

Gender-Based Violence Research Lab Whitepaper Series 2021

Sexual Misconduct Prevention Programming at Lafayette College: Findings and Recommendations



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This report is part of the Gender-Based Violence Research Lab (GBVRL) Whitepaper Series, a collection of reports produced by Professor Dana Cuomo (Women's, Gender and Sexuality Studies) and Professor Susan Hannan (Psychology).

The GBVRL is a feminist research lab with interdisciplinary research projects centered on examining and addressing issues of gender-based violence at Lafayette College and across the Lehigh Valley.

The GBVRL also prioritizes training Lafayette students in feminist and community-based research design, methods and analysis.

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Acknowledgements

This research was a collaborative effort, spearheaded by Dana Cuomo, Assistant Professor of Women's, Gender and Sexuality Studies and conducted with student research assistants Ella Goodwin '21, Libby Mayer '22, Annika Murray '23 and Andrea Rivera '23, who also serve as members of Pards Against Sexual Assault (PASA).

We collectively conducted the original research and analysis, but would not have been able to complete the research or this report without the help of many dedicated partners.

We would like to thank Vice President for Campus Life, Annette Diorio for providing funding to support Ella, Libby, Annika and Andrea as research assistants during FY 2020-2021 and for her overall endorsement of the project's objectives and goals. We would also like to thank Professor Mary Armstrong, Program Chair of Women's, Gender and Sexuality Studies for additional funding support and for providing feedback on earlier iterations of this report.

Thank you especially to all of our research participants who willingly agreed to be interviewed and participate in focus groups, and who also helped to recruit additional participants to the project.

We would like to extend a special thanks to Professor Susan Hannan for providing quantitative data analysis support and for her comments and feedback on earlier drafts of this report.

Finally, we want to thank the First Year Orientation staff, including Director of Student Involvement Vanessa Pearson, for endorsing the "Empowered Consent: Preventing Sexual Assault, Relationship Violence and Stalking at Lafayette College" prevention program for FYO 2021.

Introduction

In 2011, the Obama Administration’s Department of Education Office of Civil Rights distributed a “Dear Colleague Letter” with guidance on the responsibility of federally funded schools, including colleges, to respond to campus sexual misconduct.

The guidance reinforced federal requirements such as having a Title IX coordinator, implementing clear grievance procedures, conducting impartial investigations within prompt time frames, and providing notification of investigation outcomes. While the reporting and investigative components of Title IX compliance largely occupied the attention of both college administrators and public discussion, the 2011 Dear Colleague Letter also charged colleges with proactively preventing sexual misconduct by implementing education programs and making available comprehensive survivor services.

Colleges without robust sexual misconduct prevention programs and survivor services worked to meet the Office of Civil Rights’ guidance, and a flurry of victim advocate, prevention coordinator and Title IX coordinator positions were advertised across the US in the years following the 2011 Dear Colleague Letter. Notably, the guidance provided within the 2011 Dear Colleague Letter for education programming was fundamentally basic, encouraging colleges to incorporate orientation programs for new students, faculty, staff and employees and to provide training for specific campus populations, including student RAs, student-athletes and coaches.

Guidance regarding content for such education programs largely centered on providing general definitions of sexual harassment and sexual violence, information on policies and disciplinary procedures, and the consequences of violating these policies. Although informative, this content is educational and not necessarily preventative.

Despite acknowledgement that efforts to prevent sexual misconduct are as essential as a college's response to reports following incidents that have already occurred, **the allocation of resources within many colleges continues to prioritize the reporting and adjudication process over comprehensive prevention programming.** As colleges without established sexual misconduct resources worked to meet the basic education requirements outlined in the Dear Colleague Letter, other higher education institutions with decades-old "Women's Centers" (renamed "Gender Equity Centers" in recent years), already established "Violence Prevention Coordinator" positions and tested models of utilizing peer health educators raised the standard for what constitutes comprehensive prevention programming and survivor support services.

