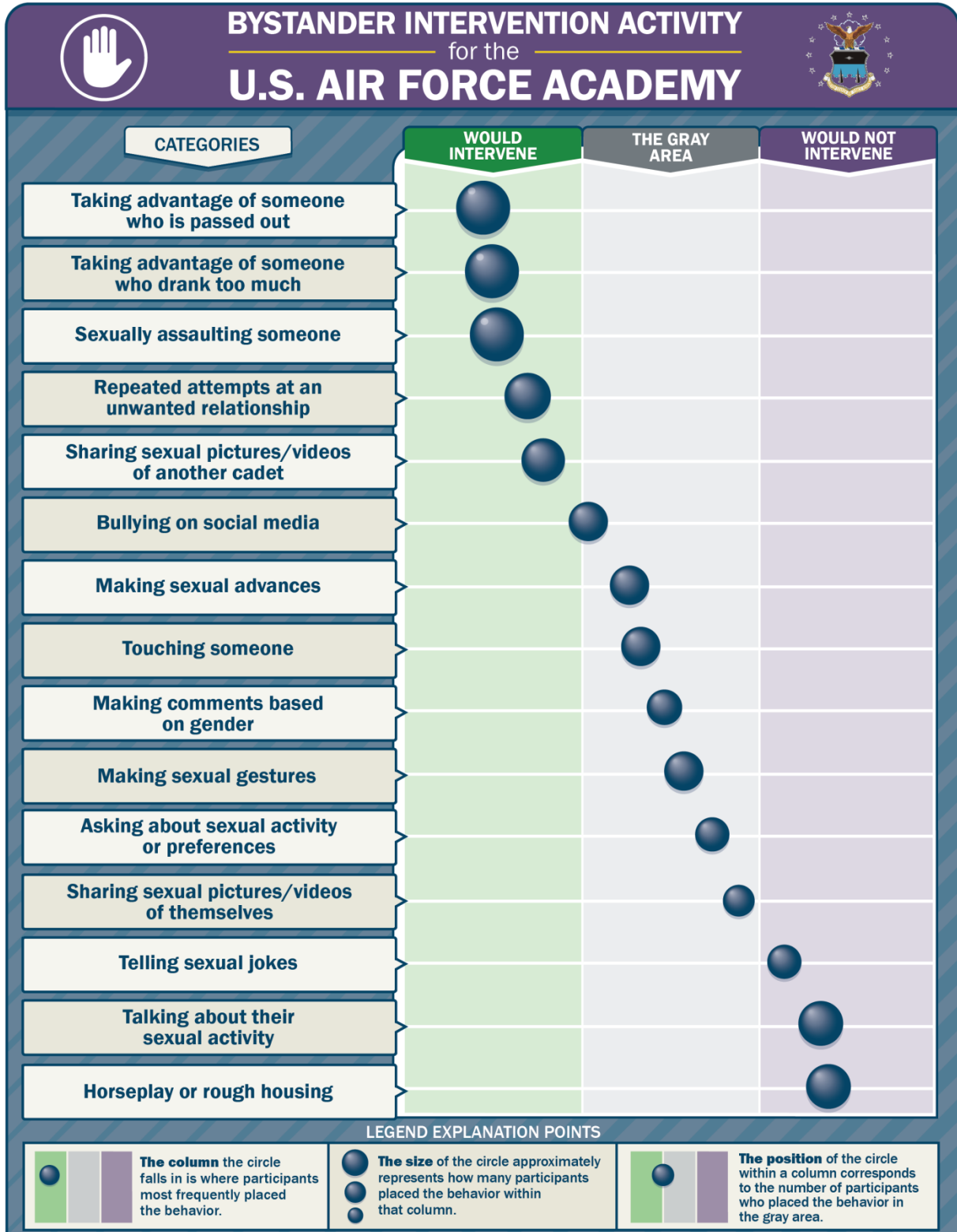
## **Prevention at the Academy**

Although providing victims of sexual assault with resources and avenues to access recourse is necessary, it is not sufficient in eliminating sexual assault from the Department of Defense, and thereby the Academy. Preventing these incidents from happening remains a priority for Academy and Department leaders. Cadet participants were asked several questions surrounding prevention of sexual assault at the Academy, including what kind of behaviors they would and would not intervene in, what official trainings they have participated in that focused on sexual assault prevention, and how different elements of Academy leadership work to prevent sexual assault.

### **Bystander Intervention and Training**

During the course of the focus groups, cadet participants were asked to identify whether or not they believe they would intervene in a number of problematic behaviors they could potentially witness between a variety of people. Participants were also given the option to identify these behaviors as being in the “gray area,” a term used to indicate when a participant was unsure how they would react. Participants were given a set of stickers representing a range of behaviors aligned with sexual assault and sexual harassment and were asked to place them on a continuum where one end signified “would definitely intervene,” the other end signified “would definitely not intervene,” and the middle of the spectrum signified the “gray area” where intervention was uncertain. The behaviors ranged in severity from verbal jokes and comments to sexually assaulting someone and behaviors could appear in multiple categories. Participants then discussed specific situations where they would or would not intervene, what contributes to the decision to intervene, and the techniques they use when doing so. Figure 7 displays which behaviors cadets would and would not intervene in, as well as which behaviors fell in the gray area. Cadets were asked to discuss their rationale for placing behaviors where they did on the continuum. The resulting discussions illuminated several factors that contribute to reasons for intervening and not intervening in risky behaviors.

**Figure 7.**  
*Bystander Intervention Activity at the U.S. Air Force Academy*



### ***Cadets Would Intervene***

When asked which behaviors they would intervene in when observed, male and female cadets often reported that they would intervene in situations involving sexual assault, taking advantage of someone who is asleep, and taking advantage of someone who is drunk. Less severe, but still noted as a behavior that participants would intervene in, were repeated attempts to initiate a romantic relationship, and a few participants noted sharing sexual pictures of another cadet is severe enough to warrant intervention. When asked why these behaviors warranted their intervention, participants identified several factors that would motivate them to step in. One of the most prevalent factors was the severity of the behaviors being unambiguously harmful and/or unwanted. Many cadets noted how these behaviors leave no room to perceive them as anything other than harmful. Additionally, participants identified that these behaviors do not provide clear indications of consent from both parties or the victim has no agency to act and is thus violated. When asked about their willingness and comfort to intervene, the majority of cadets said they would be very comfortable intervening should the situation warrant it.

*“I think we kind of rated it on a scale of not too harmful to absolutely detrimental. And so, horseplay or roughhousing, I wouldn’t intervene because it’s just like I don’t see that as anything bad. But yeah, the bullying on social media or the sexually assaulting someone, that I definitely would intervene and stop that right there.”* —**Senior, Female**

*“I was just going to say, you can just look at a lot of [these behaviors], and you feel morally repulsed by the idea of anybody doing these things.”*  
—**Junior, Male**

*“With those [behaviors I would intervene in], those are the ones...that they’re not going to stop unless someone else steps in. So that’s kind of why I put them [on the intervene side] because it’s not something that the victim themselves could take care of on their own.”* —**PEER Participant**

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### ***Cadets Would Not Intervene***

Participants also identified the behaviors they would not intervene in and the factors surrounding those decisions not to intervene. These behaviors included roughhousing/horseplay, someone talking about their sexual activity, and sharing sexual pictures of oneself. The rationale behind participants’ assertions that they would not intervene in these situations was primarily driven by the perception that these behaviors are none of their business, they perceive consent by both parties, the behaviors are normal at the Academy, or a situation is one that the victim has agency to stand up for themselves should they find the behavior unwanted. Cadets in the focus groups identified several normalized behaviors they would not intervene in at the Academy, notably horseplay and ground fighting. Participants described frequently encountering other cadets engaged in playful ground fighting—a type of grappling considered a cornerstone of hand-to-hand combat and a graduation requirement taught to build warrior ethos—in hallways and other non-athletic facilities on Academy grounds.

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*“Horseplay can go too far. But I guess the way I thought of it originally... I’m not going to stop a hall brawl.” —Senior, Male*

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### **The “Gray Areas”**

The cadets discussed behaviors in the “gray areas” and the factors that influenced their decision to place them there. The “gray areas” consisted of behaviors and situations in which cadets were unsure if they would intervene or not. Participants identified behaviors that fell into the “gray area” as unwanted touching, making sexual advances, telling sexual jokes, and making sexual gestures. Cadets stated that these behaviors fell into the “gray area” of intervention primarily due to the context surrounding the behavior, such as the relationship of the persons in the situation to the bystander, the time and place of the situation, as well as the bystander’s ability to pick up on non-verbal cues.

**The role of context.** Participants stated that context is key when it comes to behaviors in the “gray area”, especially surrounding the identity of the offender and the victim in the hypothetical situation. The factors of time and place and not knowing the persons in the situation played a large role in participants’ uncertainty toward the hypothetical situations.

*“A lot of it fell on [the gray area], because I didn’t know them. I don’t know their situation. They could be talking. They could be actually dating...If it looks like nobody is trying to fight against it, okay, not my business to intervene...So to me it’s all about, what is the situation that’s going on?...There are some things that are just black and white, and there are some things that have a lot of gray area going on.” —Senior, Female*

*“A lot of the other [behaviors] like the talking about sexual activity or preferences or touching someone or things like that, you don’t necessarily know whether or not it’s a negative or positive interaction that’s occurring. You need more context to have an understanding.” —Junior, Male*

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Cadets were asked how knowing the individuals in the hypothetical situation would affect their decision to or not to intervene. Many participants noted that as a bystander, knowing the persons in the situation would make it easier for them to decide to intervene for several reasons. For example, if the persons in the situation were friends, participants claimed that it would be easier for them to intervene or know they should not intervene based on the behavior. In the case of behaviors warranting intervention, participants identified motives of wanting to protect someone they care about if the victim is their friend and wanting to prevent a friend from doing something wrong if the offender is their friend.

Participants also stated that knowing the persons would allow them to know what those individuals considered normal or acceptable with regard to social interaction, and thereby the participants would not intervene in behaviors they considered normal. On the contrary, while most participants felt comfortable intervening generally, they claimed that intervening in situations involving strangers is less comfortable, as they could be unwittingly interfering in consensual interactions.



*“And it’s really easy... not to misinterpret taking advantage of someone who’s passed out, taking advantage of someone who’s drank too much... versus some of the other things like making comments or making jokes. You don’t know necessarily the relationship between those two people. And between the two of them that might be completely kosher.” —Senior, Male*

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Not only does knowing the individuals have an impact on decisions to intervene, but so do the identities of the persons as fellow cadets or civilians. Participants noted being more comfortable intervening in situations involving cadets for reasons similar to those with persons they know, but they also said that having an established in-group membership with other cadets makes it easier to intervene, even if they have had no prior relationship. Lastly, participants also asserted that class year differences impact their hypothetical intervention. Although cadets of all class years indicated feeling generally comfortable reporting, freshman participants appeared less willing to intervene, especially when the situation involves upperclassman cadets. This hesitance for freshmen to intervene was said to include fear they might get in trouble or punished by an upperclassman.

*“If we were freshmen, you might be a little bit more hesitant to say on some of these [behaviors]. Obviously, some of these are—taking advantage of someone, you would say something either way. But I don’t know. Making sexual jokes or something, they’re like, ‘Okay. I’m not going to say anything. I don’t want to get in trouble.’” —Senior, Male*

*“I didn’t do anything about [a situation I observed when I was a freshman] because I felt like I didn’t have that power to do something. And that is something that compels me to do something now because I constantly feel like, ‘Yeah, I was a freshman, but yes I was still human. Yes, I would have done it with good intent.’” —Senior, Female*

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With regard to the time and place of the situation, some participants indicated feeling that the Academy itself presents a challenging setting with regard to intervention because of the multiple roles it occupies for cadets. Participants stated that they perceive the Academy to be their home, place of work, academic institution, and social space, thereby holding different standards for acceptable or expected behavior. Specifically, participants claimed that behavior that might be acceptable in some situations would not be in others, such as talking about sexual behavior. Cadets noted that they might intervene if these behaviors occurred in public, but not necessarily in private.

*“I had a couple of those [behaviors] in the gray areas just, because it’s really situational. I think a lot of it—pretty much anything that goes from upperclassmen to four degree can shift it to I would intervene, just because truly unprofessional. But then at the same time, if it’s just a neutral—this is in a bar, and I see two guys or something like that, or at a party or something—I would have to judge the atmosphere, whereas there’s not a hard line.” —Junior, Male*

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*“We eat here. We sleep here. We work here. We go to school here. Technically, this is supposed to be a professional setting but for college kids and we live here. So, it kind of gets gray,” —Junior, Female*

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**The role of non-verbal cues.** As the context of the situation impacts a bystander’s decision to intervene in gray area behaviors, so does the perceived consent of the observed parties through non-verbal cues. Participants noted that their decision to intervene also largely relies on their perception of consent among the observed parties. This perceived consent was identified by a number of factors such as facial expressions, appearing trapped, looking afraid, or otherwise generally uncomfortable.

*“How uncomfortable somebody looks, like body language, facial cues... If somebody is looking like they’re trying to get away and trying to walk away or looking really uncomfortable, okay, well maybe that’s something I would go up to them and go like, ‘Hey, let’s talk about this,’ and just change the subject and get them away sort of thing.” —Senior, Female*

*“The touching someone, inherently there’s [nothing] inherently wrong with that one, but if you see that someone’s got a problem with it, and you can tell by their body language, then that can make it go the intervene side very quickly if you see that’s an unwanted touching.” —Junior, Male*

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## **Bystander Intervention Training**

Cadets who participated in the focus groups were asked about their Academy-provided training on sexual assault and sexual harassment prevention—namely bystander intervention training. These discussions touched on areas in which that cadets felt well-trained, specific intervention techniques, and participant suggestions for training improvement.

**Well-trained areas.** Participants indicated that Academy training actively addresses sexual assault and harassment prevention and perceived their training as heavily emphasizing intervention. However, many participants noted that they perceived trainings as emphasizing the importance of intervention rather than how to intervene.

**Areas to improve training.** Participants also discussed several opportunities to improve the current Academy trainings on prevention. The most commonly discussed idea was small group discussions. Participants noted how a setting with large numbers of cadets makes it easy for some to not pay attention and harder for cadets with questions to speak up. Participants indicated that small group forums could be beneficial, as they would allow cadets to ask questions, speak their minds, and have back and forth discussions. Participants also noted that facilitators of the trainings should be relatable to them, ideally junior USAF officers, and Academy alumni, as they embody what all cadets work toward and are close enough in age to remain approachable.

*“I think the smaller group’s better because people then have to contribute as opposed to just sit there and say, ‘I’m getting talked at all the time.’ Now people can provide some more perspectives on it and give more personal examples,*

*maybe with people that they know, so they may feel more comfortable.”*  
—**Senior, Male**

*“That small group discussion on a certain topic that people are interest[ed] about, having to do with things within the realm of sexual assault and sexual abuse. It was eye-opening... We should have more of those, because it really opens peoples’ eyes.”* —**Freshman, Female**

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Cadet participants also provided feedback on the content of the trainings in addition to the format. Some participants explained that real-life examples or scenarios from the Military or the Academy resonated with cadets. Additionally, participants indicated wanting to see a breadth of behaviors across the spectrum, not just black-and-white scenarios in which behaviors are clearly unacceptable, but more exploration of the “gray area” situations and what makes those incidents acceptable or unacceptable, as those type of explanations would help them determine how to act in those real-life “gray area” scenarios. Also, regarding intervening in “gray area” situations, participants discussed a desire for training to address fears about inaccurately identifying risky situations, such as intervening in a situation that is actually consensual. Similarly, some participants said they want training to further clarify consent and to focus on the negative impacts on the victim, as an attempt to get hesitant cadets to buy into prioritizing sexual assault prevention. Finally, some male participants said they want training to illustrate situations with male victims in an effort to reduce the stigma of victimization with men and to help men accurately identify what sexual assault of a male victim looks like.

