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Too Little, Too Late: Consent Education, Sexual Practice, and Institutional Power in College Life

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Abstract: Despite widespread efforts to address sexual assault on US college campuses through consent education, understanding and practicing consent remains a complex and under-researched area. Consent, defined as clear, continuous, and voluntary communication, is often emphasized as a preventive measure against sexual assault. However, high rates of sexual assault, particularly among college students, highlight the limitations of current educational approaches. Our study examines college students' conceptualizations of consent, their application of consent in sexual relationships, and their views on the effectiveness of consent education. Findings indicate that many students harbor concerns about consent education, particularly regarding best practices, the influence of alcohol, and individual interpretations of consent. Notably, students report that their educational experiences have a limited impact on their understanding of and practices regarding consent, and they often struggle to apply these concepts effectively in real-world contexts. These findings underscore the need for more nuanced and impactful educational consent strategies that address the complexities of consent in intimate relationships and provide clearer guidance on managing factors like alcohol. This research aims to inform more effective approaches for activists and educational institutions in reducing campus sexual assault.

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Defining and educating students about sexual consent in educational institutions is a strategy endorsed by contemporary activists to prevent sexual assault in colleges and universities in the US. Yet the role of consent in romantic and sexual relationships is imperfectly understood by educators, activists, and scholars. This article examines how institutional consent discourses collide with peer/media "counterdiscourses," producing a gap between stated definitions and inpractice negotiation, using a case study at a small residential liberal arts college. Despite the focus on consent in assault prevention efforts, however, sexual assault remains a serious issue in the United States, especially among college students. Annually, an estimated 734,630 people experience threatened, attempted, or completed rape (Morgan and Truman 2019). Additionally, 51% of women who experienced rape were raped by an intimate partner, and 40.8% were raped by an acquaintance. These numbers suggest that despite educational focus on understanding and practicing consent, additional research on the role of consent in sexual relationships needs to be conducted. Consent is complex, especially for intimate partners who often use implied consent in place of verbal, affirmative consent. Existing research finds that, especially among young people and college students, the ability to define consent is rarely associated with the use of consent in sexual relationships (Curtis and Burnett 2017; Groggel, Burdick, and Barazza 2021; Setty 2021; Hardesty et al. 2022). These findings highlight gaps in college students' understanding of consent and suggest that more comprehensive research could provide resources for activists and institutions.

To address this issue, our research draws on qualitative, in-depth interviews with students at a small liberal arts college to examine how they define and understand sexual consent, how these understandings shape communication and decision-making within their intimate relationships, and how students perceive the role and effectiveness of formal consent education in influencing their attitudes and behaviors. Our findings indicate that participants have significant reservations regarding consent education, best practices surrounding consent education, the impact of alcohol on consent, and individual students' consent definitions and practices. Our analysis reveals a disconnect between consent education and students' lived experiences, with many students reporting that these programs provide limited knowledge and insufficient guidance for navigating consent.

Applying the analytic framework of discourse and counter-discourse central to Michel Foucault's work (1984; 2000; 2003) to this issue, we analyze how institutional consent discourse is interpreted and enacted by students in everyday sexual interactions, and how alcohol-controlled social settings and heteronormative assumptions mediate this process. Our analysis is informed by the following questions. How do students translate institutional consent discourse into daily practice in intimate encounters? How do gendered/heteronormative sexual scripts and party drinking cultures shape this translation? How do students evaluate consent education relative to competing peer/media discourses? Our findings demonstrate how institutional consent discourses collide with peer/media counterdiscourses around sexual behavior. In practice, this effectively produces a consent disconnect, a gap between stated definitions and inpractice behavior, within a residential, small liberal arts context. This case study can help us better evaluate how larger frameworks of sexual behavior in contemporary culture may be tied to high rates of sexual violence in society and on campuses, despite efforts to focus on teaching consent discourse.

Theoretical Framework and Literature of Consent

For this project, we treat discourse as a historically situated set of statements, practices, and rules that delineate what can be known, said, and done; in our context, this refers to the college's consent training. This training defines appropriate subjects for "responsible students," authorized speech, verbal, ongoing consent, and legitimate behaviors within institutional consent discourses (Foucault 1984; 2000). Because of systems of power, institutional efforts to normalize sexual behavior inevitably encounter counterdiscourses that contest, reject, or sidestep official norms (Foucault 2000; 2003). In our context, peer talk, media tropes, and party routines function as counterdiscourses that normalize sexual behavior and dilute the institutional authority (Foucault 2000; 2003). This lens clarifies how colleges may attempt to shape intimate behavior through policydriven discourse and why this may fail about sexual behavior when counterdiscursive logics are better aligned with normative expectations (Foucault 1984; 2000).

