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SA initiative seeks to reduce stigma surrounding sexual assault

Campus organizations table to advance campaign, highlight resources for survivors
By MELANIE GULBAS - OCTOBER 28, 2019

Binghamton University's Student Association (SA) hopes to broaden the conversation and reduce the stigma surrounding sexual assault as part of a new campaign being rolled out this fall.

On Thursday, the SA and Crime Victims Assistance Center, Inc. (CVAC) collaborated by setting up a display table on campus to talk with students about sexual assault and hand out pamphlets offering on- and off-campus resources.

SA President Emma Ross, a senior double-majoring in political science and psychology, said it is incredibly important to discuss sexual assault and break the taboo nature of the topic.

"We are trying to make the discussion around sexual assault more accessible," Ross said. "This is a very serious topic and, until recently, one that has not been very public."

Ross said she wants students to never feel alone and to know their resources. Still, she said speaking up is the victim's decision, and assault happens more often than records show.

According to the National Sexual Violence Resource Center, more than 90 percent of sexual assault victims on college campuses do not report the assault.

Maggie Koekkoek, SA chief of staff and a junior majoring in biomedical engineering, said those who experience sexual assault may not know who to reach out to afterward, something she hopes to change on BU's campus.

"I hope that students come away with a greater understanding of the places that they can go for support and solutions after cases of sexual assault," Koekkoek said. "I am hoping that students will hold onto our reference materials for the future to use and share with friends in need. I also hope that this event opens up the conversation and starts to normalize the use of reporting and getting help after cases of sexual assault."

Some of these resources include mandated reporters, who must report the names and facts of cases that are brought to them to relevant authorities, and others are confidential, meaning any

information a victim provides remains between the resource and the victim.

“These are important distinctions to know about as different students have different needs,” Koekkoek said. “I wanted to create an event where we can hand out information in a concise format that makes these distinctions clear.”

Koekkoek said giving a variety of resource options is important as students may feel more comfortable talking about the subject in the community and not on campus, naming this as one reason the SA partnered with CVAC. The center offers a number of confidential and off-campus resources, such as counseling and a 24-hour crisis line.

“When students are vulnerable, some may not want to be on campus in the Union talking about it,” Koekkoek said. “It’s such a personal choice.”

Taina Diaz, SA director of advocacy and a senior majoring in political science, helps contact student organizations to coordinate events, and said she hopes to help with additional student group collaborations on sexual assault. She said she is particularly concerned with partnering with more diverse student groups, especially given how sensitive the topic of sexual assault can be.

“It affects so many people and honestly affects more people than we know,” Diaz said. “If we can have these conversations, then maybe we can prevent it from happening and people won’t feel like they have to stay silent.”

The SA plans to have more events this semester centered around sexual assault education and partner with other student organizations to continue their sexual assault education campaign.