**Intervention techniques.** When asked about the details of prevention training and what intervention techniques were taught, cadets struggled to identify specific techniques from their trainings. Participants perceived their training as either missing detail on specific interventions or they did not remember the specific intervention techniques taught. However, participants still claimed that they feel comfortable intervening regardless of this perceived deficiency, and they noted that because of the varied situations in which sexual assault could happen, flexibility in technique would be superior to a one-size-fits-all intervention technique.

*“I’ve been taught just to do something rather than giving specific examples. They always talk about the bystander effect and don’t be the person who just watches, but then they don’t really tell you what to do. I don’t know if you guys have experienced that, but I can’t think of specific examples. I know what I would do but can’t think of what I’ve been taught to do.”* —**Sophomore, Male**

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Participants discussed intervention techniques that they would use; often identifying checking in with the people in the situation to make sure everything is “OK.” This direct but non-confrontational approach was endorsed by many participants as what they would likely do in a hypothetical situation. Some participants claimed they would be more confrontational, as they would feel justified based on the situation itself and on the context of the behavior. Clear-cut situations of sexual assault and taking advantage of another person were perceived as deserving this confrontational approach, as well as some behaviors that set bad examples, such as making explicit jokes. Other cadet participants said they feel strength in numbers and would enlist the help of friends or other cadets in the vicinity as wingmen. Depending on the severity of the

situation, and whether the bystander knows the offender or not, participants also claimed that they might follow up with the offender to let them know that their behavior was not acceptable.

*“I’d say utilizing wingman concepts, so I went to my friend, and I was like, ‘Yo, I’m going to go take care of something. If something goes bad, you’ve got my back, right?’ So yeah, it’s just letting someone know if you are about to go do something.” —Sophomore, Male*

*“I think that depends on the situation. One day... there was a doolie<sup>23</sup> at my table that made a rape joke, and I cussed him out in front of the other doolies, because I thought he deserved it because it was pretty blatant. It was really bad. And he never did it again.” —Junior, Female*

*“You always have to do it privately. I feel like if you do it publicly then you’re just undermining everything you’re doing because they just feel like you’re trying to expose them and make a statement or things like that. But if you’re like, ‘Hey, look. Would you mind talking to me at your earliest convenience?’ Put it on them. Be friendly, and then when you talk to them, just be stern and very clear about what you want to say.” —Junior, Male*

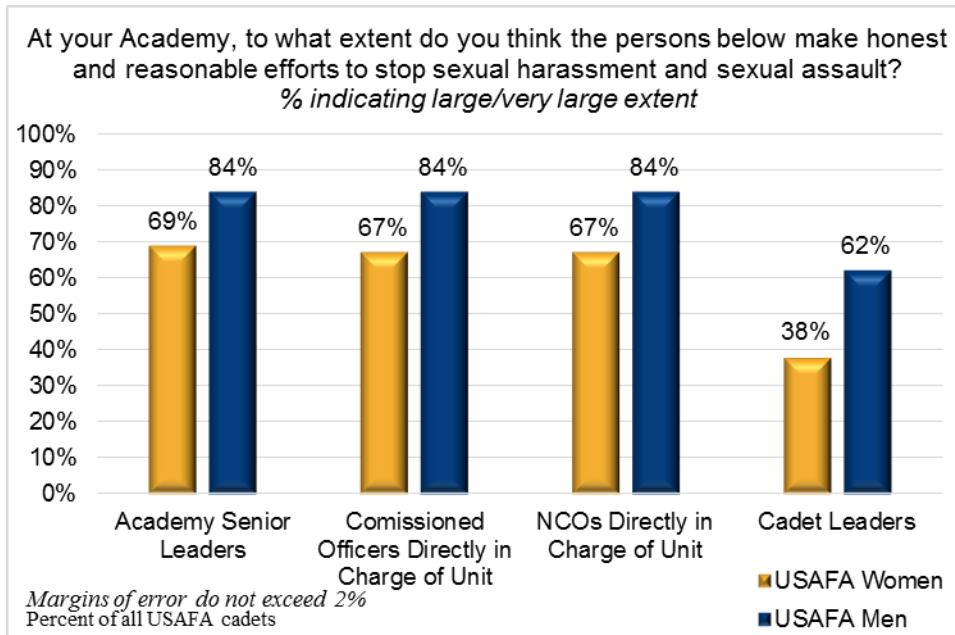
## Leadership and Prevention

In addition to training efforts to prevent sexual assault, the Academy climate influenced by leaders also impacts prevention efforts. Participants discussed three leadership groups at the Academy—cadet leaders, senior leaders, and middle-level leaders—and how participants perceived their handling of sexual assault issues.

Results from the 2018 SAGR survey provide a starting point for understanding students’ perceptions of Academy leadership. The survey included questions focused on assessing student opinion of the extent which a variety of leaders make “honest and reasonable efforts to stop sexual harassment and sexual assault” at their Academy. While the 2019 SAGR qualitative data cannot be quantified, the data in Figure 8 illustrate USAFA cadets’ views of Academy leadership on key focus group discussion topics. The qualitative data add additional context to the quantitative results seen on the 2018 SAGR.

<sup>23</sup> “Doolie” is USAFA cadet slang referring to a fourth degree (freshman year) student.

**Figure 8.**  
**USAFA Cadet Perceptions of Leadership (2018 SAGR)**



### Senior Leadership

Cadet discussions on senior leadership's role in handling sexual assault issues at the Academy revolved around perceived strengths and areas of improvement from the participant's perspective.

**What they do well.** Many participants asserted that senior leadership has clearly identified sexual assault and sexual harassment issues as a priority at the Academy, citing Superintendent General Silveria's speech to the Cadet Wing on sexual assault and his speech to Congress following the release of the 2018 SAGR survey results. Some cadets perceived senior leaders as doing all they can to prevent sexual assault and sexual harassment at the Academy and that there is nothing more they could realistically do to increase prevention. Many cadets said that they feel senior leadership is genuinely dedicated to the cause of eliminating sexual assault and sexual harassment at the Academy.

*"I watched the Commandant come to a rape victim and personally just see her case through to make sure that she could... still commission as an Air Force officer, and seeing someone that high, with, admittedly, other things on her plate, focus her attention on individuals, and I know the Superintendent reviews each case individually, too. It's not going to be perfect. But they show they care, and they show a commitment to getting to that place where they can increase the number of reporting and decrease the amount of assault."* —**Sophomore, Male**

**Areas to improve.** However, participants often shared the sentiment that although senior leadership appears to prioritize sexual assault, little is seen in the way of concrete follow

through. This notion was shared among all class years but was especially prevalent with female participants. To the contrary, PEER participants spoke of viewing senior leadership efforts firsthand and recognizing that senior leaders are truly doing much to change how the Academy deals with sexual assault. Male and female participants identified other factors that senior leaders could work to improve, such as transparency of cases and overall communication with the Cadet Wing.

*“I feel like, especially General Silveria will come out super strong on issues like this, but that doesn’t mean that there is a real effect...So even though he gives these great speeches on the staff tower... that doesn’t mean that those people aren’t here.” —Junior, Female*

Some participants discussed situations in which cadets have been moved to a new squadron without notice or reason, and then removed from the Academy several months later with no explanation. The lack of communication over such operations allows the Academy rumor mill to fill the vacuum with what participants viewed as half-truths, falsehoods, and other rumors, misleading the Cadet Wing at large and sometimes dividing opinion based on inaccurate information. Cadet participants also perceived senior leadership as appearing reactive to issues instead of proactive, such as not discussing the reasons behind a cadet’s removal until the issue comes out in the news.

Some participants claimed that the rumor mill is the most toxic element at the Academy and that senior leadership could do more to mitigate it. Faculty and staff participants also noted the impact of the rumor mill, but further discussed how senior leadership is fragmented in its approach to sexual assault issues. It was noted that every group within senior leadership wants to address the issue and has a plan to do so, but has failed to coordinate a unified effort with other senior leaders, possibly leading to duplication of effort, a lack of synergy, and potential unintended interference with each other’s programs. Finally, many participants said that senior leadership does everything in its power to mitigate sexual assault at the Academy and that the issue comes down to cadets being engaged in prevention, as well as middle-level leadership’s role. Similar to peer leaders, participants said that senior leaders can improve by taking the time to proactively care for victims.

*“The former Commandant... made the remark he didn’t have time to deal with this stuff. I know for me, that’s the absolutely wrong answer...and that was mentioned over the Superintendent’s hearing. That statement was made there. And I just know for me, that fact that we did have a leader who did reply in that way, it’s a little unsettling.” —Sophomore, Male*

*“Everyone has a different lane. They think that they talk to each other. ...It doesn’t have bad intentions, but they certainly don’t speak to each other. For example, Superintendent gave a speech... giving the results of the survey. There were survivors in the room who had to stand at attention during this speech. They*



*didn't know it was coming... There were no advocates in the room because the SARC<sup>24</sup> office wasn't told that he was going to go give this speech... so the strategic messages are not aligned across all of these elements. And it's not out of malice. It's out of everyone has a good idea and thinks that they're doing the best thing. But they're not getting down to the lowest level, which is the survivor that's standing in the room. What do they need?" —Faculty/Staff Participant*

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Although the majority of male participants endorsed beliefs akin to those above, some also claimed that they perceive senior leadership as blaming cadet men as a whole for the bad actions of a few. This perception often leads to frustration, as participants indicated not knowing what else they can do to prevent sexual assault at the Academy, since they do not perceive themselves as part of the problem. Some male participants also noted that other male cadets seem to struggle to prioritize sexual assault as an issue if they have no connection to it. Similarly, participants said that men who know someone impacted by sexual assault are more likely to recognize sexual assault issues as important.

***Innovative approaches to improve prevention.*** When participants were prompted to share ideas on how they would help improve prevention at the Academy, participants shared the innovative idea of creating a joint MSA task force. This task force was suggested to put USMA, USNA, and USAFA students in contact to share experiences, best practices, and to coordinate efforts. Another unique approach that was suggested was to have cadet leadership positions require time spent in the Academy PEER program. Participants said that this idea could improve the knowledge of future cadet leaders on how to appropriately handle sexual assault and sexual harassment issues.

*"I would say a think tank not among the three and four stars... I'm a third degree. Get me with a three-degree over at Army to figure out what works there. Get... people that are in the [expletive] talking about it. 'Hey, what do you do there that works?' 'What do you don't do?' 'This is what I've seen...' Just get us all together and see what works." —Sophomore, Male*

*"There's plenty of stuff happening that gives [PEERs] experience in a short, short time, which allows us to help in these situations. Not that we can do this, but making people in upper leadership have to have a PEER job for a certain amount of time just because the stuff that we get to do really makes us more knowledgeable and more mature." —PEER Participant*

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### **Middle-Level Leadership**

Participants said that they believe that middle-level leadership, especially AOCs, have a large impact in setting the tone and culture of a squadron or group. AOCs have an influence on prevention of risky behaviors, especially by having zero tolerance for behaviors aligned with sexual harassment and gender discrimination. However, participants said that some AOCs do not set a good example for officer behavior and that there have been some instances in which

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<sup>24</sup> Sexual Assault Response Coordinators (SARCs) are DoD professionals that work to provide victims of sexual assault with helping resources.

AOCs endorsed toxic behaviors, such as dissuading reporting and openly supporting alleged offenders. This variance in AOC behavior may result from insufficient training or standards in AOC selection. Finally, participants noted one area of improvement for AOCs is having less turnover, as they have an average two-year rotation at the Academy.

*“I would like to see senior leadership more hands on when it comes to AOCs because an AOC can truly determine a survivor’s experience after the trauma, and a lot of AOCs just absolutely destroy their lives, destroy their careers. And even though the justification is...they have this graduate—this master’s in counselling—that they have to get as an AOC, none of the AOCs will remember it. I’ve heard AOCs tell me all the time that they don’t remember anything from that class they took, and it shows because of the way that they treat survivors. So, this is something that we’ve briefed the general on, is that you have to have them be measured for empathy and tested skills on empathy.”* —**Senior, Female**

*“One of the people that got kicked out this year for sexual assault lived next to me, but our AOC through the entire process reiterated to the squad her support. And she built this culture that not only was she supporting someone until they were found guilty and still supporting the squad in the sense of the issues that were being presented.”* —**PEER Participant**

*“I don’t want to say whether your commander believes you, but how seriously your commander takes that particular harassment. Right? Because I’ve heard stories of certain commanders. Someone will report someone for saying something, and the commander is like, ‘Well, did they really mean it? Is it really that bad?’ Because that particular commander was [DoD Service member], and he’s heard all sorts of the, and I quote, locker-room-talk type deal where it’s like they just kind of brushed it off, and it ended up becoming nothing until something worse happened.”* —**Senior, Male**

## **Cadet Leadership**

Participants discussed cadet leaders and their role as key players in sexual assault prevention at the Academy. Participants said that cadet leaders have areas of strength but also have areas for improvement in the eyes of other cadets. However, their main strengths revolve around reporting unwanted incidents and not necessarily prevention.

**What they do well.** One thing that participants said cadet leaders at USAFA do well is being there for their subordinates and being approachable. Some participants said that if they were to experience an unwanted event, they would feel comfortable going to their cadet leadership to find out what their options for recourse are. When discussing cadet leadership’s handling of issues around sexual assault, many participants asserted that cadet leaders are generally powerless to handle these issues, and instead, they act as intermediaries for cadet victims in reporting the incident up the chain of command. Additionally, many participants claimed that it is a good thing that cadet leaders have little power in this regard, as participants perceived most cadet leaders as lacking the training, resources, and maturity to appropriately handle sexual assault incidents involving other cadets.

*“Cadet leadership doesn’t have much... power in... affecting those kinds of things... since it’s that serious, it’s pushed automatically above the cadet level.”*  
—**Junior, Male**

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**Areas to improve.** Participants perceived that cadet leaders do not discuss gender issues, as it is a difficult conversation to have. Some participants said they feel that cadet leaders are too laissez-faire in their leadership when witnessing events, preferring to let another person take responsibility for dealing with them. Some participants alluded to trainings that were conducted by cadet leaders on sexual assault that failed to effectively disseminate information and, in some cases, spread misinformation.

*“I specifically remember somebody [leading a gender forum] saying... that women, basically, you just put on a show when you’re in front of them, but you have to treat them differently in the end. And maybe better vetting for who’s teaching the gender forum because all of the guys there were just kind of like, ‘Wow, maybe you should have attended one of these forums before he got to teaching [one].’”* —**Junior, Female**

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Participants indicated that some cadet leaders are too busy to effectively prioritize sexual assault and sexual harassment issues because of their other competing priorities. Although all participants said they feel that the Academy is a challenging place, some said they want to see cadet leaders take the time to engage with their subordinates.