There is no single legal definition of consent, but individual policy definitions exist (Hust, Rodgers, and Bayly 2017; Baldwin-White 2021). Generally, most state that consent must include a voluntary choice to engage in sexual activity (Jozkowski and Peterson 2013; Baldwin-White 2021). Many also include that consent can be retracted, cannot be coerced through threat, and cannot be given if one or both parties are incapacitated, such as through

intoxication (Baldwin-White 2021). Some policies also require consent to be given explicitly and verbally (Jozkowski and Peterson 2013; Curtis and Burnett 2017; Hust et al. 2017; Goodcase, Spencer, and Toews 2021; Groggel et al. 2021). However, consent often involves a complex interactional relationship between the parties engaged in a sexual relationship, in which consent may be implicit or nonverbal (Jozkowski and Peterson 2013; Hust et al. 2017; Groggel et al. 2021; Setty 2021).

Written definitions of consent are an important element of consent practices at colleges and universities (Graham et al. 2017). All colleges and universities that receive federal funding must comply with Title IX by establishing policies to address campus sexual misconduct, including the definition of consent (Singleton 2017). In an analysis of consent definitions from 995 colleges and universities, researchers found that 93% of schools had sexual assault policies and consent definitions, and 87.6% of those were available online. Singleton (2017) found that college consent definitions tend to discriminate against the accused party and benefit the accuser in sexual assault cases. Singleton (2017) cited some cases that highlighted the lack of investigation into sexual assault at institutions with broad and all-encompassing consent definitions or that favor specific identities.

Existing research also attempts to understand the difference between students' knowledge of consent and consent practices in sexual relationships. In studies on this topic, students could define consent, including affirmative consent, but they did not view it as a realistic component of their sexual relationships, leading them to be unlikely to seek consent (Curtis and Burnett 2017; Setty 2021; Hardesty et al. 2022). Students with a difference between their understandings of consent and their behaviors attributed this discrepancy to social norms and expectations surrounding sex, such as the idea that kissing and touching always lead to sex (Setty 2021). Students further emphasized that they do not wish to seek verbal consent for sex when it is preceded by nonverbal actions, such as kissing or leaning in (Groggel et al. 2021; Hardesty et al. 2022:1122). These findings indicate that students may misunderstand nonverbal cues, leading to nonconsensual sexual interactions (Groggel et al. 2021; Hardesty et al. 2022).

Further, the literature on consent education identifies why some types of consent education may fail. In one survey, students ranked their sources of consent education from most to least influential, with the internet and social media as the most influential, followed by friends, school, and parents (MacDougall et al. 2020). On average, students ranked the sexual health education that they received in school as poor (MacDougall et al. 2020). 46% of respondents said that their school-based consent education had no impact on them, and 76% stated their consent education from their parents had no impact on them (MacDougall et al. 2020).

Still, some students can benefit from consent education in college (Thomas, Sorenson, and Joshi 2016; Ortiz and Shafer 2018). A survey of students' understanding of consent before, during, and after a campus consent education campaign found that consent education in college improved students' understanding of consent (Ortiz and Shafer 2018). The groups that experienced the greatest improvement in their comprehension of consent, based on the information they learned from the education campaigns, were men and sorority or fraternity members (Ortiz and Shafer 2018). Thomas and colleagues (2016) examined specific tactics to increase

the effectiveness of college consent education campaigns. They found that direct messages are most effective for college students, especially when they use bright colors and witty language. This research provides a model for how education can become effective for college students if it targets groups without existing consent education (Thomas et al. 2016; Ortiz and Shafer 2018).

Alcohol and Stereotypes as a Situational Organizer of Sexual Scripts

One specific context where consent behaviors may change in a sexual relationship, according to research on college students, occurs when alcohol is present (Jozkowski and Wiersma 2015; Baldwin-White 2021). In one survey of heterosexual undergraduate students, researchers found that students believed expectations of alcohol consumption made them more likely to consent to sex, and it also made them more likely to expect sex (Jozkowski and Wiersma 2015). This effect was particularly pronounced for students in relationships, who were more likely to expect and use nonverbal and passive forms of consent (Jozkowski and Wiersma 2015). Similarly, students in another study said that alcohol made them uncertain about how to handle consent (Baldwin-White 2021). Because nonverbal consent may increase misunderstandings surrounding consent, and alcohol increases students' preferences for nonverbal consent, alcohol can negatively influence students' abilities to identify and give consent (Jozkowski and Wiersma 2015; Baldwin-White 2021).

Stereotypes also play a role in how individuals respond to nonconsensual behaviors. Jozkowski and Peterson (2013) discovered that students who endorse traditional sexual expectations, such as that women should perform oral sex, that men are aggressive, and that men use deception to obtain sex, were less likely to negotiate consent in their sexual relationships. Jozkowski and Peterson (2013) discussed that, according to college students, men are framed as seekers and women are characterized as gatekeepers of sex. Overall, existing research highlights factors that impact perceptions of consent and how consent is used in sexual relationships. This project seeks to contribute to the growing body of research on the complexity of meanings associated with the concept of consent and to provide insights into how college students may use this knowledge to inform their understanding of consent.