Although formally rescinded in 2020 by the Trump administration, the 2011 Dear Colleague Letter continues to guide the spirit in which colleges address sexual misconduct on campus, including its emphasis on the role of prevention programming in reducing campus sexual misconduct. Related, the last ten years has seen an explosion of multi-disciplinary research in the field of prevention education, with a robust body of literature evaluating sexual misconduct prevention programs on college campuses. Prevention educators have access to evidence-based research focused on every facet of prevention education, from primary and secondary prevention, to effective delivery modalities, to the implementation of program evaluation and assessment measures.

Project Objectives & Outcomes

We embarked on this project with this context in mind, convening as a research team throughout FY 2020-2021 with the primary objective of developing an evidence-based First Year Orientation sexual misconduct prevention program for Lafayette College.

To develop a prevention program tailored to the Lafayette community, we immersed ourselves within current literature, conducted a climate survey with the class of 2024, analyzed content posted to the anti.violence.laf and black.at.laf Instagram accounts, and conducted qualitative interviews and focus groups with key stakeholders at Lafayette and nationally recognized prevention specialists.

As a secondary project outcome, we have cohered the data that we collected and analyzed into the following report as a resource for the college. The findings and recommendations that we synthesize reflect a compilation of the expert knowledge and insight from stakeholders those most closely connected to the problem.

Methodology & Methods

The methodological framework guiding this project is rooted in the principles of feminist research design and community-based participatory action research (CBPAR). As research methodologies, feminist research design and CBPAR emphasize the needs and knowledge of the community being studied and engage community participants as active members of the project. Both attend to inequities and injustices, encourage community members' power over their own lives, work to prevent exclusion and promote diversity of participation, and build and expand on local partnerships (Hesse-Biber et al 1999; Kindon et al 2007). Importantly, feminist research and CBPAR underscore the role of research in supporting action necessary to achieve social change. As indigenous scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith notes, "Research is not an innocent or distant academic exercise but an activity that has something at stake and that occurs in a set of political and social conditions" (2005: 5).

Data collection occurred during the 2020-2021 academic year and the research team incorporated a mixed methods approach focused on collecting data that would inform an FYO prevention program tailored to the local needs of the Lafayette community. The data collection methods for this project include the following:

Survey

We designed and executed a survey with the class of 2024. In designing the survey, we incorporated questions from the ARC3 Survey, an open-source campus climate survey developed by a group of sexual assault researchers and student affairs professionals in response to the 2014 White House "It's on Us" initiative with the objective of assessing perpetration and victimization of sexual misconduct on college campuses. We also added survey questions specific to the Lafayette community (i.e.: pertaining to the anti.violence.laf Instagram account) and more recent patterns and trends in sexual misconduct not reflected in the ARC3 survey (i.e.: technology abuse). The First Year Class Dean distributed the survey by email to the 606 students in the class of 2024. 98 students completed the survey in full, reflecting a response rate of 16%. We used Qualtrics to execute the survey, SPSS to organize and clean the data, and JASP to run correlations between variables.

Interviews

We conducted open-ended, in-depth interviews with ten stakeholders at Lafayette and nationally recognized prevention specialists, representing the following offices and institutions:

Interviews were conducted remotely over Zoom and all but one participant agreed to audio recording.

Interviews lasted between 30-60 minutes. The interviews were transcribed and analyzed using axial coding based on recurrent emergent themes, including gaps in previous FYO programming, prevention programming best practices, programming objectives and content area for prevention programming.

Instagram Account

We analyzed content from the anti.violence.laf Instagram account, “an alum run page dedicated to sharing gender-based violence/discrimination experiences of women/men/LGBTQIA students at Lafayette College”. We incorporated an inductive coding process in which we developed primary and secondary codes in response to the concepts, themes and content raised in the posts. Preliminary analysis focused on demographic data, types of gender-based violence, location of assault, alcohol involvement, Greek Life involvement, and institutional responses, etc. While the account has remained active throughout the research project, we limited our analysis to 354 posts that were added to the account between June 24, 2020 – March 10, 2021. We anticipate conducting a more thorough analysis of the posts associated with this account in FY 2021-2022.

Focus Groups

Following the development of the “Empowered Consent: Preventing Sexual Assault, Relationship Violence and Stalking at Lafayette College” prevention program, we facilitated the program with two focus groups of campus stakeholders, including students and employees . We collected and implemented feedback from the focus groups into revised iterations of the prevention program.