*“Just take the time to do things for your people. I don’t care if it’s a peer leadership or regular whatever leadership. You should be stopping by. If you know somebody’s going through stuff, stop by... Bring them a little candy. Just text them. I don’t care what it is. You should go in person, but if all you can do that day is send a text, send a text. If they want to go see a PEER or they want to go to some facility, walk them there. And if your leadership isn’t doing that, then be the peer leadership, then you need to take over yourself... you should feel a moral responsibility.”* —**Junior, Female**

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## Conclusions on Prevention at the Academy

Although cadet participants were generally confident in their ability and willingness to intervene in hypothetical severe situations, bystander intervention in lower-level, day-to-day, behaviors remains ambiguous. This ambiguity is partially driven by the assumption that persons in the situation had the agency to stand up for themselves if the behaviors were genuinely unwanted. However, this attitude fails to take into account that cadets (especially female cadets) may feel pressure to tolerate lower-level unwanted behaviors to fit in with the group. The unlikelihood of intervention on lower-level behaviors also appears to be driven by a fear of being perceived as meddlesome or intrusive and the social taboo of perceived interference in others’ personal matters. Finally, although trainings addressed how to approach clearly unwanted behaviors, cadets indicated wanting to see trainings addressing how to approach ambiguous situations and more “gray area” behaviors.

Participants noted that Academy senior leaders are viewed as doing all they can to make sexual assault and sexual harassment a priority at the Academy. Middle-level leaders, such as AOCs, vary in the way they set the tone with cadets, and can potentially promote unhealthy, toxic behaviors. A noteworthy consideration to improve prevention efforts at USAFA from the cadet PEER group was to mandate some degree of time spent as a PEER to be eligible for cadet leadership positions and cadet jobs. This was thought to be a way to incentivize PEER membership, as many cadets are highly motivated to achieve these positions, and also to effectively disseminate PEER skills and knowledge to key figures in the Cadet Wing that may require these skills and knowledge to perform their duties.

## Reporting of Sexual Assault and Sexual Harassment

Complementary to prevention, increasing the reporting of sexual assault incidents remains a priority to further the DoD Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Office's (SAPRO) goal of eliminating sexual assault from the Department and Service Academies. Focus group participants were asked to discuss the Academy's Sexual Assault Prevention and Response (SAPR) office and potential reasons why victims of sexual assault may not report their experience(s). Finally, participants discussed what they would change to close the gap between sexual assault incidents and reports.

### Perceptions of the SAPR Office

Cadet participants discussed the Academy SAPR office and how they perceived elements of the office and how those perceptions may influence reporting. Generally, many participants said that in a hypothetical experience of sexual assault, they would be unlikely to go to the SAPR office at the Academy. This was largely due to negative perceptions of the SAPR office, a lack of established rapport with SAPR staff, and the location of the office.

### Knowledge of SAPR Office and Resources

Few cadets were highly familiar with the SAPR office and its resources. However, many cadets were confident in their ability to find resources should they need them. These resources include the physical office itself, identifying mandatory reporters, and what happens after making a restricted report versus an unrestricted report.

Regarding cadet knowledge of the location of the SAPR office, few cadets stated that they confidently know where the office is. This was the case for both male and female participants. However, many said that they would be able to locate the office should they need to.

*"It's kind of the hidden structure. I don't think I've recently met anyone within the SAPR office, or I don't know the staff. The staff's not visible. I really don't know where the office is." —Sophomore, Female*

### Trust in the SAPR Office

Cadet participants noted several factors of the SAPR staff that affected their perceptions of the office as a whole, as well as their thoughts on reporting incidents to the SAPR office. When

asked to discuss the Academy SAPR office, many responses alluded to the SAPR office as being perceived as ineffectual by cadets.

*“They’re not [comfortable going to the SAPR office]. At least everyone I know, because the SAPR office, while it may have been revamped in a way and redone, new staff, new goals, and everything, they still have the reputation they had a few years ago when the whole sexual assault scandal came out... So, people still aren’t comfortable. They don’t trust them.” —Sophomore, Female*

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**Participants would not go to the SAPR office.** Many participants noted that the SAPR office would not be their initial point of contact when thinking of resources for help with an experience of sexual assault; they instead largely identified persons they had close and established relationships with, such as peers, cadet leaders, teachers, and AOCs. The discussion around these remarks centered on the perception of having little established rapport with SAPR staff; reporting incidents to the SAPR office was perceived as uncomfortable and akin to telling a stranger.

*“I’ve never had to report anything, but if I were to need to talk to somebody any of those issues, I wouldn’t go to the SAPR office. I’d probably go talk to a teacher or an AOC or someone in one of those kinds of positions that I know and respect and have a relationship with already and discuss the issue with them, not random people who I’ve never met before, who only interactions I’ve had are briefings by them.” —Junior, Male*

*“This is where I think those lower levels are important, right, because nobody’s going to run into the Superintendent’s office to go report to him, right. So regardless of what his message is, that’s not the individual that they’re going to go to. It’s the lieutenant, the captain, right, the younger civilian faculty and staff that are here that the cadets feel like they can relate to better, right. But it also takes time to build—for those folks who have built a personal relationship with someone in order for them to then feel comfortable coming and talking.” —Faculty/Staff Participant*

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**The SAPR office lacks sufficient resources.** When faculty and staff participants were asked to discuss the SAPR office, participants stated that helping resources for victims of sexual assault, such as the SAPR office itself, are generally understaffed and that quality employees were in high demand across the Service, making it difficult to sufficiently retain an appropriate number of staff.

*“But we still don’t have the people. We still don’t have the helping agencies. And so, [cadets] get tired of saying it over and over and if they find out about something, they’d be like, ‘Oh, yeah. Don’t bother telling them how to fix it because they’re not going to do anything.’ Because, like you said, even people call up—they finally get the courage to go and people are like, ‘Oh, we can’t talk to you’ or there’s no advocates.” —Faculty/Staff Participant*

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*“It’s hard, too, especially for the military billets, right. So, we already have a smaller population to pull from. And then, especially for some specific specialties, that’s almost...nonexistent, right, to find that person. And if they are that unicorn, you know who wants them? Every single general in the Air Force is like, ‘No, no, no. They’re not going to the Air Force Academy. They’re coming to be my exec.’” —Faculty/Staff Participant*

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***The office location is too public to preserve anonymity.*** Of those female participants who were aware of the location of the SAPR office, many stated that the current location of the SAPR office, which is situated in a common area and next to the cadet bar, is too public. Many stated that because the entrance to the office is in plain sight of a highly trafficked area, there is little opportunity for privately accessing helping resources, reporting the event in person, or discussing options with staff. Further, participants noted that anyone seen entering the office is assumed to be a victim, given the perceived unambiguity of the office’s mission. Participants said that this perception may dissuade reporting by victims, as they may fear the possibility of their experience becoming public knowledge among the Cadet Wing.

*“I didn’t go to the SAPR office. But just I didn’t want to, especially since it’s in Arnold Hall. If someone sees you walking [through] those doors, you never know what’s going to happen. It could just blow up out of proportion, especially if it’s someone you know.” —Freshman, Female*

*“I also don’t think the office should be in such a public place because Arnold Hall, so many cadets go to Arnold Hall, and if you walk into those doors and people see you walk into those doors, they automatically assume, ‘Oh, they’re reporting a sexual assault.’ So, I just feel like a lot of people just don’t want to go there, because they’ll get caught walking in through the doors.” —Senior, Female*

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### ***Trust in the SAPR Staff***

***Participants perceived the SAPR office as lacking a “go-to” person for SAPR issues.*** Similarly, few participants identified any individual as the “go-to” person for SAPR-related issues. Some participants said that a former SARC and current program analyst at the Academy were known among the Cadet Wing as being related to research and education on sexual assault and sexual harassment, but not necessarily a resource for reporting. Some cadets alluded to the recent history of investigations into the USAFA SAPR office as having damaged its reputation with the Cadet Wing and impacted the likelihood of cadets using it as a resource.

***Public scandals involving SAPR staff damaged the reputation of the office.*** In late 2017, USAFA leadership removed four of its six SAPR staff in the wake of a USAF investigation that found “significant evidence of mismanagement and unprofessionalism that negatively impacted victim advocacy and assistance rendered to a number of cadets” (DoD, 2018). Regardless of Academy efforts to rectify the issue by removing the majority of staff and hiring a second SARC for the office, the poor reputation of the office established by the former SARC persists among some members of the Cadet Wing. Some participants alluded to the poor reputation of the office, stating that even with the new staff; there is little trust in the office. However, some



cadets noted a positive change at the office being felt by the Cadet Wing, especially with newer cadets who indicating feeling generally comfortable with the SAPR office. Cadets also indicated having good experiences with the current staff. Additionally, since the staffing change, the SAPR office has worked to mitigate issues of collateral misconduct, which were previously identified to be a significant barrier to reporting sexual assault.

*“When I went into the SAPR office...they told me, ‘You don’t have enough information. We can’t do anything for you,’ and they turned me away. So that was my initial interaction with the office, right? So, when I heard it got revamped... I was like ‘I ain’t going back there. They didn’t believe me before. Why would they believe me now?’ So, I waited until this past semester, and I went to the new SAPR office only because... there was an advocate who I’d met prior... so I went to her and I told her. I was like, ‘Okay. I’m ready to try again,’ right? So, we filled out the reports, and then afterwards, she was extremely considerate of me. She would text me, and she would say like, ‘How are you doing?’ Things like that. So, I do think it has changed.”* —**Senior, Female**

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## **Barriers to Reporting**

Participants discussed other barriers to reporting incidents of sexual assault, including the potential impact on their careers, social consequences and impacts of the rumor mill, the process itself, and a failure to identify what behaviors constitute sexual assault.

### **Sexual Assault**

Sexual assault has been widely identified as a significantly underreported crime. Several factors were discussed in the focus groups that were perceived to drive cadets to not report experiences of sexual assault.

**Negative career impacts.** Cadet participants discussed the fear of potential deleterious effects on their career as being a substantial barrier to reporting an experience of sexual assault. Focus group discussions touched on the fact that participants were unclear how reporting might impact an individual’s career and this uncertainty was said to impact reporting. Additionally, considering the Academy SAPR office history, participants said cadets may anticipate consequences to reporting.

*“A lot of people don’t go to the [Peak Performance Center], because we’re scared that if we say we were sexually assaulted then they’re going to be like, ‘Oh, you’re not fit for duty. You’re not going to be able to go rated. You’re not going to be a pilot,’ all these things. So, something clarifying you can talk to people about this and you can get counseling in the Air Force and it’s not going to affect your career. Because I think that is kind of like the bottom line for a lot of people is like I don’t want to go and talk to somebody, because it’s going to affect my career.”* —**Junior, Female**

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In addition to impacting one’s own career, some participants indicated they would hesitate to report in fear of damaging the career path of another cadet. This attitude was driven by the

perception of some behaviors not being worth reporting and the fear of social consequences, as well as a sense of loyalty to the alleged offender. This toxic loyalty appears to manifest through cadets being loyal to each other to a fault and seems to result in victims of reportable incidents avoiding reporting for fear of getting the alleged offender in trouble or damaging their career prospects.

***Social consequences and the rumor mill.*** Participants also illustrated how social consequences are barriers to reporting, discussing the rumor mill at the Academy and the fear of exclusion by peers. Participants discussed how the rumor mill at the Academy dissuades reporting and that cadets are sensitive to the possibility of private and hurtful details of a sexual assault incident being unwillingly shared with the Cadet Wing. Not only were concerns of privacy in general discussed, but so was the perception that the rumor mill often twists the truth by spreading gossip that goes beyond the facts. In addition to not wanting others to know in general, cadets also discussed how these rumors might impact the reputation of an individual. As discussed in the culture section of this chapter, reputation is important to cadets, persists over time, and a poor reputation is easy to establish. Cadets said that the fear of being ostracized plays a significant role in dissuading victims from reporting. Because reporting is perceived to drive peer exclusion, the prospect of reporting threatens the close working, training, and personal relationships that cadets often have with one another.

*“Everyone knows everything eventually. And so, with that in mind, people don’t want to be faced with—people don’t want to have to relive what they went through.” —Freshman, Male*

*“If you’re in an institution where everybody knows everybody like high school. I mean, I don’t want to say that people felt like they couldn’t trust the system in making an unrestricted report, but I think it gives them the privacy that they want because if you do open up that unrestricted, then everybody knows everything about it. The story is going to get around and maybe even the wrong story gets around and so I don’t know if that’s the reasoning why people made restricted reports, but if it was for privacy reasons, then I could see it’s because cadets know everything about everybody.” —Senior, Male*

***False reporting and victim blaming.*** Similar to the rumor mill, some participants noted that cultural beliefs in false reporting are a barrier. Some female cadet participants noted that the outspoken support by some male cadets for individuals accused of sexual assault undermined their faith in those peers and made it more difficult to consider coming forward. Some female cadet participants said that they would likely need to choose when to report an incident for fear of “crying wolf” when experiencing sexual assault. They noted some fear about not being believed in regard to reporting prevalent behaviors and the fear of developing a reputation of reporting every unwanted event, and in response, they feel the need to tolerate unwanted behaviors.

***The process.*** In addition to these external factors that present barriers to reporting, cadets also identified elements of the reporting process itself as a barrier. Participants often discussed that the length of the reporting process deters reports because the average cadet is already overloaded with schoolwork, military training, and mandatory extracurricular activities. Reporting was

sometimes perceived as too much work and too long and thereby is disregarded as a reasonable course of action. Some upperclassman participants stated that because the outcome of a sexual assault report would likely be established after graduation, it would be easier to handle the issue alone until they could leave the Academy. Another prevalent attitude among participants was that incidents are sometimes not worth reporting, as reports are perceived largely to conclude with little to no result.

*“And the burden of time, too. How much time it takes away from how busy we are already, so if I was sexually assaulted, I’m so busy as it is right now, do I have time, or do I have to make time to do this?”* —**Junior, Male**

*“I feel like it becomes so confusing. The process itself is so confusing that it’s almost like, ‘It’s too hard. I don’t know what to do. I don’t know the correct way to do this. I’m just not going to do it.’ That’s kind of the perception I’ve got.”*  
—**Junior, Female**

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**Failure to identify experiences as sexual assault and stigma.** Some participants stated that some victims of sexual assault may not report the incident because they do not recognize the behavior as sexual assault. Some cadets stated that although some behaviors may fit legal definitions of crimes, some individuals may not be bothered by such behavior, or they may not realize that the behavior itself was sexual assault. The latter perception was especially prevalent among male participants who sometimes said they would hear of other men describing scenarios in which they were sexually assaulted but did not identify the experience as such. Participants said this perception is driven by a stigma against men as victims of sexual assault and the misconception that men cannot be sexually assaulted. Broad social stigmas were related to the barrier of not recognizing behaviors aligned with sexual assault, especially around men and victimization. Some participants said that because of the social stigma against men being victims of sexual assault and some social beliefs that men cannot be victims of sexual assault, male cadets who do experience sexual assaults might be less likely to seek out help from official helping resources.

*“Technically, you could have been assaulted, but to the victim, it wasn’t that big of a deal whether it was technically sexual assault or not. I don’t feel like the effort going all through all that is worth it, so they don’t make a report about it.”*  
—**Sophomore, Male**

*“If it’s just like a boob grab or something, something that you think should definitely be taken care [of] but doesn’t necessarily entail a court-martial, it’s all or nothing. You could report, and it’s going to a court-martial or nothing.”*  
—**Junior, Female**

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**Class year factors.** Class year was another factor that was perceived as influencing reporting at the Academy. As discussed in the culture and prevention sections of this chapter, freshmen were often perceived as separate from the rest of the Cadet Wing. As this isolation was said to influence their willingness to intervene in incidents, it also was perceived to detract from their willingness to report incidents that happen to them. Participants stated that freshmen are expected to “keep their heads down” and not make waves. Senior cadets, on the other hand,

reported wanting to maintain a low profile in order to avoid trouble as they approached graduation. Combined with other factors, such as the time taken to report, the social repercussions, and possible delays in graduation, some seniors said that it might sometimes be easier to not report and put the incident behind them.