Methods

This study draws on indepth interviews to examine how students move from learning definitions of consent to negotiating consent in real situations. Rather than asking only what students know, we focus on how consent is communicated, avoided, or assumed in practice, especially in moments shaped by alcohol, awkwardness, and relationship dynamics. This approach makes visible where institutional consent discourse fails and how peer norms and mediainfluenced counterdiscourses create alternative rules for what counts as acceptable behavior. Our central research questions are: How do students translate institutional consent discourse into daily practice in intimate encounters? How do gendered/heteronormative sexual scripts and party drinking cultures shape this translation? How do students evaluate consent education relative to competing peer/media discourses?

In this project, we elected to conduct a case study of a small, private liberal arts college in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. A small, residential

liberal arts college provides strong analytic leverage for examining the gap between consent discourse and practice. High residential density and close social networks mean students repeatedly encounter one another across classrooms, residence halls, and social spaces, making norms around dating, hooking up, and consent highly visible and quickly shared. Partycentered residential social life further concentrates situations in which consent must be negotiated in real time, often under social pressure to avoid discomfort or disruption. By interviewing both firstyear students and seniors, this study captures how students initially interpret institutional messaging and how their consent practices develop over time within campus peer cultures. Our focus was to provide insight from the perspectives of college students, whose experiences make them cultural insiders (Knott et al. 2022; Small and Cook 2023).

We collected in-depth semi-structured interview data from 20 participants between the ages of 18 and 22. The average age of the participants was 20 years old. 10 participants were seniors in college, and 10 were freshmen. Of the participants, 75% were female, and 25% were male. 15 participants identified as white, 3 as Hispanic or Latino, and 2 as Asian. Further, 11 participants stated that their sexuality was straight, 6 said they were bisexual, 2 said they were gay, and 1 participant said they identified as asexual. The participants had a variety of majors as well.

Participants were recruited for this project using three methods. First, posters advertising the research were distributed to individuals who oversee the student residences. Interested students could contact the researcher by email, and they were then sent a description of the research and a link to sign up for an interview. After conducting initial interviews with students contacted via posters, additional participants were recruited through referrals from those initial participants. Finally, information was sent to officers of on-campus student organizations via email to solicit student participation within their organizations. No incentives were offered for student participation, and all students were over the age of 18. These data were collected with IRB approval from Gettysburg College and by CITI-trained researchers. The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

Interviews were conducted in person for this project. The interview topics included experiences with romantic and sexual relationships, defining consent, describing experiences with consent, and education related to consent. Interviews lasted for approximately 30 minutes and were recorded through an audio transcription service. A codebook was developed through open coding of 10 transcripts. Next, the remaining 10 transcripts were selectively coded for topics such as knowledge of consent, types of consent, sources of consent education, beneficial aspects of consent education, harmful aspects of consent education, the role of alcohol, and sexual practices related to consent. After coding based on these themes, the data were categorized into the themes with the strongest findings for further analysis.

Limitations of this research include the small sample size, which is effective for a targeted case study of a single institution, such as this project. Future research might include a more comprehensive, systemic collection of survey data. Additionally, this work may provide a theoretical basis for future research evaluating how students conceptualize consent across different universities in other regions of the United States, thereby gaining a broader understanding of this topic.

Results and Discussion

Several key themes emerged from this research surrounding students' perceptions of consent and consent education. First, they identified issues specifically related to consent education, including that students received it too late, that the education they received was not interactive, and that it was not inclusive. Secondly, students believed the best practices for effective consent education included realistic examples, presentations and lectures, and videos and media, which they did not feel were reflected in their educational experiences. Third, the ways students defined consent differed significantly from how they understood their practices related to consent in sexual relationships, especially when alcohol and party culture were involved.

"This is Annoying": When Consent Education Fails

The central framework at this institution is the use of pre-matriculation online modules. These modules appear to secure procedural compliance without fostering interactional competence or student buy-in. Students routinely described "clickthrough" engagement and rapid forgetting, caused by low interactivity, inconvenient timing, and sexual stigma. These accounts show how the university's institutional discourse, organized around oriented training before students enter actual campus social life, fails to translate into memorable, inthemoment language for negotiating consent. The mechanism is straightforward: low interactivity + prematriculation timing + stigma result in limited discursive buy-in, leaving students trained yet unprepared.

The actual structure and framework of consent education were identified as a significant concern for participants in this study. These issues included recommendations for improving consent education, as well as issues such as timing, inclusiveness, and structure. Our results identified that over half of the participants believed the consent education they received occurred too late in their lives. Among the 20 interviewees, 11 stated they had no formal education on the topic of consent. Lilly, a first-year student, said, "I think [consent education] comes a bit too late, like the fact that we're going into college and…almost all of us are adults, and it's the first time that at least I've had an actual education about consent." Rose, a senior, shared, "I don't think I heard about [consent] until like college…which is kind of concerning." Among the nine students who received a formal consent education before college, most said that their education emphasized not having sex rather than how to have consensual sex. Maddie, a first-year student, stated, "I went to a religious school…no one ever really wanted to talk about sex because sex was supposed to be this thing between married people and married people only."