Lafayette Offices:

Admissions and Aid
Campus Life
Counseling Center
Department of Psychology
Office of the Dean of Students
Office of Educational Equity

Prevention Specialists from:

Chatham University
The University of Washington

Lafayette Offices:

Admissions and Aid
Campus Life
Counseling Center
Department of Psychology
Office of the Dean of Students
Office of Educational Equity
Pards Against Sexual Assault
Religious and Spiritual Life

The Landscape of Prevention Programming

Before we discuss our project's findings and recommendations, we offer context regarding sexual misconduct prevention programming at Lafayette. This Lafayette-specific landscape is situated alongside conversations responding to different forms of systemic oppression within higher education and beyond, and which provide additional insight for the project findings and recommendations to follow.



We began this project alongside nation-wide discussions concerning gendered and racialized violence occurring across the US. These are old conversations, particularly for groups directly impacted, that are extending further into public discourse as a result of new technologies, such as social media. While not reflective of every influence, the foci of the #MeToo and Time's Up movements on addressing sexual violence and the #BlackLivesMatter movement on eradicating white supremacy play a role in inspiring activism that works to challenge long-standing systems of oppression and patterns of structural inequality that disproportionately impact historically marginalized people.

The acknowledgement of how direct and indirect forms of violence accompany sexism and white supremacy has also trickled into localized conversations, including at Lafayette. Largely driven by student activism and in response to specific incidents of violence and a history of systemic injustices within the institution, our campus has seen a reinforced call for change in recent years. The formation of student groups like Pards Against Sexual Assault (PASA) and Dear Lafayette, the establishment of awareness raising social media campaigns like the anti.violence.laf and black.at.laf Instagram accounts, and the gathering of survey data to detail what it might mean to “abolish Greek Life”, all point to a building and sustained effort by students to disrupt the harms caused by intersecting systems of oppression.

As an institution of higher education that struggles with how to effectively acknowledge, disrupt and prevent systemic oppression, Lafayette is not unique. However, Lafayette's history as a private liberal arts college that predominately centered on serving the needs and experiences of upper-class white men also cannot be ignored.

As a campus that only admitted women students in the last fifty years, that has historically struggled to meaningfully recruit, enroll, retain and graduate students of color, that ranked the most homophobic college in the country as recently as 1992, and which was largely out of reach of students without financial means to attend, the institution wrestles with the tension of its exclusionary past and its goals for a more inclusive future.

The lack of institutional support at Lafayette for sexual misconduct prevention programming is but one piece of this tension. With appreciation that any student can experience sexual assault, relationship violence and stalking, the students who are disproportionately vulnerable to experience such sexual misconduct – women and LGBTQ+ students – are also some of the most historically marginalized on campus.

Related, the students who are most likely to perpetrate sexual misconduct – men involved in Greek Life and athletics – are some of the most historically privileged on campus. The lack of dedicated staffing and financial resources for sexual misconduct prevention programming, which we discuss below in our findings, reflects a lack of prioritization by the institution to center the needs of vulnerable students and to meaningfully prevent these harms from occurring.

This lack of institutional support for sexual misconduct prevention programming cannot be disentangled from the college's historic privileging of some students over others, and is connected to how decisions are made regarding the allocation of resources - including staffing and budgets – across all divisions, programs/departments, centers and other entities on campus.

Findings

The following reflect this project's primary findings

Finding 1: Student experiences of sexual misconduct are disproportionate and significant

While we draw primarily on the personal experiences shared within the anti.violence.laf Instagram account to detail the disproportionate and significant impact of sexual misconduct on students, these first-hand survivor experiences are reinforced by the perspectives of stakeholders who participated in interviews.

Sexual misconduct is experienced disproportionately on campus. First year students are particularly vulnerable to experiencing sexual misconduct, underscoring what practitioners and prevention education specialists have called the 'red zone'. This is the time period between first year students' arrival to campus and Thanksgiving break in which first year students enter into unfamiliar surroundings, are establishing new friend groups including with older students, and are more likely to be experimenting for the first time with alcohol, other drugs and intimate sexual encounters, all of which increase vulnerability for experiencing sexual misconduct. While first year students describe assaults occurring across various locations on campus, including off campus athletic houses, first year students were more likely to describe being assaulted on campus in dorm rooms.