**Mandatory reporters.** Although cadets said that if they were sexually assaulted, they would prefer to speak with someone they had an established relationship with; many of the persons they listed were mandatory reporters. Mandatory reporters are legally obligated to report to the Office of Special Investigations (OSI) when they become aware of an incident. In online content provided by USAFA on reporting a sexual assault, mandatory reporters at the Academy are described as including “all military members or civilian employees supervising someone involved (including Commanders, AOCs, First Sergeants, and AMTs of those they supervise), law enforcement, equal opportunity personnel, Military OneSource, and law enforcement” (USAFA, 2019b). Cadets said that because many victims may not want to instigate a full-blown investigation, they will avoid discussing the issue with an individual who they know to be a mandatory reporter. Faculty and staff participants noted that rumors had circulated claiming that teachers would also soon be included as mandatory reporters. These participants said that this would further dissuade students from discussing incidents with trusted persons and was perceived to be a step in the wrong direction.

*“There’s no way in hell they’re about to go to their AMT or AOC...because they’re not sure exactly what happened in that scenario, but they’re not going to talk to their AOC or AMT, because AOC or AMT is going to have to report it. That’s going to go unrestricted, and there’s going to be—OSI might have to get involved and start prosecuting people. And if they don’t even really know what happened, they don’t want that happening yet. It’s hard meeting people who are mandatory reporters...I don’t even really understand why we have mandatory reporters. It feels almost obsolete. You’re turning a lot more people away.”*

—**Freshman, Male**

*“Most of us trust our AOCs, but if we don’t want an investigation, then we can’t go talk to them. But I don’t trust other people to go talk to them. So, then it’s like I’m in this limbo.”* —**Junior, Female**

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## **Sexual Harassment**

Participants also discussed the barriers to reporting incidents of sexual harassment. Despite sexual harassment being similar to sexual assault in some ways, participants identified unique barriers to reporting sexual harassment. These barriers surrounded cadets’ ability to identify behaviors as sexual harassment and the perceived severity of the behaviors themselves.

**Perceived to be less severe.** Some cadets stated that despite sexual harassment being problematic, it is comprised of behaviors perceived as less severe compared to sexual assault. This perception was driven by the normalization of some behaviors aligned with sexual harassment at the Academy, such as roughhousing. Some cadets stated that because they perceived these behaviors as less serious, they were simply not worth reporting in the first place. Participants also discussed other ways the perceived mildness of these behaviors present unique

barriers, such as the fact that the Academy culture of handling issues at the lowest level, so even incidents considered severe enough to require action would likely be handled unofficially at a lower level. Finally, cadets also indicated that the social consequences for reporting a sexual harassment incident would be significant, as it is likely that most of the Cadet Wing would not perceive the incident as worth reporting.

*“And then the severity of the incident, the Academy focuses a lot on full-out rape, the penetration, sexual assault all the way, the big one. That’s the big incident. And you hear about a lot of little incidents. It’s not little to the individual, but it’s considered minor in comparison. So, the people that are getting assaulted, I think if they don’t think their incident is up to that level, they’re not going to make the report.” —Sophomore, Female*

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**Harder to identify.** Cadets said that because sexual harassment consists of behaviors that are less clear than those comprising sexual assault, the sexual harassment behaviors are more difficult to identify in the first place. Similar to the identification of sexual assault, participants asserted that if someone is not able to identify an experience as sexual harassment, it is unlikely that they will report it.

### **Improvements to Reporting**

Participants identified a multitude of ways to increase reporting of these incidents at the Academy, particularly innovating new reporting methods, improving facilities at the Academy, improving access to information on the reporting process, and an emphasis on providing helping resources to victims.

### **Education on the Process**

Cadet participants said they feel that increased education on what the reporting options are and what happens after making a report would improve reporting. Some cadets said this familiarity would improve confidence in the process and lead victims to make informed decisions. Additionally, some cadets mentioned wanting to know more about how the reporting process does not affect a victim’s potential career in the Air Force.

### **Additional Resources**

Participants noted that an increased focus on providing anonymous resources would likely improve reporting of sexual assault incidents at the Academy. Some anonymous resources that cadets suggested were locked “drop boxes” where cadets could place a note asking a SARC or other staff member to meet at a specific time and place, a touch-tone phone system that provides information or reporting resources, and a process to become more familiar with an AOC outside of their chain of command in the event a cadet wants to speak with an AOC but not trigger an unrestricted report. Another cadet suggested the establishment of a women’s center at the Academy to aid in providing reporting resources in addition to general support for female cadets.



## Conclusions on Reporting Sexual Assault and Sexual Harassment

A significant detriment to reporting sexual assault and sexual harassment at the Academy is the lack of existing trust and rapport between the SAPR office and the Cadet Wing. This extends beyond the investigations of the USAFA SAPR office in recent years and comes more so from cadet discomfort with the idea of speaking to a SAPR professional with whom they have no established relationship. Many cadets noted that they would prefer to speak to persons with whom they had close personal and professional relationships such as peers and AOCs. However, the fact that AOCs in a cadet's chain of command are mandatory reporters dissuades many from discussing with these trusted persons, as they do not want to initiate an unrestricted report.

Another significant barrier to reporting is the perception of some behaviors as less severe than they actually are. This perception invites instances of these behaviors to be handled at the lowest level per military culture. However, encouraging that behaviors constituting sexual harassment, or even sexual assault, be handled at the lowest level possible misconstrues their severity and how they should be responded to.

Finally, fear of ostracism and victim blaming dissuade those who have experienced reportable events from coming forward. Given the Academy's small and tight-knit community, some victims may fear others finding out about their unwanted experiences and potentially being ostracized by cadets, especially those supportive of the alleged offender. Some of this fear is also driven by those beliefs around false reporting and the possibility of not being believed if they choose to come forward.

## Alcohol at the Academy

Finally, focus group participants were asked about the role that alcohol plays for cadets at the Academy. Cadets spoke about their perceptions of the Cadet Wing's relationship with drinking in general and their trainings on alcohol use, and then discussed opportunities for improvement with regard to the alcohol culture within the Cadet Wing.

## Drinking Behavior

Participants identified several locations on and off Academy grounds where drinking occurred, such as local restaurants, the Academy bar, and dormitories. Cadets also noted drinking around large-scale events, such as sporting events. Participants said that they feel that their drinking behavior is normal for their age group and healthier than other "typical" students at American universities. Some participants did not perceive alcohol abuse as an issue in the Cadet Wing and others alluded to the drinking culture of the military as a whole to explain or justify alcohol use in their culture.

*"It has to be usually a significant event... if you're going to be a part of any sort of party sort of thing. So, after Spring Dance, after an IC team wins some tournament or something like that... But drinking, as we've said, it's pretty under control here." —Junior, Male*



## ***Binge Drinking***

Despite these attitudes and Academy rules prohibiting consumption of alcohol for freshman and sophomore cadets, many cadets expressed perceptions of Academy alcohol culture as heavy drinking. Participants described typical drinking behavior among cadets as abstinence during weeknights and heavy drinking over the weekend. This cycle of behavior was perceived to be cadets “making up for lost time,” in the sense that because weekdays are spent purely on academic, military, and athletic pursuits, the only time cadets have to themselves is weekends, during which many binge on alcohol in an effort to “make up for” the weekdays. Some participants described this bingeing behavior as more than just having fun, but as a coping mechanism that cadets use to deal with stressful and omnipresent Academy pressures.

*“I would say it’s part of our culture. It’s almost like people drink to be cool... so I would say we got a lot of heavy drinkers here.” —Senior, Male*

*“There’s a high chance of getting caught, so there’s people that don’t drink a lot, and then when they get that opportunity to drink, they go crazy, whereas I think at a regular college... you’re going to make your mistakes freshman year, and then you kind of taper off as you go down, where I think it’s vice versa here. The people that, okay, when you say, ‘Okay, it’s legal,’ and they go for it too hard. And then they just don’t know how to handle themselves. So, people are learning their junior and senior year of college how to handle alcohol, and very few people learn how to do that well.” —Sophomore, Female*

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***Alcohol use and Academy pressures.*** As many cadets alluded to Academy culture as highly regimented and stressful, in combination with the impossibility for cadets to regularly remove themselves from the Academy, binge drinking was said to be a common way for cadets to temporarily de-stress and escape from Academy burdens.

*“It takes forever to unwind from this place. And it takes so long that sometimes just the alcohol hitting your system makes it all go away, just for a couple hours, and since you rarely get that, you may get that once or twice a week, I can see how alcohol is such a much greater temptation.” —Sophomore, Female*

*“Weekends are not enough to actually fully get restored and refreshed. Spring break didn’t even feel like a break. Literally left and... I hadn’t even gotten a break by the time I got back because teachers still assign work that’s just ridiculous amounts... I had five assignments due that I’d been assigned right before spring break. There’s no respect for any down time because we’re just expected to be on the constant go. So, alcohol ends up being one of the main things that people just go to.” —Sophomore, Female*

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## ***Alcohol and Unwanted Events***

Participants acknowledged the relationship between alcohol use and unwanted behaviors associated with sexual assault and sexual harassment, discussing the impact alcohol consumption has on consent and on impairing individuals’ abilities to pick up on non-verbal communication

both as a bystander and a potential offender. Many participants were aware of how alcohol consumption impacts the risk of sexual assault, citing their training.

### **Campus Bar**

**The bar as a protective factor.** Participants identified the campus bar, Haps, as a location where cadets who are of drinking age can do so relatively safely, avoiding the dangers of drunk driving and remaining close to the dormitories. Some cadets said that the bar staff are effective in enforcing Academy drinking rules on age and class year and making sure patrons do not drink to excess.

*“Some kid came up and he went and ordered two drinks, sat down and ordered two more, and... the bartender...that served him, snapped on him and kicked him out immediately. It was like, ‘We have rules in place for how much you’re allowed to drink. You didn’t follow them. Leave.’” —Junior, Female*

**The bar as a place of bingeing.** However, other participants indicated that cadets often drink heavily at Haps and use the phrase “Haps ‘till taps.” Some participants explained excessive drinking at Haps is driven by cadets who drink beforehand in their dorms and arrive at Haps already intoxicated.

### **Alcohol Training**

Cadets shared their perspectives on the strengths and weaknesses of the Academy’s current approach to alcohol trainings and discussed their perceptions of the Academy’s alcohol policies in general. Finally, participants discussed opportunities to improve the Academy’s alcohol culture.

#### **Positive Perceptions**

Many participants stated that the Academy’s alcohol training excels in effectively showcasing the policies, punishments, and consequences of alcohol misuse. Specifically, the trainings were perceived as clearly explaining what behaviors constitute alcohol abuse, the range of punishments for various degrees of alcohol infractions, and graphically visualizing the consequences of drunk driving.

*“I thought the training was effective in that it let us know what the expectation is, where the line comes from for where you might find yourself in some trouble or not.” —Junior, Male*

#### **Areas to Improve**

Although participants said that they felt educated about the consequences of alcohol misuse, some cadets said the training used scare tactics by displaying graphic accidents and detailing every legal punishment possible. These perceived scare tactics were said to miss the mark for participants. Many participants also indicated that they perceived the current Academy guidelines on alcohol use to be too restrictive. The current USAFA cadet alcohol training is

called “0013” (zero-zero-one-three), referring to the limit of alcoholic drinks per certain context: zero underage drinking, zero drunk driving, one drink per hour, three drinks per day. Many cadets said the restriction on drinks per hour and per day is unreasonably low and, therefore, rarely followed by other cadets.

*“I don’t think any of it’s realistic, any of the training, honestly, because like you said, the zero, zero, one, three—the first two are like, ‘Of course.’ But people underage drink and... no training’s going to stop them from doing that. Drinking and driving definitely is a huge thing, but the “one, three,” one drink per hour three drinks a night. I don’t think that’s realistic at all for anybody. I don’t think anybody ever follows that.”* —**Sophomore, Male**

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Some cadets mentioned wanting to see more proactive training, claiming that lowerclassmen do not receive alcohol trainings because they are not of age and that some alcohol trainings are administered reactively to an alcohol incident within the Cadet Wing or a squadron. Trainings that are proactive were perceived to better educate cadets as how to act safely in a situation involving alcohol, rather than trainings after the fact to emphasize abstaining from drinking.

*“I think they just need to be more consistent and just have set times for these, I guess, awareness kinds of things versus being like, ‘Oh, they got in trouble. Now let’s tell them about everything that goes on and the repercussions and what consequences.’”* —**Senior, Female**

*“So over hundred’s weekend this year, there was a lot of alcohol usage. A lot of people got in trouble. Then after that, the squads that were affected, especially, had briefs on it. But other than that... you don’t really get training on it.”* —**Sophomore, Female**

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Another consideration regarding the training was to focus on drinking safely instead of abstaining from drinking altogether. Many participants said that because they are at an age in which many of their peers drink at college, cadet drinking cannot be stopped by the Academy. Instead, participants discussed focusing training on safety and responsible alcohol consumption.

*“College kids are going to drink. How about teach them how to be safe when they’re drinking instead of just saying don’t drink and acting like it doesn’t happen?”* —**Junior, Female**

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Other participants said they want trainings to be taught by relatable persons. Participants said that younger USAF officers would be good candidates to teach the training, as they are respected by cadets but still relatable. Participants also noted that cadets with alcohol violations could also be an option for teaching alcohol trainings and would also be relatable. It was discussed as a possibility that the person could be respected as a peer and be able to emphasize the legal, physical, or psychological dangers of irresponsible drinking.

*“I think there’s only two types of people who can teach a lesson like that. The first one is a 22...29-year-old person who’s there and knows and will speak*

*honestly with you. Or my AOC taught us a... lesson, and he ended up in the [alcohol education] program, so someone who's been there, done that, got the T-shirt. I think if you... don't have someone from those two categories... they're not effectively teaching the lesson.” —Sophomore, Male*

*“If you can have a person who got an alcohol [punishment] come and be like, ‘I actually almost got seriously injured or in trouble or something really bad could have really happened.’ And I feel like that could maybe make a difference.”  
—Junior, Female*

As many cadets linked alcohol use and abuse at the Academy to the perceived need of cadets to cope with stress, some participants said that the Academy could mitigate cadets' alcohol abuse by providing unstructured time to students, which would allow them to de-stress as needed. Some cadets also stated that providing recreational activities or events where alcohol is not involved would establish a safe avenue for cadets to relax without consuming excessive amounts of alcohol.

### **Conclusions on Alcohol at the Academy**

As has been found in prior years, alcohol abuse by cadets remains an issue at the Academy. Cadets' typical descriptions of drinking are those of binge drinking, primarily driven by a perception of making up for time “lost” during the work week spent on academic and military pursuits in addition to a need to cope with Academy stressors. Cadets discussed wanting to see changes to the current alcohol trainings, specifically to focus them on how to drink safely and responsibly as opposed to the current approach of alcohol abstinence. Cadets also wanted to see proactive trainings delivered to cadets before they were of legal drinking age instead of trainings administered directly in response to illicit drinking events.