Another issue with students' consent education was that before college, it was not inclusive of members of the LGBTQ+ community. Many students remarked that their consent education focused primarily on heterosexual relationships, resulting in a lack of understanding about consent for LGBTQ+ students. Regarding the consent education she received before coming to college, a senior named Marie said, "I felt like a lot of things were missing, especially once you reached high school and realized that like there's more to the world than straight sex, and like, that's the kind of sex that's mostly talked about." A first-year, bisexual student named Abigail also said that her consent education before college "was just focusing on sex between a man and a woman." Given that Abigail identified as bisexual, her consent

education did not account for her sexual orientation and practices. Students also expressed that their college consent education did not adequately discuss consent within the LGBTQ+ community. Charlotte, a bisexual senior, said that she wished the education included "more conversations about different sexualities and how [nonconsensual relationships] can still happen in non-straight relationships." While discussing his experiences with college consent education, Ben, a gay-identifying senior, stated that in his education:

> Anything about gay people [was missing]. Now, I get that getting a "yes" from a gay person isn't exactly that different from getting a "yes" from a straight person, but…even before you get to like sex is like, when you want someone's consent to flirt with them…you really don't have any way of knowing if he's gay or straight until you ask him, and most straight men aren't going to be comfortable with you flirting with them, so… there's aspects of consent that matter in almost every interaction you have with a romantic or sexual partner.

According to Ben, asking for consent to flirt with an individual is an experience that is unique to the gay community, which is why consent education that accounts for various sexualities is important. Without this specific education, students may be misinformed about the expectations of consent within some communities. Students felt that the consent education they received before and during college did not provide them with knowledge about consent that applied to members of the LGBTQ+ community. This impacted how they viewed the value and quality of their consent education.

While there is little a college can do when faced with inadequate consent education in secondary education, this finding remains important. Understanding that a significant number of first-year students may come into college with extremely limited or unrealistic knowledge of safe sexual practices and consent education is an important element in developing consent education and college policy. Furthermore, their education may be shaped by shared media and peer culture, creating discourse that runs counter to consent education models.

Though most students claimed they did not receive thorough consent education before college, it is a mandatory component of the first-year orientation at the institution they attend. Despite receiving consent education in college, students often did not remember it, with many stating they did not receive any college consent education. Others, such as senior Noelle, shared that while she knew she received a consent education in college, she did not remember what she learned because "it was freshman year." First-year students also indicated that they did not receive consent education in college, even though they had completed it less than six months before these interviews. A first-year student named Josie shared, "I don't see when [consent] would have come up [in college], like definitely not in any of my classes." Another first-year student, Katie, initially shared that she did not learn about consent "through college-mandated learning," then exclaimed, "oh my god, maybe we had to do something…but not that I can think of off the top of my head, because if it was something I feel like I already knew, so it didn't stick by me." The fact that both senior and first-year students were unable to recall the consent education they received in college highlighted the issue that consent education itself was not memorable enough.

Other students explicitly stated that the consent education they received in college was not interactive

enough, leading them not to engage with it. Most of the consent education students received occurred through online modules they completed before arriving at college. Regarding the online consent education modules, Lily recalled:

> There were multiple [modules] that we had to do, so I think that just because there were multiple, everybody just wanted to like to scan through them and do them as quickly as possible…I feel like people probably didn't read it well enough. I know that…everybody was just kind of like, "this is annoying."

Lilly's comments on the volume of the modules she completed and how other students perceived them indicated that those students did not appreciate the education they received. Senior Donny shared similar sentiments, stating, "They gave us the mandatory online training, [and] I was kind of sitting there like… 'Why am I doing this?' It is important, but…it was like 'Now I gotta sit through and click all these buttons.'" Donny continued by explaining his perception of the online modules in general, "Multiple choice boxes don't do jack crap…having a checkbox that says, you know, 'is this rape' or 'is this not rape' is not going to do anything." Another senior, Brock, said, "I just feel like the way it was distributed was like an online module that needed to be completed; a lot of people, me included, didn't take it seriously. I have never once heard someone talk about how the consent modules were useful." Brock's stance stressed that not only did students tend not to take their consent education seriously, but they also did not reflect on it meaningfully. According to Lilly and Brock, students did not dedicate attention to their college's existing consent education system, which undermines the institutional authority of the consent discourse.

Colleges often rely heavily on online training modules to meet state and federal guidelines for employee and student training. Our case study is no exception, and a deeper dive into college policy found that students are expected to complete an online training module before the start of their freshman year that includes consent education. The research on the effectiveness of online training modules is mixed (Means et al. 2013), but this research suggests that such training may not be sufficiently effective for consent education. One possibility is that the timing of training, before the freshman year, may play a role. Additionally, the content of the training may encourage some students to move through quickly, due to social stigmas around sex and sexual behavior (Astle et al. 2021).