Survivors who identify as LGBTQ were also disproportionately represented within the anti.violence.laf Instagram posts, illustrating the intersections between sexism and heterosexism. The posts by LGBTQ survivors detail numerous experiences of verbal abuse and harassment, including slurs and heterosexist language, in which the perpetrators of such harassment were frequently identified as being associated with fraternities. While there were fewer posts detailing the intersections between racism and sexual misconduct, it is notable that nearly all of the posts highlighting experiences of both racialized and gender-based violence involved male perpetrators affiliated with Greek Life.

In general, men who occupy positions of power on campus due to social status, including affiliation with fraternities and athletics, were disproportionately identified as perpetrators of sexual misconduct.

Survivors noted a social hierarchy at Lafayette and indicated that this hierarchy protects perpetrators affiliated with Greek Life and athletics, as it creates barriers to reporting among survivors who fear (or experienced) victim blaming or pressure not to report by their peers or members of the community who retain such social status. This is particularly concerning as the anti.violence.laf Instagram posts also note the frequency in which perpetrators engaged in sexual misconduct with different students over time (i.e.: serial perpetration).

Survivors also detail that the impact of experiencing sexual misconduct is significant, with adverse consequences for mental health in particular. Survivors share a range of short and long term negative mental health impacts, from increased feelings of anxiety and hypervigilance to suicidal ideations.

Survivors also detailed how mental health issues that arise post assault have a negative impact on their academic performance. While some survivors shared positive experiences of seeking mental health support, including that provided by Lafayette's Counseling Center, other students expressed frustration with the support they received, including long waits to be connected with counseling services on campus.

The anti.violence.laf Instagram posts highlighted a range of sexual misconduct experiences, however we highlight the adverse emotional impacts of sexual coercion as a common form of sexual misconduct. Sexual coercion entails a survivor establishing boundaries for themselves (i.e.: by saying 'no' to engage in sex), followed by a perpetrator's repeated attempt to pressure, persuade, or convince the survivor to reconsider. Sexual coercion is often accompanied by alcohol and other drugs in which the perpetrator encourages the survivor to consume substances to lower their inhibitions and reconsider the boundaries that they had already communicated.

As it relates to negative impacts of experiencing sexual misconduct, survivors explained how sexual coercion was difficult to immediately identify as a form of assault, thus leaving survivors feeling confused by what had happened, engaging in self-blame and unsure of what resources they might be entitled to. Reflective of sexual misconduct more broadly, the anti.violence.laf posts reinforce that most survivors know the perpetrator who assaulted them, and while healing from a traumatic experience and feeling safe are difficult and often long-term processes for many survivors, survivors highlight that Lafayette's particularly small community - numerically and geographically - complicates the healing process and ability to feel safe.

“We spend so much time focusing on the most egregious harms when I like to think of it [gender violence] like a virus, like it mutates and it becomes an even stronger variant. Because most of the gender violence that happens on a college campus amongst our community is covert, is insidious.

Interview Participant

Finding 2: Lafayette lacks sufficient prevention education and survivor resources

To date, the prevention education that Lafayette students receive is largely facilitated by peer educators. This method of delivery is not inherently problematic, as peer education is an evidence-based form of training that is effective for sexual misconduct prevention programming, including on college campuses.

Rather, concern centers on the lack of institutional oversight, organization and supervision of campus-wide sexual misconduct prevention education. While led by well-intentioned, committed and passionate student leaders, Pards Against Sexual Assault (PASA) and the more recently established One Love are operating with inconsistent faculty/staff advising, rotating executive boards with annual turnover, and are largely responsible for training their own members.