## Chapter 5: Discussion

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The Military Service Academies (MSAs) are committed to developing military leaders for tomorrow's armed forces. Leadership at the MSAs continues to act on that commitment by ensuring that students have a safe environment to develop their education, physical abilities, leadership, and character. Each of the MSAs has a unique history and culture, with Academy-specific programs and policies that address sexual assault and sexual harassment. Despite these differences, the 2018 SAGR survey found similar rates of unwanted sexual contact across all three Academies. Similarly in the focus groups, though there are differences by Academy, many of the themes and considerations that were identified were consistent. This chapter summarizes these similarities in culture and perceptions of gender, prevention through intervention and leadership, trust in the Sexual Assault and Response Program (SAPR) and the reporting process, and the role of alcohol.

### Culture Across the Military Service Academies

The focus groups participants at the U.S. Military Academy (USMA), U.S. Naval Academy (USNA), and U.S. Air Force Academy (USFA) revealed a number of overlapping aspects of their Academy cultures. Participants at all three MSAs were quick to express the feeling of comradery and the familial relationships they developed with their peers, with many describing their fellow cadets or midshipmen as kindred or siblings. Many suggested that their entry training period (Beast, Basic Cadet Training [BCT], Plebe Summer) played a large role in forging these bonds. Under what participants described as an extremely stressful and unfamiliar circumstances, cadets and midshipmen believed they banded together to survive. Participants expressed during that time, gender differences seemed not to matter; all cadets and midshipmen were part of the Academy.

Similar to prior years, cadets and midshipmen in the focus groups often suggested despite this sense of togetherness at the outset, there is intense competition between students that grows over time. This competition was often attributed to the cadet/midshipman ranking system, where rankings, including those from their peers, affect what responsibilities a student is considered for, thereby not only impacting their time at the academy but also their military career. Students saw ranking as having an impact on potential leadership positions and eventual job opportunities in their larger military branch after graduation. Many admitted that competition was particularly pointed between male and female cadets or midshipmen.

Cadets and midshipmen in the focus groups discussed several official and unofficial rules that affect how male and female cadets and midshipmen interact. Dormitory door closure policy was one major official rule that many cadets and midshipmen identified as a pressure point. Many participants expressed that forcing students to keep their doors open when male and female cadets or midshipmen were together led to exclusion of female midshipmen and cadets or to problematic rumors regarding relationships between two students that may only have been meeting for platonic reasons. The most discussed unofficial rule regarded dating fellow cadets or midshipmen at the Academies. Despite official policy on fraternization, many cadets and



midshipmen said that they were unofficially, strongly encouraged by their peers to avoid dating others at the Academy, especially within smaller units like their company or wing. Despite this unofficial rule, cadets and midshipmen also acknowledged that dating among peers is common.

Differences in Physical Training (PT) standards were a major point of contention between male and female cadets and midshipmen at all of the Academies. Some male cadets and midshipmen in the focus groups described a belief that female physical achievements are less valuable because their standards are considered easier. This sentiment was mirrored by female cadets and midshipmen, who believed that their male peers often were dismissive of their abilities. Female participants also pointed out their belief that it makes sense for the female standards to be different because of physical and biological differences between men and women. Many female cadets and midshipmen expressed that they thought that their accomplishments, physical and otherwise, should be treated with more respect by their male peers. Beliefs around leadership diversity quotas were also expressed by the participants. Female cadets described feeling as if they need to work much harder to be considered deserving of a position by their peers and by middle level leaders at the Academy due to the perception that they only received a leadership position in order to fill a gender quota and would not have achieved the position if there was no such quota.

Many cadets and midshipman participants described a culture in which female cadets and midshipmen are expected to adapt their attitudes to be “one of the bros.” Female participants described an environment where they are required to tolerate problematic language and actions to be considered part of the group. Several expressed that students are often avoided or shunned if they were deemed to be unwilling to engage in or at least let slide, this type of “locker room talk.”

“Bro Culture” was a topic discussed by both male and female cadets and midshipmen at all three MSAs. It was described as a setting in which a behaviors like inappropriate sexualized language and gestures and problematic touching and rough housing are commonplace due to the male-dominated environment. This acceptance of sexual harassment-type behaviors could increase the risk for sexual assault through the continuum of harm (OPA, 2019b).

Middle-level military member leadership (TACs, AOCs, AMTs, SELs) influence cadet and midshipman culture and perceptions. Cadets and midshipmen who participated in the focus groups expressed that the variance in middle-level leaders’ ability to address sexual assault and sexual harassment played a role in prevention and response efforts, either positively or negatively.

Many of these problematic beliefs dismissing the achievements of female cadets and midshipmen and forcing them to adjust to the “bro culture” are perpetuated throughout the Academies by several key entities. First, some cadets, midshipmen, and faculty members who participated believed that much information is passed between students at the Academy, either between peers or from upperclassman to more junior students. Further, many suggested that middle-level military leaders play a large role in setting the culture for those

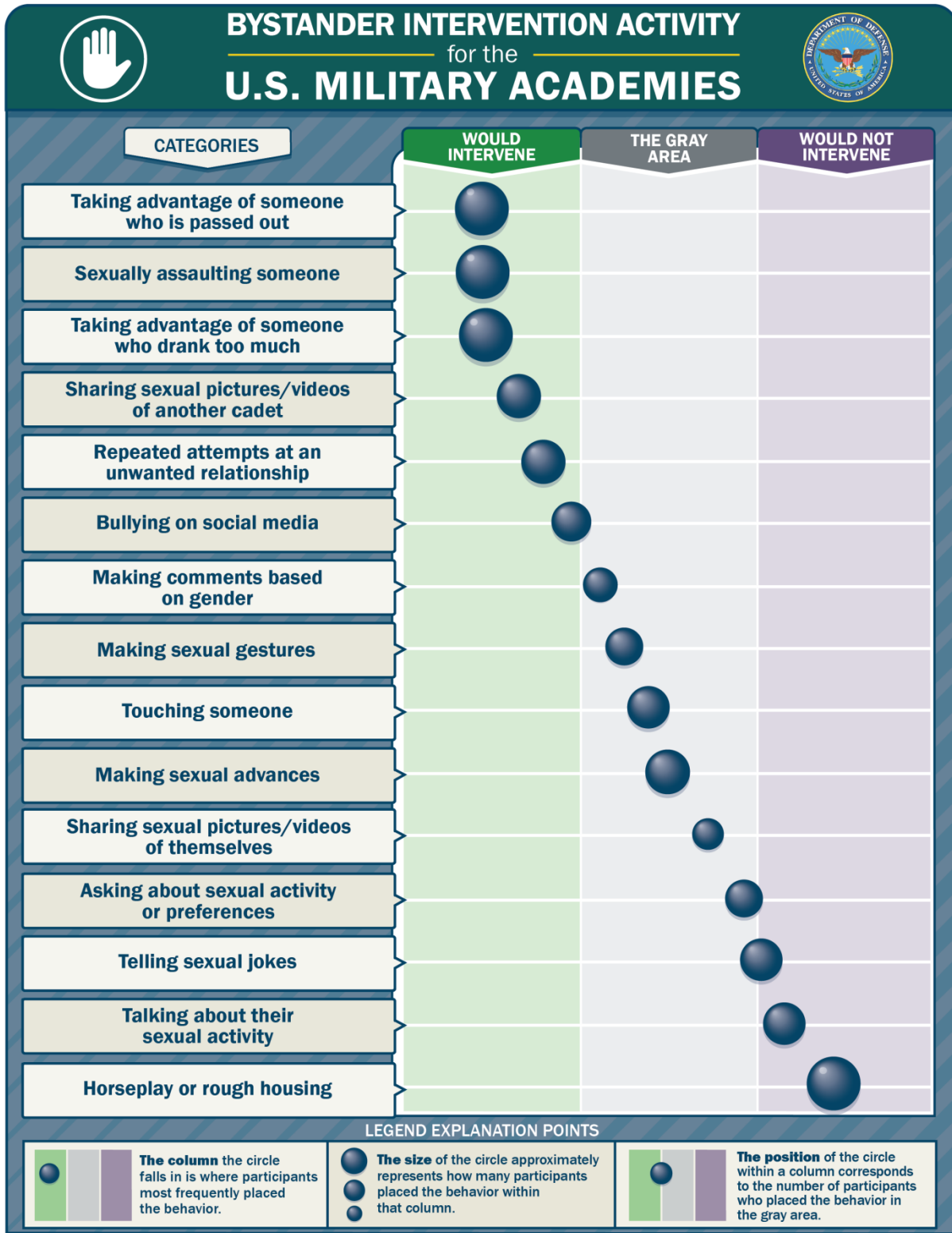
over whom they have authority. Often times, these middle-level military leaders bring their experience from the field with them, which could have both negative and positive effects on the culture depending on who that leader is and what their previous role entailed.

## Prevention Through Intervention and Leadership

Prevention of sexual assault and sexual harassment was a second major topic of discussion in the 2019 SAGR focus groups. Many participants shared similar ideas on bystander intervention as a method to increase prevention efforts.

Figure 9 displays which behaviors in which cadets and midshipmen in the focus groups across the three MSAs would and would not intervene in as well as which behaviors fell into the “gray area.” The cadets and midshipmen that participated generally expressed that they ranked behaviors by severity and were able to easily identify behaviors in which they would definitely intervene. Virtually all cadets and midshipmen who participated said they would intervene in the most explicit behaviors such as seeing someone being sexual assaulted or seeing someone take advantage of someone who drank too much. On the other hand, there were some problematic behaviors that many participants said they would not intervene in such as horseplay or roughhousing or telling sexual jokes. This was reflective of the discussions that cadets and midshipmen had around the “bro culture.” Unwillingness to intervene in problematic “locker room talk” and touching in a professional environment was considered the norm for many cadets and midshipmen. As known from prior research, this tolerance of sexual harassment could increase risk for sexual assault through the continuum of harm (Breslin et al., 2019).

**Figure 9.**  
*Bystander Intervention Activity across all three MSAs*



Quite a few of the behaviors that the participants were asked about fell into the “gray area.” Cadets and midshipmen who participated expressed that they would need more context to understand if a situation could be interpreted as risky or not. The participants tended to think that the more ambiguous behaviors fell into the “gray area”, such as touching someone or making sexual advances. Many participants expressed that they would have to determine if these behaviors were wanted or unwanted to know if they should step in, and would use visual cues like body language and facial expressions to help make that assessment. Several cadets and midshipmen who participated suggested that this appraisal of situations was sometimes difficult, and fear of misunderstanding a situation could prevent people from stepping in.

Context was described in a number of ways by the cadets and midshipmen who participated. It included situational factors such as where they were, who was around, class year differences, gender differences, if they were in uniform or not, and personal factors like the way a person was reacting, how their faces looked, and tone of voice.

Cadets and midshipmen who participated expressed that their current bystander intervention training was not resonating with them. Several believed that they need more specific trainings that are tailored to their unique situation as Academy students to help them identify risky situations and how to intervene when there is ambiguity.

While the cadets and midshipmen who participated frequently said they would intervene, there was often little consensus on how they would do so. Many expressed that training on bystander intervention did not resonate with them (if they remembered receiving it in the first place). Some cadets and midshipmen who participated thought that intervention was strictly physically stepping in to remove a person from a situation, while

others were able to speak to more subtle methods, like striking up a conversation or gathering allies to confront a single bad actor. Some cadets and midshipmen suggested that they would benefit from implementing trainings to address these gaps in their understanding of bystander intervention.

Leadership at all levels plays a pivotal role in prevention efforts at the Academy. Many cadets and midshipmen in the focus groups believed that cadet and midshipman leaders were trying their best to address sexual assault and sexual harassment, but did not have the tools or authority necessary to have a meaningful impact. Other participants thought that there was a disconnect between what cadet and midshipman leadership was saying during official briefings and trainings and how they spoke and acted privately. To many of the participants, it seemed that cadet and midshipman leaders were willing to read prepared remarks as commanded, but would later make jokes about the training or speak in the same inappropriate terms that they had just previously publicly decried. This is consistent with prior survey research that found that cadet and midshipman leaders were the lowest rated when asked how well leaders at various levels acted to reduced sexual assault and sexual harassment (Davis et al., 2019). Due to their unique position, cadet and midshipman leaders are often looked up to by other cadets and midshipmen. Those cadet and midshipman leaders who are setting bad examples may be contributing to the creation of an unhealthy culture.

Middle-level leadership was often described by the participants as highly variable. There were thought to be some very good leaders and some bad leaders, with differences stemming from

each individual leader's unique experiences during their time in service. Many cadets and midshipmen expressed that they had middle-level military leaders that were receptive and understanding; while others thought that their leaders were unwilling to engage on the topics of sexual assault and sexual harassment or held problematic beliefs about female participation in the military.

Senior leadership was often thought to be taking the issues of sexual assault and sexual harassment extremely seriously. Cadets and midshipmen who participated expressed that while they believe that senior leaders were working to address these issues, they also expressed a desire for more transparency from their senior leaders regarding their decisions surrounding these topics and for more concrete follow through. Several thought that more changes needed to be put into place before they could say senior leaders were doing all they could.

Unique to USMA, a Stand Down Day was called to address sexual assault and sexual harassment. The cadets that participated in the focus groups frequently expressed that this was an excellent way to show how seriously senior leaders took these issues while also helping to spread information and motivate people to make positive changes. The event also helped some victims realize that what happened to them was wrong and could be reported.

Overall, it seems that senior leaders are generally providing good messaging regarding sexual assault and sexual harassment, but somewhere along the chain of command, that messaging is being lost or ignored. Some middle-level and peer leaders are not internalizing the same gravity that their senior leadership is applying to the issues, and that could be affecting the overall culture at the Academies.

### **Reporting: SAPR/SHARP, Barriers, and Opportunities**

Reporting was a third topic that was discussed in detail by the cadets and midshipmen. Specific to the SAPR and SHARP offices and their personnel, many participants expressed a sense of distrust or hesitance to seek their advice if they were ever a victim of sexual assault or sexual harassment. Many cadets and midshipmen stated that the first person they would talk to would be their friends, not a SAPR or SHARP professional. Many expressed that they had never seen the professionals that worked in the office personally, and would not be comfortable discussing such a sensitive topic with someone that they considered a virtual stranger.

Several cadets and midshipmen at the Academies suggested that there was a need to build rapport and have more face time with the personnel that worked in the SAPR and SHARP offices. Cadets at the USAFA recommended reinstating the on-campus women's center as a safe place for women to gather and to get resources and support.

There were a number of barriers to reporting discussed by the cadets and midshipmen in the focus groups. They included fears of reprisal from their peers or the Academy and not being believed or taken seriously. Social stigmatization and loss of peer support was specifically discouraging for female cadets and midshipmen who believed that people would not take their side and would shun them as a false accuser, something consistent with the idea of

“bro culture” and how cadets and midshipmen are supposed to handle things at the lowest level. Another major barrier that the cadets and midshipmen talked about was the process itself, which

many saw as ambiguous, long, and stressful during an already stressful time due to the circumstances that would lead a student to report an unwanted event, in an already highly stressful environment of challenging physical and mental training.

Many cadets and midshipmen who participated suggested that reporting could be improved in a number of ways. Some felt that improving trust in the system and making the reporting process easier would encourage students to report unwanted situations more frequently. Others expressed that improving knowledge around what

Some cadets and midshipmen suggested that anonymous reporting options would greatly increase reporting. Participants suggested having an anonymous drop box to make SAPR and SHARP officials aware of problematic behaviors or having online options to submit reports.

constitutes these types of reportable offenses would help students who experienced an unwanted event to recognize that they had been victimized. Cadet and midshipman participants also indicated that education on the reporting process beyond the restricted versus unrestricted reporting options would help them feel less worried about the time and stress involved if they were to make a report.