The online module is an institutional discourse that frames consent as policy knowledge. Yet students rapidly produce a counterdiscourse of trivialization ("just click through"), which undermines the policy's normative force before it can shape everyday practice. In interactional terms, the module offers definitions but not interactional resources (phrases, strategies) that students can deploy in intimate moments, leaving official discourse outcompeted by local, peer, and media-generated meanings. This helps explain why institutional efforts yield compliance without conversion; a discourse that travels poorly from the training portal to the settings where sex happens.

"When You Can Find Yourself Enjoying Consent": Best Practices for Consent Education

In contrast, students consistently described interactive and examplebased forms of consent education as meaningful and memorable. Videos, presenta-

tions, and reallife scenarios helped them understand how consent works in practice and gave them clear models to follow. These examples suggest that concrete stories and live interactions help students remember and apply consent discourses in meaningful ways. By building on realistic and compelling storylines, consent discourses can be communicated effectively and authoritatively. Such approaches help students practice the language and actions needed in real situations.

Participants identified several practices as effective approaches to consent education. From a discursive perspective, effective consent education operates through persuasive discourses that normalize consent-based sexual ethics and produce students as self-regulating subjects. Rather than relying on abstract rules, these discourses are most effective when they appear realistic and are embedded across institutional contexts. A first-year student named Charlie shared that in his college consent education, "They showed videos about situations, which was memorable. A guy sees a girl, who is, like, kind of passed out, and he just gave her a blanket and left instead of proceeding to have sex." Charlie's ability to recall this example illustrates how visual narratives function as disciplinary tools that make norms of consent visible, memorable, and seemingly commonsense. By presenting a clear model of consent, these videos work to emphasize institutional expectations and encourage students to govern their behavior accordingly. Charlie also suggested that colleges should consider "reflecting on cases that happened on campus," so that students could learn from them. He thought that the more cases that students received about consent, the more they could learn how to implement consent into their sexual relationships. Another first-year student named Rebecca said:

> There was one girl that was really drunk in the slide, and, well, they said that she couldn't give consent. They gave a scenario for if the guy continued even though the girl was not conscious enough to give consent, and one where he respected her unconsciousness, and another one where a girl was uncomfortable, and the guy noticed, and then the same one if he had ignored it.

Like Charlie, Rebecca provided an example from the consent education she received, which, once again, demonstrated that some of the most memorable elements of consent education are realistic lived experiences. Her answer highlighted the value of learning about how consent works in practice, normalizing the institutional discourse of consent. Another first-year student named Henrietta stated, "I feel that giving real-life examples goes a long way, giving examples of what happened on these campus grounds, and how it's been resolved, like, success stories, I think are really important." For Henriette and Rebecca, such examples function as institutional narratives that transform individual cases into moral lessons, delineating acceptable and unacceptable sexual conduct within the discourse. By framing incidents as "success stories," institutions present consent not only as a rule but as a normalized outcome of self-governance. Such stories encourage students to internalize the behavior and effectively police themselves in a disciplinary fashion. Henrietta further suggested that exposure to examples of nonconsensual sexual relationships increases student investment in consent education, indicating how consent discourse becomes more effective when it is grounded in recognizable experiences. Authentic examples of consent's role in sexual relationships increase the effectiveness of consent education because students more easily remember what they learned.

Participants also discussed integrating presentations and lectures into their education. A first-year student named Sally explained, "I learned a lot about [consent] in some lectures…" She continued, stating that "more lectures about consent" would be the best way to improve college consent education. For some students, lectures and presentations function as formal sites of knowledge production, where institutional authority legitimizes certain definitions of consent and sexual responsibility. Katie discussed her experience of voluntarily attending a consent education presentation that she described as "one of the best consent conversations [she] ever had." She explained that in the presentation, the speaker talked about how "consent adds to your relationship, it doesn't take away from it… when you can find yourself enjoying consent, that can also be good." Katie's belief that the presentation she attended was valuable, and her ability to clarify what she learned, emphasized the benefits of presentations in consent education. In addition, Charlotte explained:

> During first-year orientation, they…had a whole conversation about the whole, like, even if you're drunk, it's not consent. You can't consent if you're drunk, and that consent has to be verbal. I feel like they did a pretty decent job at it, at least from my perspective.

As a senior, Charlotte's ability to recall the consent lecture she had in her first year is a clear indicator of the effectiveness of in-person communication in normalizing the consent discourse. Not only did she remember that the lecture occurred, but she also recalled the details she learned from it.

Finally, students explained the positive impacts of videos and media on their consent education. Three of the interviewees discussed the same video they watched as a crucial component of their consent education. Lilly explained the following about the video:

> It's about like the tea, so if you order tea, and if you're given tea, that's great. But if you order tea, and you change your mind, and you don't want it anymore, but you're still given tea, like, that's not okay. Or you can change your mind about wanting to drink the tea halfway through, and you shouldn't have to finish it.