The inconsistency that results from these circumstances lends to sexual misconduct prevention programming by multiple student groups that lacks a strategic, long-term, comprehensive and cohesive plan. Existing opportunities to receive sexual misconduct prevention programming are often one-off trainings in response to requests from individual student groups (i.e.: fraternities/sororities, athletic teams) with limited opportunity for follow up to further enhance knowledge or skills. While important to target at-risk student populations for experiencing or perpetrating sexual misconduct with prevention programming opportunities, the lack of comprehensive campus-wide prevention programming further reflects a haphazard plan for knowledge building among all Lafayette students.

More specifically, research participants highlighted gaps within the college's approach to First-Year Orientation prevention programming, noting that FYO presented an important opportunity to introduce students to knowledge regarding sexual misconduct (i.e.: consent) and relevant practical skills to use in everyday life to prevent sexual misconduct (i.e.: bystander intervention), which were inconsistently incorporated or absent in the annually fluctuating FYO prevention programming offerings. This inconsistency extends to the pre-arrival materials, which are generic online materials lacking Lafayette-specific content.

Related, research participants noted that administrator roles within Title IX at Lafayette have historically experienced high turnover, lending to an ad hoc prevention programming and education structure that results in reactive rather than proactive training efforts across the college. Allocation of resources within Title IX have also been disproportionately directed to the reporting, investigation and adjudication process when compared to prevention efforts. Research participants highlighted that students are often confused regarding responsibilities of administrators and the roles they play in the response to sexual misconduct.

Namely, this confusion was often related to misunderstanding the neutral and impartial obligations of administrators within Title IX and Student Conduct in responding to reports of sexual misconduct as discussed within the accounts shared on the anti.violence.laf Instagram posts.

While feelings of institutional betrayal among students were reflected across data collection methods associated with the project (i.e.: interviews, survey and Instagram account analysis), we highlight here the relationship between institutional betrayal and the lack of sufficient prevention education and survivor-specific resources identified above. The absence, to date, of a dedicated confidential victim advocate position has contributed to student confusion and the perception of muddled roles and responsibilities of administrators involved in the Title IX process.

The public-facing volunteer work of PASA and One Love has reinforced notions that sexual misconduct prevention programming is not an institutional priority for the College, particularly when viewed alongside the absence of a cohesive, long-term, institutional strategic plan for prevention programming. While research participants noted the importance of transparency and direct timely responses to student concerns regarding institutional betrayal, we also want to highlight how the lack of sufficient prevention education and survivor-specific resources further exacerbates the extant sense of institutional betrayal in this moment.

“So much of prevention training has been about providing people knowledge and instead I think we need to pivot really hard into providing skills and strategies. When I’m building a curriculum I think about, am I just giving them information that they’re probably only going to retain 20% of, or am I giving them a strategy and giving them space to practice that strategy so that they can actually implement it, and is the way that that I’m asking them to practice it realistic to their life?”

Interview Participant

Finding 3: Lafayette lacks clear communication and messaging regarding community values

Notably, the research conducted for this project indicates that Lafayette students generally arrive to campus knowledgeable about sexual misconduct and are motivated to contribute to positive cultural change.

Survey data reinforces that the majority of first year students have been predisposed to at least some sexual misconduct education before arriving to campus and that students with prior education are more likely to reject rape myths and accept bystander intervention attitudes. For example, first year students with prior education regarding sexual misconduct indicated that they were less worried about the social repercussions of intervening in situations likely to cause harm and were less likely to allow outside factors to influence their decision to intervene.

Related, PASA facilitated a community discussion regarding community values and within that discussion students emphasized six values as particularly important for Lafayette to emphasize: **Empathy**, or taking care of each other/caring about each other's health; **Speaking up/out**, or intervening and hold each other accountable; **Safety**, to include individuals looking out for other individuals and the institution emphasizing the wellbeing of community members; **Responsibility**, and that we are all responsible for preventing sexual misconduct in structural and everyday ways; **Accountability**, including holding individuals and organizations accountable for their actions; and **Community**, or the need to be consistently invested in the well-being of individuals in order for the community to be successful as a whole.

While the above signify promising indicators for establishing a campus culture free of sexual misconduct, research participants also noted that Lafayette lacks clear communication and messaging regarding shared community values. As one research participant summarized, "...Lafayette struggles with identity. And the lack of, and I don't mean brand manager in a way that feels disingenuous, but I mean brand manager in terms of intentionality. We don't have a brand. We don't have an identity."