## Alcohol Use and Prevention Training

The last topic that the cadets and midshipmen discussed was alcohol use at their Academy. Many of the participants suggested that binge drinking was common when they and their peers decided to drink, which is consistent with survey research findings (Davis et al., 2019). Some described this type of drinking as a way to relieve stress and make up for perceived lost recreational/social time due to their busy schedules and restrictions of Academy life. Much like the discussions around bystander intervention, many cadets and midshipmen who participated expressed that the training they were receiving on alcohol was not resonating with them.

Midshipman participants at USNA spoke about their Guardian Angel program. Several described a group of people dedicated to helping their fellow midshipmen stay safe in downtown Annapolis while out drinking. The participants believed that this group played a positive role in making sure students got home safely.

Many of the cadet and midshipman participants believed that the trainings they received were not realistic because they focused on abstaining from alcohol use, or only described the factual numbers surrounding what constitutes a drink and how many drinks they could have in a certain time period before it was considered binge drinking. The participants requested training that was

more personalized to their unique situation and trainings that focused on how to stay safe while drinking.

## Conclusion

The questions asked during the 2019 SAGR focus groups were developed based on the results of the 2018 SAGR survey and discussions with DoD civilian and military policy makers as a foundation, with an eye toward obtaining actionable insights to inform programs and policies at the Academies. The key themes and findings from this qualitative effort continue to contribute to the knowledge regarding gender relations at the Military Service Academies. These findings



will be used to inform the 2020 *SAGR* survey as OPA continues to support the Department in its mission to eliminate sexual assault and sexual harassment at the Military Service Academies and in the U.S. Military.

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# **Appendix A.**

## **Focus Group Guide: Students**

**DATA  
DRIVEN  
SOLUTIONS  
FOR  
DECISION  
MAKERS**





## Service Academy Gender Relations Focus Group Protocol Student Guide

### Part 1: Introduction to the Focus Groups (8 min)

Hello everyone. Thank you for taking the time to meet with us today. My name is \_\_\_\_\_. My colleague, \_\_\_\_\_, and I are here on behalf of the DoD Office of People Analytics, also known as OPA. While I will be leading today's discussion, \_\_\_\_\_ will be taking notes so that I can concentrate on what everyone is saying today.

I want to mention a couple of things before we get started.

- **This is intended to be a conversation among peers.** I know we are at a service academy and there are policies in place for how to act and when to speak, but for the purposes of this discussion I encourage you to speak freely as peers. I was hired to run this focus group so you won't hurt my feelings or offend me with whatever you say. I don't have a personal stake in these results.
- **There are no wrong answers.** As students at this academy you are the experts on your own perspective on the topics we plan to discuss, and I'm here to listen to you and get your thoughts. Please speak up, especially if what you have to say is different than what someone else is saying. You may represent what a lot of other people think.
- **We are not trying to come to consensus.** It's OK for there to be disagreement and in fact I welcome different points of view. Please share what is true for you. In the spirit of this, I ask that you remain respectful of each other's opinions during our discussion. Everyone in this room may see things differently and we want to hear everyone's perspective.
- **Your participation is completely voluntary,** meaning that you do not have to answer every question and you can withdraw from this study at any time. However, I do encourage your full participation today to ensure that I am getting a representative response.
- As I mentioned, my colleagues are here for notetaking purposes. **We will be recording comments but will not be recording names or other identifying information.** We are interested in what is being said, not who is saying what.
- We will be **audio-recording today's session.** The audio files will be transcribed and then destroyed after 90 days.
- **This is a non-attribution session.** To the extent permitted by law, OPA does not publish or share anything outside this room that can be attributed to any one of you specifically. We ask your cooperation in protecting the privacy of the comments made within this session by not saying anything that would identify you or other participants. For example, do not state your name. In addition, we also ask that you do not discuss the focus group proceedings after you leave.

Today, we will be discussing sensitive topics of gender-related issues, including sexual assault and harassment. I know this can be a fairly awkward topic to discuss but it is an important discussion to have. I want to emphasize that we are here to learn from you and your perceptions here, so please feel free to speak candidly.

1

This protocol is meant to guide a discussion. Based on the discussion all questions may not be asked and all participants may not answer each question.



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You were randomly selected for this focus group from the members of your class. Your knowledge and experiences offer valuable insight on these important issues. However, I do not want to discuss any specific cases of sexual assault or sexual harassment. I would like to discuss these issues more generally so we can provide guidance to leadership to create the best environment possible for you.

The information you provide today is a part of a larger study that will help DoD leadership to better understand gender-related issues here as well as at the other service academies.

In the interest of time, we may need to move on from one topic to get to another area of interest.

Does anyone have any questions?

Before we begin, I'd like to take a moment to go around the room and get to know each other a little bit better.

Tell me a little bit about getting into the Academy. Who did you work with on getting your nomination?

*Moderator Note: Probe on the screening process for the nomination.*

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## Part 2: Gender Relations at the Academy, Leadership, and Resources (14 min)

### Gender Relations

**Warm up Question:** Thinking about your day-to-day at the Academy, who do you interact with the most?

**Warm up Question:** Who do you consider some of the most influential people in your Academy life?

**Probe:** What makes them influential?

If someone were thinking about coming to <<Academy>>, what would you say to them about how men and women interact at the Academy?

**Probe:** What are some of the beliefs related to men and women here at the Academy?

**Probe:** Who influences some of your beliefs?

### Grading Leadership

*MODERATOR NOTE: Hand out grading exercise for Senior Leadership*

Now, I would like everyone to take a moment and think about Academy Senior Leadership, including the Superintendent, Commandant, Vice/Deputy Commandant, and Dean in your definition. How would you grade their handling of issues related to sexual assault at the Academy?

I understand this grade may depend on an individual person, but let's start by grading leadership as a whole.

A      B      C      D      F

**Probe:** Tell me some reasons for your "grade?"

**Probe:** What are some things they do to handle issues related to sexual assault and sexual harassment that sets them apart from others?

**Probe:** What can they do to get a higher grade?

How would you grade their handling of issues related to sexual harassment at the Academy?

*MODERATOR NOTE: Collect Academy senior leadership handout AND hand out peer leadership exercise*

Now I would like you to grade your peer leadership on the same issue. Peer leaders could include students higher in the chain of command or student unit leaders. What grade would you give your peer leadership on their handling of issues related to sexual assault and sexual harassment at the Academy?

A      B      C      D      F

**Probe:** Tell me some reasons for your "grade?"

**Probe:** What are some things they do to handle issues related to sexual assault that sets them apart from others?

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**Probe:** What are some things they do to handle issues related to sexual harassment that sets them apart from others?

**Probe:** What can they do to get a higher grade?

*MODERATOR NOTE: Collect Academy peer leadership handout*

**SAPR/SHARP Office**

When I mention the SAPR/SHARP office, NOT the SAPR/SHARP training, what are some words that come to mind?

*MODERATOR NOTE: Keep the conversation on resources and reporting away from training.*

**Probe:** How comfortable are students going to the SAPR/SHARP office?

**Probe:** When it comes to SAPR/SHARP related issues, who do you consider as the go-to person?

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### Part 3: Rules and Culture at the Academy (18 min)

#### Culture

Now I would like to take some time to talk about the culture here at the Academy.

If you had to describe the culture here to someone back home, what would you tell them?

#### Official and Unofficial Rules

What are some of the official rules at the Academy that affect how men and women interact with each other?

**Probe:** What are some of the positive effects?

**Probe:** What are some of the negative effects?

What are some of the “unwritten” rules you learned but are not in any rule book?

**Probe:** How do some of these unwritten rules affect how men and women interact?

**Probe:** Who taught you those unwritten rules?

**Probe:** When did you learn these unwritten rules?

**Probe:** Who else was there when you learned some of these unwritten rules?

What are the unwritten rules for different class years?

What are the unwritten rules for women here?

What are the unwritten rules for men here?

#### Passing down the Culture

How would you describe the relationship between class years?

I would like you to think back to when you were a 4<sup>th</sup> year/4<sup>+</sup> class (for freshman: the start of the year), how did you learn to adapt to the Academy culture?

**Probe:** Who taught you about how the Academy works?

What are some of the lessons the upper-classmen taught you about life at the Academy?

**Probe:** What about the alumni?

**Probe:** What about parents?

**Probe:** What about sponsors?

**Probe:** How about the officers at the Academy?

**Probe:** How about the noncommissioned officers at the Academy?

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This protocol is meant to guide a discussion. Based on the discussion all questions may not be asked and all participants may not answer each question.

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**For Juniors and Seniors:** What are some of the lessons you have taught the lower-classes about life at the Academy?

**For Freshmen and Sophomores:** Thinking about the upper-class years what are some of the beliefs they hold about the Academy?

**Probe:** What about the alumni?

**Probe:** What about parents?

**Probe:** What about sponsors?

**Probe:** How about the officers at the Academy?

**Probe:** How about the noncommissioned officers at the Academy?

**For Juniors and Seniors:** Thinking about the lower-class years, what are some of things they need to know about the Academy?

**Changes over time**

Thinking about before you came to the Academy, how were your views about gender relations different than they are now?

**Probe:** How much have your views about men changed?

**Probe:** How much have your views about women changed?

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**Part 4: Boundaries and Intervention (18 min)**

**Intervention**

*MODERATOR NOTE: Hand out exercise for Intervention*

Please turn to the handout in front of you. When interacting with fellow cadets/midshipmen, leaders, friends, or coworkers we all have different boundaries.

You will see a line down the middle of the paper. I want that line to represent your boundary for when you would intervene in a situation you are witnessing. You will also see a set of stickers with words and phrases. I would like you to stick these words and phrases on either the left or the right side of the line: those that you would not intervene in on the left side and those that you would intervene in on the right side. I also understand that some things might be in a gray area, you can place those on the line.

When placing these stickers on the sheet, please think about witnessing a situation occurring between two cadets/midshipmen that you do not know well.

*LIST OF BEHAVIORS TO INTERVENE IN: telling sexual jokes, making sexual gestures, sharing sexual pictures or videos of themselves, sharing sexual pictures or videos of another cadet/midshipman, bullying on social media, talking about their sexual activity, asking about sexual activity or preferences, making repeated attempts to establish a romantic or sexual relationship with the same person, touching someone, making comments based on gender, making sexual advances, horseplay or rough housing, taking advantage of someone who is passed out, taking advantage of someone who drank too much, sexually assaulting someone*

*Moderator Note: Participants should not try to move the stickers around during the discussion.*

**Probe:** What behaviors did you place on the “would intervene” side?

**Probe:** Tell me your thinking behind placing those items on that side?

**Probe:** What behaviors did you place on the “would not intervene” side?

**Probe:** Tell me your thinking behind placing those items on that side.

**Probe:** (If there are stickers in “gray area”) What would move that sticker to the left or right side of the page?

*MODERATOR NOTE: Collect first handout and hand out second exercise for Intervention*

Now look at the next handout. I would like you to do the same exercise but imagine that you are witnessing a situation occurring between two cadets/midshipmen that you know well.

**Probe:** For those who had scenarios changed sides, tell me about your thought process.

**Probe:** How might the behavior change sides if the cadets/midshipmen involved were in a romantic relationship?



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Student Guide

**Probe:** How might the alleged behavior change sides if the cadets/midshipmen involved were in a higher class than you?

**Probe:** How might the alleged behavior change sides if the cadets/midshipmen involved were in a lower class than you?

**Probe:** How might the alleged behavior change sides if you knew the person who allegedly perpetrated the act, but not the potentially victimized person?

**Probe:** How might the alleged behavior change sides if you knew the potentially victimized person, but not the person who perpetrated the act?

*Moderator Note: Collect the handouts.*

What are some intervention techniques you have been taught that you would use if you felt someone was crossing someone else's boundary?

**Probe:** Which behaviors would you use that technique for?

What are some intervention techniques you have been taught that you would use if you felt someone was crossing your boundary?

**Probe:** Which behaviors would you use that technique for?

Thinking about the intervention training you have received, which techniques do you think would be more realistic to use in real life?

**Probe:** What are some of the reasons you would or would not use that method?

How does intervention change when you are off-campus versus on-campus?

## Service Academy Gender Relations Focus Group Protocol Student Guide

### Part 5: #MeToo and Reporting (15 min)

#### #metoo at the Academy

Starting in 2017 a number of high profile sexual misconduct cases gained attention in the media, causing #metoo, and other hashtags to take off.

Now, we could spend our entire focus group speaking about this issue, however, I would like us to focus our conversation here at the Academy rather than speaking about our Nation as a whole.

How has #metoo affected the Academy?

**Probe:** What types of conversations have you heard around #metoo here at the academy?

**Probe:** What, if any, are some positive effects you have seen here at the Academy?

**Probe:** What, if any, are some negative consequences of #metoo, here at the Academy?

#### Barriers to Reporting

Now I would like to speak about the reporting of sexual assault and sexual harassment here at <<Academy>>.

Here at <<Academy>> the number of people that made an official report of sexual assault last school year was far less than the number of incidents that occur. This includes both cadets/midshipmen who make restricted and unrestricted reports. Based on your knowledge of the Academy and your fellow students, how would you close this gap?

**Probe:** What are some things the Academy can do to get those reluctant to report the options they need?

**Probe:** What do you think causes the difference between the number of reports versus the number of incidents?

**Probe:** What specific barriers are there to reporting incidents of sexual assault?

**Probe:** Are there any barriers specific to class year?

**Probe:** How might there be a difference in reporting for men versus women?

*Moderator note: If false reporting does not come up naturally, probe around the topic. Example probes: What kind of things do people say about false reporting here at the academy? How prevalent do you think false reporting is at the academy? What steps are in place to prevent false reporting? How does this impact reporting overall/true reports?*

There was also a gap between the official reports of sexual harassment and the number of incidents that occur.

**Probe:** What are the barriers for reporting sexual harassment?

**Probe:** Do cadets/midshipmen know how to report sexual harassment?

**Probe:** How are these different then barriers to reporting sexual assault?

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**Probe:** Tell me about the type of training you receive on sexual harassment. Who conducted the training?  
What did you learn?

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## Part 6: Alcohol (12 min)

### Alcohol on Campus

Now I would like to speak a bit about alcohol use.

How would you describe the drinking culture at the Academy?

You know the ins and outs of this campus better than anyone else: where to go and when to go there. You also probably know more about what goes on here at the Academy than anyone else.

What I would like for you to do now is take a look at this map of your Academy's campus. You will also see a page of stickers.

*Moderator Note: Hold up the map and pages of stickers in view of the participants. Hand out materials.*

*Moderator Note: pass out stickers*

Now I would like you to use these stickers to represent alcohol use. I'd like you to think of places where people go to drink alcohol and place these stickers on the map where you think these experiences get out of hand or become potentially dangerous.

*Moderator Note: If more clarification is needed: Where alcohol use may lead to sexual harassment. Where it may lead to sexual assault.*

What are some of the locations you placed your stickers?

**Probe:** Talk me through your thought process.

**Probe:** How would this map look different for different class years?

What are some locations where drinking can get out of hand, or out of control?

**Probe:** How could the Academy help you from feeling unsafe or keep things from getting out of hand?

**Probe:** How can the Academy help create a healthy understanding and culture around alcohol?

*Moderator Note: collect map*

### Alcohol Training

Here at the Academy you receive a variety of trainings. I would like to take some time to talk about the trainings you receive on alcohol.