Each student who cited the video said they found it a helpful metaphor for consent practices. Students shared detailed memories of this video, demonstrating that videos are effective for distributing information about consent. Moreover, they named social media as a source of their consent education. Charlie, a student from Vietnam, stated that Western media taught him about consent because "it wasn't a big thing to talk about sexuality and sex" in Vietnam. The media served as Charlie's only consent education before he arrived at college. This is a reminder that media, especially visual media, do not merely transmit information; they exercise disciplinary power by normalizing consent as an expected component of ethical behavior. Josie explained that media-based consent education helped her learn about consent more than her school education. She said, "Just reading other people's experiences helps me form what I think applies to me and has made it seem more real than just like a slideshow in a classroom." Josie's experience reflected the notion that examples of consensual and nonconsensual behaviors may be more useful than definitions alone, and social media helps to distribute these examples. Brock shared that "media is in the form of like television shows where there's possibly a situation of, like, sexual assault or rape, and in those situations, they discuss consent," which was beneficial for him.

He also provided an example from the television show *Switched at Birth* to illustrate what he learned:

> There was a situation where…one of the characters was drunk and the male was drunk, and then they engaged in, and both drunk parties engaged in the sexual act together. And then they were discussing how, after the situation, the girl felt like there was a problem. She didn't feel okay. She felt like she was used.

Brock's explanation of the television show he watched as a source of his consent education emphasized its impact on him. Students' discussions of videos and media as tools that facilitated their consent education highlighted those options as some of the best practices for consent education.

Participants explained that, based on their experiences, best practices for consent education included realistic examples, presentations and lectures, and videos and media. Foucauldian theory would tell us that these formats function as discursive technologies that translate institutional knowledge into scripts students can rehearse and internalize. By repeatedly staging consent through recognizable scenarios, institutions strengthen the legitimacy of their discourse and extend disciplinary power into everyday sexual interactions. These narrative scenarios and recurring phrases work to counter peer and media discourses that trivialize or normalize nonconsensual behavior. In doing so, they provide students with memorable, shareable language that circulates within student networks, allowing consent to emerge as a taken-for-granted norm rather than an institutional policy. This discursive framework reshapes consent by creating individuals who regulate their conduct in alignment with institutional expectations, thereby reinforcing consent norms through everyday practice rather than overt enforcement.

"It Just Happens": Differences in Consent Definitions and Sexual Practices

Finally, many students demonstrated a gap between how they define consent and how they practice it in their relationships. Publicly, students often reproduced institutional discourses that frame consent as clear, verbal, and ongoing. Privately, however, they described relying on implied consent, routine behaviors, or "reading the vibe." This dissonance highlights the limits of institutional discourse when it competes with entrenched norms governing intimacy. Discomfort with interrupting sexual encounters, expectations rooted in gender roles, and established relationship routines frequently outweighed formal consent definitions during real interactions.

Alcohol use and party culture further complicate the alignment between consent discourse and sexual practice. These social contexts function as counter-sites in which institutional norms are suspended or reinterpreted, weakening mechanisms of self-surveillance and ethical self-control. As a result, students navigate competing regimes of truth, one articulated through institutional consent education and another embedded in peer culture and intoxicated social environments. This reveals how power operates unevenly across contexts and how consent remains contingently practiced rather than uniformly enacted.

Nine out of the 20 interviewees provided inconsistent consent definitions and explanations of their sexual practices. First, Charlie explained that consent "must be a clear, verbal agreement," but "if I have a romantic partner, I would have an agreement that I would nod my head" to give consent. While Charlie defined consent as a verbal agreement, his consent practices indicated nonverbal consent. Like-

wise, Marie referred to consent as "both partners are agreeing to whatever activity that they're doing," but defined consent differently in her relationship. She explained, "I feel like it'd be weird if my boyfriend was like, 'Can we kiss?' I'd be like 'Not now that you asked'…I feel like, at least in our relationship, I feel like implied consent is there." Marie stated that she believes consent requires agreement, yet in her relationship, it is implied, indicating discrepancies between her definition and practice. Ben, however, demonstrated how consent practices in relationships might be negotiated, noting that "it's important to ask before like every single act," but that this could differ in practice. He described how his former boyfriend "wanted to know if it was okay to wake me up with a blowjob, and I was like, 'Oh, yeah, that's weird, because I guess I can't consent if I'm sleeping,' and he was like, 'Yeah, so we can set up a thing where if we agree beforehand that that's okay.'" Next, Rebecca explained that for consent to be obtained, "We should always discuss it, have a conversation with your partner, and be sure they're comfortable with it." However, she later said that "in the moment, you kind of forget to ask [for consent] because it just happens," which differed considerably from her view that consent should always be discussed.