What are some things your trainings teach you regarding alcohol usage?

**Probe:** How do you and your fellow cadets/midshipmen view these trainings?

**Probe:** Which parts of these trainings do you find memorable?

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**Probe:** Which parts of the training miss the mark?

**Probe:** Which changes would you make to your alcohol trainings?

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### Part 7: Risky Behaviors (Remaining Time)

#### Mapping Feeling Unsafe

So we just spoke about times you may feel unsafe around alcohol use, or when things get out of hand involving alcohol, but now I'd like to talk about times you might feel unsafe generally.

*Moderator Note: Hold up the map and pages of stickers in view of the participants. Hand out materials.*

Now These stickers represent times you may feel generally unsafe or uncomfortable, but outside of when you may participate in risky or dangerous training activities such as weapons training.

If there's a location off Academy grounds you'd like to place a sticker on, please place the sticker on the white margin, and label it with a pen to the best of your ability. Place as many or as few stickers as you like. Are there any questions before we begin?

*Moderator Note: Give participants time to place stickers*

What are some of the locations you placed your stickers?

**Probe:** Talk me through your thought process.

**Probe:** How would this map look different for different class years?

**Probe:** How would this map look different for men and women?

What are some locations where you feel that things can get out of hand, or out of control?

**Probe:** What are some things about these environments that contribute to this feeling?

How could these stickers be removed? What would need to happen?

What could the Academy do to make these areas feel safer/more comfortable?



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**Part 8: Conclusion (2 min)**

That wraps up my prepared questions for today, but if you have anything you would like to add to today's discussion I open the floor to you.

Thank you for taking the time to speak with me today. Your insights have provided valuable feedback.

## **Appendix B.**

### **Focus Group Guide: Staff and Faculty**

**DATA  
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SOLUTIONS  
FOR  
DECISION  
MAKERS**





## Service Academy Gender Relations Focus Group Protocol Staff Guide

### Part 1: Introduction to the Focus Groups (8 min)

Hello everyone. Thank you for taking the time to meet with us today. My name is \_\_\_\_\_. My colleague, \_\_\_\_\_, and I are here on behalf of the DoD Office of People Analytics, also known as OPA. While I will be leading today's discussion \_\_\_\_\_ will be taking notes, so that I can concentrate on what everyone is saying today.

I want to mention a couple of things before we get started.

- **This is intended to be a conversation among peers.** I was hired to run this focus group so you won't hurt my feelings or offend me with whatever you say. I don't have a personal stake in these results.
- **There are no wrong answers.** As staff members at this academy you know a lot about the topics we plan to discuss, and I'm here to listen to you and get your perspective. Please speak up, especially if what you have to say is different than what someone else is saying. You may represent what a lot of other people think.
- **We are not trying to come to consensus.** It's OK for there to be disagreement and in fact I welcome different points of view. Please share what is true for you. In the spirit of this, I ask that you remain respectful of each other's opinions during our discussion. Everyone in this room may see things differently and we want to hear everyone's perspective.
- **Your participation is completely voluntary,** meaning that you do not have to answer every question and you can withdraw from this study at any time. However, I do encourage your full participation today to ensure that I am getting a representative response.
- As I mentioned, my colleagues are here for notetaking purposes. **We will be recording comments but will not be recording names or other identifying information.** We are interested in what is being said, not who is saying what.
- We will be **audio-recording today's session.** The audio files will be transcribed and then destroyed after 90 days.
- **This is a non-attribution session.** To the extent permitted by law, OPA does not publish or share anything outside this room that can be attributed to any one of you specifically. We ask your cooperation in protecting the privacy of the comments made within this session by not saying anything that would identify you or other participants. For example, do not state your name. In addition, we also ask that you do not discuss the focus group proceedings after you leave.

Today, we will be discussing sensitive topics of gender-related issues, including sexual assault and harassment. I know this can be a fairly awkward topic to discuss but it is an important discussion to have. I want to emphasize that we are here to learn from you and your perceptions here, so please feel free to speak candidly.

Your knowledge and experiences offer valuable insight on these important issues. However, I do not want to discuss any specific cases of sexual assault or sexual harassment. I would like to discuss these issues more generally

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so we can provide guidance to leadership to create the best environment possible for the students here at the Academy.

The information you provide today is a part of a larger study that will help DoD leadership to better understand gender-related issues here as well as at the other service academies.

In the interest of time, we may need to move on from one topic to get to another area of interest.

Does anyone have any questions?

Before we begin, I'd like to take a moment to go around the room and get to know each other a little bit better.

What is something you like to do here at <<Academy>> in your off time?

This protocol is meant to guide a discussion. Based on the discussion all questions may not be asked and all participants may not answer each question.

## Service Academy Gender Relations Focus Group Protocol Staff Guide

### Part 2: Gender Relations at the Academy, Leadership, and Resources (18 min)

#### Gender Relations

**Warm up Question:** Thinking about your day-to-day at the Academy, what is your role here at the Academy?

**Warm up Question:** Who do you consider some of the most influential people for cadets'/midshipmen's Academy life?

**Probe:** What makes them influential?

When it comes to topics related to men and women here at the Academy, who influences the cadets'/midshipmen's beliefs?

#### Grading Leadership

*MODERATOR NOTE: Hand out grading exercise for Senior Leadership*

Now, I would like everyone to take a moment and think about Academy Senior Leadership, including the Superintendent, Commandant, Vice/Deputy Commandant, and Dean in your definition. How would you grade their handling of issues related to sexual assault at the Academy? How would you grade their handling of issues related to sexual harassment at the Academy?

I understand this grade may depend on an individual person, but let's start by grading leadership as a whole.

A B C D F

**Probe:** Tell me some reasons for your "grade?"

**Probe:** What are some things they do to handle issues related to sexual assault that sets them apart from others?

**Probe:** What are some things they do to handle issues related to sexual harassment that sets them apart from others?

**Probe:** What can they do to get a higher grade?

*MODERATOR NOTE: Collect Academy senior leadership handout AND hand out peer leadership exercise*

Now I would like you to grade cadet/midshipmen leadership on the same issue. Peer leaders could include students higher in the chain of command, student unit leaders, and battalion commanders. What grade would you give cadet/midshipmen leadership on their handling of issues related to sexual assault at the Academy?

What grade would you give cadet/midshipmen leadership on their handling of issues related to sexual harassment at the Academy?

A B C D F

**Probe:** Tell me some reasons for your "grade?"

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**Probe:** What are some things they do to handle issues related to sexual assault that sets them apart from others?

**Probe:** What are some things they do to handle issues related to sexual harassment that sets them apart from others?

**Probe:** What can they do to get a higher grade?

*MODERATOR NOTE: Collect Academy cadet/midshipmen peer leadership handout*

**SAPR/SHARP Office**

When I mention the SAPR/SHARP office, NOT the SAPR/SHARP training, what are some words that come to mind?

*MODERATOR NOTE: Keep the conversation on resources and reporting and separate from training.*

**Probe:** How comfortable are students going to the SAPR/SHARP office?

**Probe:** Are you comfortable sending students to the SAPR/SHARP office?

**Probe:** When it comes to SAPR/SHARP related issues, who do you consider as the go-to person? Why?

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**Part 3: Rules and Culture at the Academy (18 min)**

**Culture**

Now I would like to take some time to talk about the culture here at the Academy.

If you had to describe the culture here to someone that had never been stationed at the Academy, what would you tell them?

**Official and Unofficial Rules**

What are some of the official rules at the Academy that affect how men and women interact together?

**Probe:** What are some of the positive effects?

**Probe:** What are some of the negative effects?

What are some of the “unwritten” rules the cadets/midshipmen learn to do but are not in any rule book?

**Probe:** How do some of these unwritten rules affect how men and women interact together?

**Probe:** Who teaches the cadet/midshipmen those unwritten rules?

**Probe:** When do they learn these unwritten rules?

**Probe:** Who else was there when they learned some of these unwritten rules?

What are the unwritten rules for different class years?

What are the unwritten rules for women here?

What are some of the unwritten rules for men here?

How would you describe the relationship between class years?

**Culture**

What role do you play in Academy culture?

What are some of the things you try to teach cadets/midshipmen during their time at the Academy?

What aspects of Academy culture do you think should change?

**Probe:** What are some ways the Academy can encourage this change?

**#metoo at the Academy**

Starting in 2017 a number of high profile sexual misconduct cases gained attention in the media, causing #metoo, and other hashtags to take off.

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not be asked and all participants may not answer each question.

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Now, we could spend our entire focus group speaking about this issue, however, I would like us to focus our conversation here at the Academy rather than speaking about our Nation as a whole.

How has #metoo affected the Academy?

**Probe:** What types of conversations have you heard around #metoo here at the academy?

**Probe:** What, if any, are some positive effects you have seen here at the Academy?

**Probe:** What, if any, are some negative consequences of #metoo, here at the Academy?

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**Part 4: Reporting (15 minutes)**

**Role in Reporting**

What is your role in the reporting process?

What tools do you use to fulfill your role?

What additional resources would you want that you do not currently have to help assist you in the reporting process?

**Probe:** Without speaking about a specific case, what are some of the challenges to interacting with potential victims?

**Probe:** What about potential perpetrators?

**Barriers to Reporting**

Now I would like to speak about the reporting of sexual assault and sexual harassment here at <<Academy>>.

Here at <<Academy>> the number of people that made an official report of sexual assault last school year was far less than the number of incidents that occur. This includes both cadets/midshipmen who make restricted and unrestricted reports. Based on your knowledge of the Academy and your fellow students, how would you close this gap?

**Probe:** What are some things the Academy can do to get those reluctant to report the options they need?

**Probe:** What do you think causes the difference between the number of reports versus the number of incidents?

**Probe:** What specific barriers are there to reporting incidents of sexual assault?

**Probe:** Are there any barriers specific to class year?

**Probe:** How might there be a difference in reporting for men versus women?

*Moderator note: If false reporting does not come up naturally, probe around the topic. Example probes: What kind of things do people say about false reporting here at the academy? How prevalent do you think false reporting is at the academy? What steps are in place to prevent false reporting? How does this impact reporting overall/true reports?*

There was also a gap between the official reports of sexual harassment and the number of incidents that occur.

**Probe:** What are the barriers for reporting sexual harassment?

**Probe:** Do cadets/midshipmen know how to report sexual harassment?

**Probe:** How are these different then barriers to reporting sexual assault?

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**Part 5: Boundaries and Intervention (12 min)**

**Intervention**

*MODERATOR NOTE: Hand out exercise for Intervention*

Please turn to the handout in front of you. When interacting with cadets/midshipmen, leaders, friends, or coworkers we all have different boundaries.

You will see a line down the middle of the paper. I want that line to represent where you think most cadets'/midshipmen's boundary for when they would intervene in a situation they are witnessing. You will also see a set of stickers with words and phrases. I would like you to stick these words and phrases on either the left or the right side of the line: those that they would not intervene in on the left side and those that they would intervene in on the right side. I also understand that some things might be in a gray area, you can place those on the line.

When placing these stickers on the sheet please think about a cadet/midshipman witnessing a situation occurring between two cadets/midshipmen that they do not know well.

*LIST OF BEHAVIORS TO INTERVENE IN: telling sexual jokes, making sexual gestures, sharing sexual pictures or videos of themselves, sharing sexual pictures or videos of another cadet/midshipman, bullying on social media, talking about their sexual activity, asking about sexual activity or preferences, making repeated attempts to establish a romantic or sexual relationship with the same person, touching someone, making comments based on gender, making sexual advances, horseplay or rough housing, taking advantage of someone who is passed out, taking advantage of someone who drank too much, sexually assaulting someone*

*Moderator Note: Participants should not try to move the stickers around during the discussion.*

**Probe:** What behaviors did you place on the "would intervene" side?

**Probe:** Tell me your thinking behind placing those items on that side?

**Probe:** What behaviors did you place on the "would not intervene" side?

**Probe:** Tell me your thinking behind placing those items on that side.

**Probe:** (If there are stickers in "gray area") What would move that sticker to the left or right side of the page?

*MODERATOR NOTE: Collect first handout and hand out second exercise for Intervention*

Now look at the next handout. I would like you to do the same exercise, but imagine that the cadet/midshipman is witnessing a situation occurring between two cadets/midshipmen that they know well.

**Probe:** For those who had scenarios changed sides, tell me about your thought process.

**Probe:** How might the behavior change sides if the cadets/midshipmen involved were in a romantic relationship?

This protocol is meant to guide a discussion. Based on the discussion all questions may not be asked and all participants may not answer each question.

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**Probe:** How might the behavior change sides if the cadets/midshipmen involved were upper-classmen?

**Probe:** How might the behavior change sides if the cadets/midshipmen involved were lower-classmen?

**Probe:** How might the behavior change sides if the witnessing cadet/midshipmen knew the person who allegedly perpetrated the act, but not the potentially victimized person?

**Probe:** How might the behavior change sides if the witnessing cadet/midshipmen knew the potentially victimized person, but not the person who allegedly perpetrated the act?

*Moderator Note: Collect the handouts.*

What are some intervention techniques cadets/midshipmen have been taught that they would use if they felt someone was crossing their boundary?

**Probe:** Which behaviors would they use that technique for?

What are some intervention techniques cadets/midshipmen have been taught that they would use if they felt that they were witnessing a situation that was crossing someone else's boundary?

**Probe:** Which behaviors would they use that technique for?

Thinking about the intervention training they have received, what techniques do you think would be more realistic to use in real life?

**Probe:** What are some of the reasons you think they would or would not use that method.

How does intervention change when cadets/midshipmen are off-campus versus on-campus?

This protocol is meant to guide a discussion. Based on the discussion all questions may not be asked and all participants may not answer each question.

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**Part 6: Training (16 min)**

**Alcohol Training**

Here at the Academy there are a variety of trainings. I would like to take some time to talk about some of those trainings.

What are some trainings students receive regarding alcohol usage?

**Probe:** How do cadets/midshipmen view these trainings?

**Probe:** What from these trainings do you think are impactful?

**Probe:** What messages miss the mark?

**Probe:** What changes would you make to the alcohol trainings?

**SAPR/SHARP Training**

Now I would like to speak about SAPR/SHARP trainings.

What is your role in SAPR/SHARP trainings?

What are some things that you find most helpful or useful from the various trainings you receive on sexual assault?

What are some things that you find most helpful or useful from the various trainings you receive on sexual harassment?

What are some things that you find least helpful or useful from the various trainings you receive on sexual assault?

What are some things that you find least helpful or useful from the various trainings you receive on sexual harassment?

What are some things people need to know, but don't, regarding sexual assault?

What are some things people need to know, but don't, regarding sexual harassment?

Thinking about the trainings the students receive, how effective are they in preparing cadets/midshipmen to be an officer?

**Probe:** How can the SAPR/SHARP trainings better prepare cadets/midshipmen to be an officer?

**Probe:** If a future subordinate came to them to discuss being the victim of unwanted sexual contact, how has the training they received helped them to assist that person?

This protocol is meant to guide a discussion. Based on the discussion all questions may not be asked and all participants may not answer each question.



Service Academy Gender Relations Focus Group Protocol  
Staff Guide

**Part 7: Conclusion (3 min)**

That wraps up my prepared questions for today, but if you have anything you would like to add to today's discussion I open the floor to you.

Thank you for taking the time to speak with me today. Your insights have provided valuable feedback.

This protocol is meant to guide a discussion. Based on the discussion all questions may not be asked and all participants may not answer each question.