Unlike other interviewees, Rose provided two conflicting explanations of her sexual practices related to consent, rather than a definition that differed from her practices. She started by explaining, "When I'm like with someone, and we're like, gonna have sex, I usually like ask them like, 'Is this okay? Is this okay?' like the whole time as we're going through it." Later in her interview, Rose said:

> Sometimes the communication hasn't been good in the past with me…maybe because we just don't, like, aren't like compatible or whatever and, like, don't really like vibe as well, and then it just feels awkward, so then I feel weird asking, and then in that case, I'm like, I don't know if they want this, but I'm just gonna do it and see if they say anything or respond.

Although Rose initially stated that she liked to ask for consent before every sexual act, her second explanation indicated that she would not ask for consent if she felt awkward doing so. In general, these responses indicated that even though students may be able to define consent, and they may think that their sexual interactions are consensual, their explanations of their sexual practices show that this is not always the case.

Unsurprisingly, a major theme among student responses was that while they understood that alcohol impairs the ability to give consent, they did not incorporate this understanding into their perceptions of consent. Party culture and peer expectations shape how students apply consent rules in specific situations. Alcohol often speeds up intimacy and reduces verbal communication, making students rely on assumptions rather than clear agreement, even when they know official guidelines say otherwise. Out of the 20 interviewees, 13 stated that consent was possible with some amount of alcohol consumption. Josie explained that from her college consent education, she learned "consent is different sober than drunk." However, she later stated that "it'd be easy to say not have sex when you're drunk, but that's not going to change and that's not inherently wrong," because "[having sex while drinking] is fun at the time, and like, while it can result in potential regret and uncomfortableness, like, it's not always bad." Josie's knowledge about consent showed that while she knew consent differed with the presence of alcohol, she did not believe that having drunk sex was "inherently wrong." Similarly,

Rebecca stated that "It's not wise to be under the influence of alcohol" while having sex, but consent is possible "with a few drinks." Like Josie and Rebecca, Brock explained:

> When people are under the influence, they are likely unable to give consent. However, people do process alcohol in different ways and at different times based on a variety of factors, so just because someone has had a drink does not mean that they are tipsy yet or drunk yet, like, I could likely have something like a Mike's Hard Lemonade at a meal and not be under the influence at all or not feel like my judgment is impaired and still feel like I could probably consent.

He then continued, stating, "For the sake of educational purposes, the tagline needs to be once you've had something to drink that you can no longer consent, otherwise people will likely abuse that." Brock's explanation reflected most students' perspectives as they disagreed with the notion that alcohol automatically inhibits consent. His reference to the educational "tagline" also sheds light on how students may dismiss consent education related to alcohol because they do not perceive it as realistic. Donny discussed his perception that "the law and… morals are pretty clear about, you know, if you're intoxicated, you can't consent." Nevertheless, he added, "I think if both parties are intoxicated, it kind of, in some way, should cancel out" and "this is college, drunk people go home together all the time…999 times out of 1000…it's not an issue." Donny's perspective represented similar inconsistencies to other students' perspectives because, while he knew that intoxicated people could not consent, that knowledge did not change his personal view. This counter-discourse is deeply culturally embedded within the institution and often supersedes the discourse of institutional consent. Without question, peer and media knowledge is normalized in a way that overrides institutional power.

Additionally, students shared that they perceived alcohol as an acceptable component of sexual relationships in college, even if they did not participate in this practice themselves. Lucy explained, "I think especially because of hookup culture…there's a more and more variable approach to alcohol use and consent." She added, "I haven't been to a frat yet, I haven't drunk, any of that, but I'm guessing that if you have like a little to drink and you don't feel intoxicated…you engage in sexual acts." Through her explanation, Lucy highlighted that many students do not view alcohol as a definitive barrier to consent, which is especially problematic for first-year students, like her, who have not yet experienced this challenge. Next, Charlotte said, "I feel like sex is just generally considered a thing people do in college, like it's a bigger part of culture and campus life, like you go to parties, you get drunk, and then you hook up with someone," even though she had not participated in this practice herself. Like Lucy, Charlotte expressed that she knew about alcohol-fueled hookup culture in college, despite not engaging with this culture. Lastly, Toni shared her perception of alcohol and sex on college campuses:

> I think it's been like really normalized, like about hookup culture, like the way that you hook up with someone is to go to a social setting that usually involves alcohol, find someone there that you want to hook up with, and you go home with them, and like, that's just what happens, and that is kind of what college is advertised as.

Through this perspective, Toni emphasized that drinking during sexual activity is highly normalized, even when it runs counter to institutional con-

sent narratives. She then provided an example of what she learned about the role of alcohol in sexual relationships from her older brother before coming to college:

> He did just talk all the time about how, like, that was all people do on the weekends, like they go out and get drunk and then like, hook up with people. He'd be like, "Yeah, I walked one of my, like, girlfriends back to her dorm after she hooked up with a guy that lived in my dorm. Like she came to my room, and I walked her back."

Toni's experience with her brother showed how harmful perceptions about alcohol and consent are passed down to students before they enter college. This normalization reflects the operation of discursive power, in which repeated representations of college as a space of alcohol-fueled sexual freedom produce expectations about how intimacy "should" work. Whether they learn through siblings or friends, students know what to expect in their sexual relationships long before they arrive at college. This peer-based knowledge operates alongside institutional discourse, often reinforcing dominant sexual scripts rather than challenging them. If students believe that alcohol does not impede their ability to give or obtain consent, then this may impact how they approach their sexual relationships. In these contexts, a partyculture counterdiscourse normalizes nonverbal communication and rapid sexual connection, redefining what counts as consent despite the institutional discourse of affirmative, sober agreement. Alcohol functions as a situational organizer that activates alternative sexual scripts ("a few drinks are fine") and overturns explicit consent.

This pattern shows students publicly voicing the institutional discourse while privately adopting peer/partner counterdiscourses that privilege smooth interaction, implied consent, and gendered expectations. At the level of social interaction, the desire to avoid awkwardness tips the balance toward nonverbal scripts, widening the gap between stated norms and enacted practice. The persistence of this gap indicates that counterdiscourses are not merely resistance but working logics that practically organize intimate and sexual behavior unless institutions supply usable alternatives. This dissonance between experience and expectation may play a significant role in issues of sexual violence on college campuses.

Conclusion

Future research could build on this work by including a larger, more diverse sample of students using more systematic recruitment methods. Second, because this study was conducted at a single college in the United States, the findings may not reflect students' experiences at other types of institutions or in different regional contexts. Future studies could examine how students conceptualize and negotiate consent across multiple campuses and geographic regions to develop a broader understanding of consent practices in higher education. Additional areas for future research might include a deeper analysis of where and how counter-discourse around sexual consent emerges, especially as it relates to narratives of college culture, sexual behavior, and, in particular, alcohol consumption. A deeper understanding of the students' concepts of consent and how they use these in their everyday sexual practices could be especially beneficial in addressing concerns about sexual violence on college campuses. Still, this specific case study provides strong findings that allow us to examine institutional consent education within the framework of Foucault's view

of educational institutions, such as universities, as powerful bodies capable of creating discourse.

Given the power colleges possess over their students, Foucault's theories suggest that consent education should shape students' conceptions of consent (Foucault 1984; 2000). However, the findings indicate that this is not the case as students perceive the consent education they receive as largely ineffective in changing behavior, though they do highlight some areas of effectiveness. They also demonstrate misunderstandings surrounding crucial components of consensual sexual relationships. As a result of this disconnect, a counter-discourse surrounding consent persists within communities of students that shape sexual behavior and may contribute to sexual violence. Understanding the external networks through which students acquire knowledge about consent may be key to altering their behavior.

Our findings suggest students perceive their consent education as flawed due to its timing, limited interactivity, and lack of inclusion of LGBTQ+ experiences. These shortcomings reveal how institutional consent discourse often fails to establish itself as authoritative or relevant within students' everyday sexual lives. Even when consent education is provided, students reported that it was frequently ineffective, suggesting that the discourse lacks sufficient power to reshape conduct. These findings align with prior research showing that many students rate the consent education they receive as poor (MacDougall et al. 2020). However, they contradict studies suggesting that inadequate pre-college consent education can be remedied through college-level instruction, as participants in this study reported learning little from their college consent education (Thomas et al. 2016; Ortiz and Shafer 2018).

Students also identified effective forms of consent education as those that included real-life examples, presentations and lectures, and videos and media. These discursive technologies translate abstract institutional norms into strategies and scripts. These methods directly address one of students' primary critiques—its lack of interactivity, suggesting that consent discourse gains power when it is experienced as participatory rather than purely informational.

In addition, students acknowledged that while alcohol limits individuals' capacity to consent, they simultaneously viewed alcohol as a normalized and expected component of college hookup culture, often incorporating drinking into their sexual relationships. This reflects the presence of competing discourses in our findings. Institutional consent education frames alcohol as a risk factor, while peer and media discourses normalize it as integral to college life. These findings are consistent with prior research demonstrating that students are often uncertain about alcohol's role in consent (Jozkowski and Wiersma 2015; Baldwin-White 2021).

Many of the responses further highlighted a persistent disconnect between students' definitions of consent and their sexual practices. Although students articulated definitions emphasizing communication and mutual agreement, they frequently expressed discomfort with explicit, verbal, and ongoing consent in practice. As existing research suggests, the ability to define consent does not necessarily translate into the ability to enact it (Curtis and Burnett 2017; Setty 2021; Hardesty et al. 2022). Overall, our research suggests that students may misunderstand or selectively apply consent based on existing educational approaches, leading to practices that normalize alcohol use and avoid explicit consent communication. These findings indicate that

peer-driven, media-amplified sexuality discourses exert greater influence over students' behavior than the formal, structured consent discourse provided by our educational institution. Further study is needed to consider how common this is, but it may be that some institutions have succeeded in producing a definition of consent without producing subjects who can consistently practice it, revealing a fundamental weakness in how consent discourse is constructed, circulated, and embodied.

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