## Appendix C. Handouts

DATA  
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SOLUTIONS  
FOR  
DECISION  
MAKERS







### Ground Rules for Discussion

Thank you for participating in this important focus group. We will follow a few ground rules for the focus group:

- This is intended to be a **conversation among peers**
- There are **no wrong answers**
- We are **not** trying to **come to a consensus**
- Your participation is completely **voluntary**
- The conversation will be **audio-recorded**
- This is a **non-attribution** session
- No side conversations

Preserving the privacy and confidentiality of focus group participants is a fundamental principle for any successful data collection program, and the Department of Defense (DoD) Office of People Analytics (OPA) strives to maintain and protect the identity of every individual who participates in any of our data collection efforts. To accomplish this goal, OPA uses procedures and protocols that protect respondent confidentiality to the extent permitted by all federal laws and statutes.

Participation in this focus group is voluntary; however, maximum participation is encouraged so that data will be complete and representative. The data collection procedures strive to maintain the anonymity of all participants; no one from OPA will know who has been selected and no record will be made of those who participate in any given session. Further, no comments will be kept in the written notes that could be linked to any individual participant. The risk to you is accidental or unintentional disclosure of any identifying data you provide during the session or other disclosures required by law. However, OPA has a number of policies and procedures in place to preserve the anonymity of focus group data to the extent allowed by law, and all potentially identifying information has been removed.



### Definitions

#### Sexual Harassment:

Involves unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature when:

- Submission to such conduct is made either explicitly or implicitly a term or condition of a favorable decision.
- Submission to or rejection of such conduct by a person is used as a basis for decisions affecting that person.
- Such conduct has the purpose or effect of unreasonably interfering with an individual's performance or creates an intimidating, hostile, or offensive environment.

This definition emphasizes that conduct need not result in concrete psychological harm to the victim, but rather need only be so severe or pervasive that a reasonable person would perceive, and the victim does perceive, the environment as hostile or offensive.

#### Unwanted Sexual Contact:

Unwanted sexual contact refers to a range of activities including uninvited and unwelcome completed or attempted sexual intercourse, sodomy (oral or anal sex), penetration by an object, and the unwanted touching of genitalia and other sexually related areas of the body. Uninvited and unwelcome implies lack of consent. Article 120 of the UCMJ defines "consent" as "a freely given agreement to the conduct at issue by a competent person." The term is further explained as:

- "An expression of lack of consent through words or conduct means there is no consent.
- Lack of verbal or physical resistance or submission resulting from the use of force, threat of force, or placing another person in fear does not constitute consent.
- A current or previous dating or social or sexual relationship by itself or the manner of dress of the person involved with the accused in the conduct at issue shall not constitute consent.
- A sleeping, unconscious, or incompetent person cannot consent.
- A person cannot consent to force causing or likely to cause death or grievous bodily harm or to being rendered unconscious.
- A person cannot consent while under threat or fear or under the circumstances described in subparagraph (C) or (D) of subsection (b)(1). (Under the definition of sexual assault, these are (C) making fraudulent representation that the sexual act serves a professional purpose and (D) inducing a belief by any artifice, pretense, or concealment that the person is another person).
- Lack of consent may be inferred based on the circumstances of the offense. All the surrounding circumstances are to be considered in determining whether a person gave consent, or whether a person did not resist or ceased to resist only because of another person's actions."



We appreciate your participation in this focus group. In the event you would like to discuss issues related to this focus group with someone from OPA during (or after) our visit to the U.S. Military Academy, please contact Dr. Ashlea Klahr at (571) 372-2278 or DSN 372-2278.

If you wish to provide feedback regarding this focus group process or the focus group content, please send us an e-mail at: [SA-Survey@mail.mil](mailto:SA-Survey@mail.mil). If you know of others who might like to contact a member of the OPA team, please share this information with them.

In April 2011, the Department of Defense launched the DoD Safe Helpline to provide confidential, live, one-on-one expert advice to victims of sexual assault. Available 24/7, users can click, call or text to access Safe Helpline services:

**CLICK:** Logging on to [www.SafeHelpline.org](http://www.SafeHelpline.org) allows users to receive live, one-on-one confidential help with a trained professional through a secure instant-messaging format. The website also provides vital information about recovering from and reporting sexual assault.

**CALL:** Calling the telephone hotline (877) 995-5247 allows users to speak with trained Safe Helpline staff for access to resources and support. Safe Helpline staff can also transfer callers to installation or base Sexual Assault Response Coordinators (SARCs)/On-call SAPR Victim Advocates (VAs), civilian rape crisis centers or the Suicide Prevention Lifeline.

**TEXT:** Texting their location to 55-247 (inside the U.S.) or (202) 470-5546 (outside the U.S.) allows users to receive automated contact information for the SARC at their installation or base.

If you feel uncomfortable or uneasy after participating in this focus group, and/or if you are a survivor of sexual assault, or have experienced sexual harassment or stalking, we strongly encourage you to contact the following resources that are available to you:

**WEST POINT SHARP HOTLINE 24/7: (845) 659-7467**

**USCC SARC**

**(845) 938-7479; 24/7 Cell: (845) 476-1426**

**Keller Army Community Hospital (SARC)**

**(845) 0398-4150; 24/7 Cell: (845) 476-4712**

**Center for Personal Development (CPD)**

**(845) 938-3022; 24/7 Cell: (845) 591-7215**

**Military Police Desk**

**(845) 938-3333**

**West Point Duty Chaplain**

**(845) 401-8171**

**Garrison SARC**

**(845) 938-5657; 24/7 Cell: (914) 382-8180**

**USMA Victim Advocate**

**(845) 938-3532; Cell: (845) 590-1259**

**USMAPS Victim Advocate**

**(845) 938-1938**

**Medical Attention**

**Keller Army Community Hospital**

**Emergency Room: (845) 938-4004**

**Behavioral Health: (845) 938-3441**





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### Definitions

#### Sexual Harassment:

Involves unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature when:

- Submission to such conduct is made either explicitly or implicitly a term or condition of a favorable decision.
- Submission to or rejection of such conduct by a person is used as a basis for decisions affecting that person.
- Such conduct has the purpose or effect of unreasonably interfering with an individual's performance or creates an intimidating, hostile, or offensive environment.

This definition emphasizes that conduct need not result in concrete psychological harm to the victim, but rather need only be so severe or pervasive that a reasonable person would perceive, and the victim does perceive, the environment as hostile or offensive.

#### Unwanted Sexual Contact:

Unwanted sexual contact refers to a range of activities including uninvited and unwelcome completed or attempted sexual intercourse, sodomy (oral or anal sex), penetration by an object, and the unwanted touching of genitalia and other sexually related areas of the body. Uninvited and unwelcome implies lack of consent. Article 120 of the UCMJ defines "consent" as "a freely given agreement to the conduct at issue by a competent person." The term is further explained as:

- "An expression of lack of consent through words or conduct means there is no consent.
- Lack of verbal or physical resistance or submission resulting from the use of force, threat of force, or placing another person in fear does not constitute consent.
- A current or previous dating or social or sexual relationship by itself or the manner of dress of the person involved with the accused in the conduct at issue shall not constitute consent.
- A sleeping, unconscious, or incompetent person cannot consent.
- A person cannot consent to force causing or likely to cause death or grievous bodily harm or to being rendered unconscious.
- A person cannot consent while under threat or fear or under the circumstances described in subparagraph (C) or (D) of subsection (b)(1). (Under the definition of sexual assault, these are (C) making fraudulent representation that the sexual act serves a professional purpose and (D) inducing a belief by any artifice, pretense, or concealment that the person is another person).
- Lack of consent may be inferred based on the circumstances of the offense. All the surrounding circumstances are to be considered in determining whether a person gave consent, or whether a person did not resist or ceased to resist only because of another person's actions."



We appreciate your participation in this focus group. In the event you would like to discuss issues related to this focus group with someone from OPA during (or after) our visit to the U.S. Military Academy, please contact Dr. Ashlea Klahr at (571) 372-2278 or DSN 372-2278.

If you wish to provide feedback regarding this focus group process or the focus group content, please send us an e-mail at: [SA-Survey@mail.mil](mailto:SA-Survey@mail.mil). If you know of others who might like to contact a member of the OPA team, please share this information with them.

In April 2011, the Department of Defense launched the DoD Safe Helpline to provide confidential, live, one-on-one expert advice to victims of sexual assault. Available 24/7, users can click, call or text to access Safe Helpline services:

**CLICK:** Logging on to [www.SafeHelpline.org](http://www.SafeHelpline.org) allows users to receive live, one-on-one confidential help with a trained professional through a secure instant-messaging format. The website also provides vital information about recovering from and reporting sexual assault.

**CALL:** Calling the telephone hotline (877) 995-5247 allows users to speak with trained Safe Helpline staff for access to resources and support. Safe Helpline staff can also transfer callers to installation or base Sexual Assault Response Coordinators (SARCs)/On-call SAPR Victim Advocates (VAs), civilian rape crisis centers or the Suicide Prevention Lifeline.

**TEXT:** Texting their location to 55-247 (inside the U.S.) or (202) 470-5546 (outside the U.S.) allows users to receive automated contact information for the SARC at their installation or base.

If you feel uncomfortable or uneasy after participating in this focus group, and/or if you are a survivor of sexual assault, or have experienced sexual harassment or stalking, we strongly encourage you to contact the following resources that are available to you:

**24-Hour USNA SAPR Hotline: (443) 336-2637**

**Sexual Assault Response Coordinators: (443) 336-5359**

**CMEO: (410) 293-2560/(410) 293-2560**

**Midshipmen Development Center: (410) 293-4897**

**Website: [www.usna.edu/SAPRO](http://www.usna.edu/SAPRO)**

**Chaplain's Office: (410) 293-1100/Duty Chaplain: (443) 871-2339 (After Duty Hours-Main Office)**

**Human Research Protection Program: (410) 293-2533 or [HRPPoffice@usna.edu](mailto:HRPPoffice@usna.edu)**



### Ground Rules for Discussion

Thank you for participating in this important focus group. We will follow a few ground rules for the focus group:

- This is intended to be a **conversation among peers**
- There are **no wrong answers**
- We are **not** trying to **come to a consensus**
- Your participation is completely **voluntary**
- The conversation will be **audio-recorded**
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**USAFA Peak Performance Center 333-2107 (Duty Hours)/After Duty Hours – Contact your Squadron/Group/Wing PEER and they will contact the on-call PPC Provider**

**USAFA Cadet Chaplain's Office 333-2636 (Duty Hours)/333-2633 (After Duty Hours)**

**USAFA Equal Opportunity Office/MSgt Kimberly Guler 333-4258/(After Duty Hours) (719) 556-4555**

**Military Family Life Counselors (0800-2000) (719) 651-4810**

**Inspector General 333-3490**

## Grade for Senior Leadership

(Includes Superintendent, Commandant, Vice/Deputy Commandant, and Dean)

A

B

C

D

F

## Grade for Peer Leadership

A

B

C

D

F



I would not intervene	I would intervene



Telling sexual jokes



Making sexual gestures



Sharing sexual pictures or videos of themselves



Sharing sexual pictures or videos of another cadet/midshipman



Talking about their sexual activity



Asking about sexual activity or preferences



Making repeated attempts to establish an unwanted romantic or sexual relationship with the same person



Touching someone



Making comments based on gender



Making sexual advances



Horseplay or rough housing



Taking advantage of someone who is passed out



Taking advantage of someone who drank too much



Sexually assaulting someone

## Behaviors Key









Alcohol use occurs



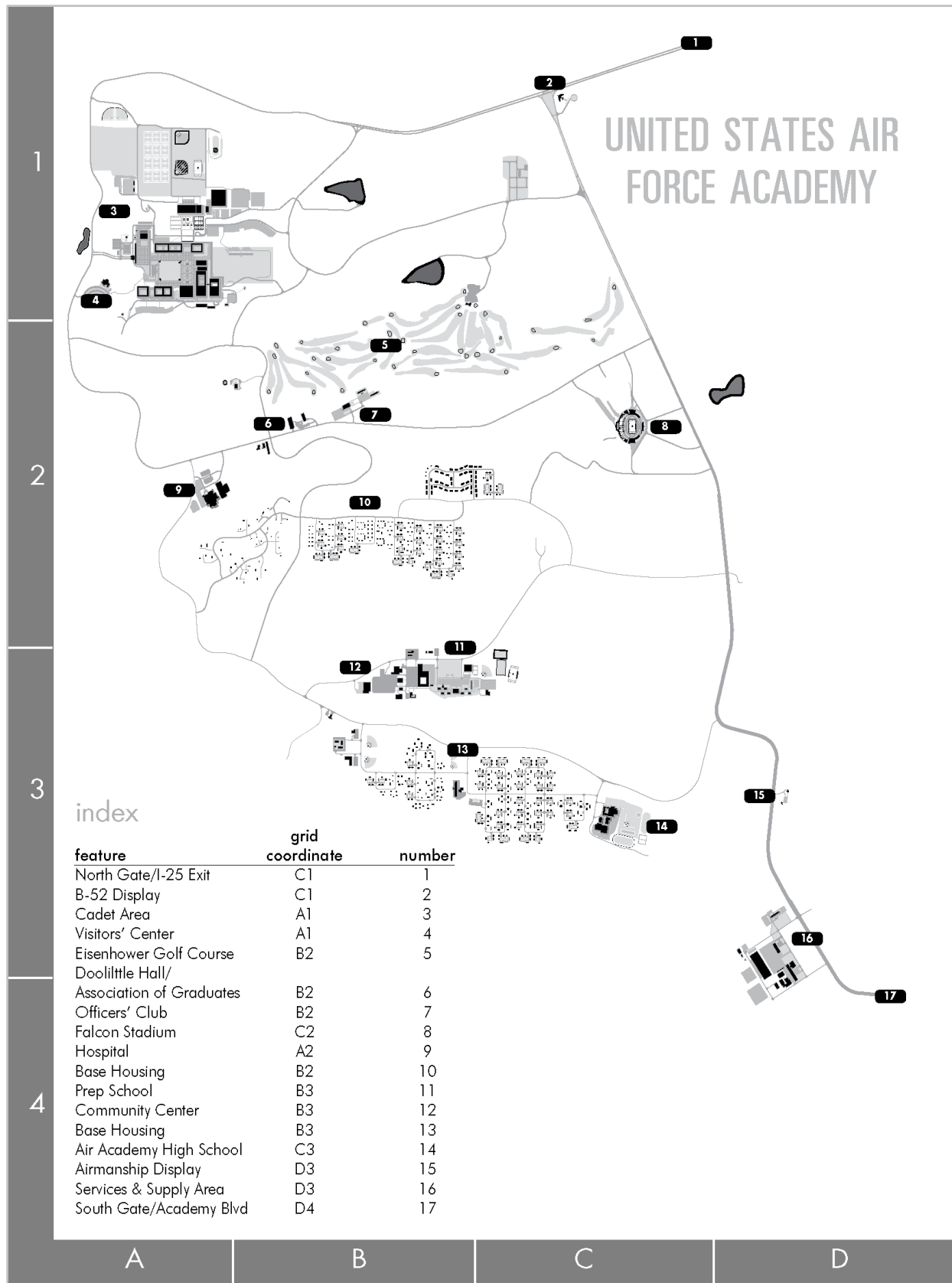
Alcohol use gets out of hand

## Behaviors Key

	Sharing of explicit imagery
	Feeling unsafe
	Staring/Gawking
	Verbal harassment
	Unwanted touching
	Unwanted Sexual Contact









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