As this relates to the lack of a strategic plan for campus-wide prevention programming addressed in Finding 2, research participants highlighted a missed opportunity for establishing a central message or focus regarding shared community values, specifically within First Year Orientation and the pre-arrival materials. Research participants also noted the importance of community-building, shared values and Lafayette-specific content as critical to first year students' introduction to the campus. This lack of community-building as related to sexual misconduct prevention programming extends after FYO is over, where research participants noted that there are limited opportunities for first year students to reengage with content introduced in FYO programs later in the semester or before the completion of their first-year.

Recommendations

In what follows, we offer our recommendations for improving Lafayette’s approach to sexual misconduct prevention education. We view these recommendations as fully intertwined and equally significant, thus the structure for this section coheres the recommendations together into a written narrative in which no one recommendation takes precedent over another.



We encourage stakeholders to develop a comprehensive, long-term strategic plan for sexual misconduct prevention programming that begins with a reassessment of the pre-arrival materials that first year students receive and establishes metrics and goals for long-term change regarding prevalence of sexual misconduct on campus. Research participants reiterated the importance of prevention programming that is evidence-based and tailored to the Lafayette community. This includes considering a diversity of approaches for presenting and visualizing content and website material, including how to translate policies and procedures that are heavily conveyed in legalese to student-friendly text.

This also includes incorporating prevention programming that targets at-risk populations for experiencing and perpetrating sexual misconduct, while also extending programming campus-wide to include all students, faculty and staff. Such programming should be survivor-centered, trauma-informed, build on the knowledge and skills gained in earlier trainings and incorporate prevention education across a student's enrollment at the college. Our research findings and the prevention education literature that we reviewed reinforce that students with prior education on topics related to sexual misconduct are more likely to reject rape myths and positively adopt bystander intervention attitudes.

Prevention programming should include evaluation and assessment measures, and such assessment data should be consistently analyzed and prevention programs modified in response, as warranted. Prevention programming should also include "booster messaging", that is regular follow up to reinforce program content and resource information between prevention programming efforts. For example, this might include RA's distributing sexual misconduct resource information six weeks after First Year Orientation to all first-year students.

"I think we get right up to the assessment part but then I think we don't actually do as good of a job at circling back and incorporating that back in."

Interview Participant

Research participants also emphasized the importance of establishing and communicating clear messaging regarding the values that shape Lafayette and that building a sense of unity among the campus community is directly related to creating a campus culture free of sexual misconduct. Research participants encouraged creating a campus-wide campaign that establishes the norms and values of the Lafayette community.

As part of this campaign, research participants noted the importance of normalizing shared community values focused on social justice in making a safer and more inclusive campus. This would entail repeated social norm messaging that begins during First Year Orientation and extends across campus programming and events throughout the academic year, and which is reinforced as part of the college's identity and brand in visual materials, such as videos and posters.

At the time of this writing, Lafayette is preparing to welcome its first Student Advocacy and Prevention Coordinator. This is a significant demonstration of commitment to address the advocacy needs of student-survivors and enhance prevention programming on campus.

However, we also want to assert caution and temper the excitement expressed by research participants that the hiring of a dedicated staff person to provide direct services and prevention programming will resolve the larger structural injustices raised throughout this report, specifically issues of institutional betrayal. As one research participant noted on the topic of institutional betrayal: "Don't pretend it's not there, don't expect people to just suddenly trust the institution or go to the institution. The best thing to do is to be transparent about it."

With the arrival of the Student Advocacy and Prevention Coordinator to campus, establishing, clarifying and communicating roles will be significant. A new employee in a new position cannot be responsible for mitigating institutional betrayal expressed by students in the recent past, nor is it fair to pass that burden to the Student Advocacy and Prevention Coordinator if a successful transition is the goal. We recommend as part of a college-wide strategic plan for preventing and responding to sexual misconduct that stakeholders develop a proactive plan for rebuilding trust among students in relationship to the college.

"Our namesake is Marquis de Lafayette. He was one of the first abolitionists, one of the first suffragists. Like why are we not flexing that justice is exactly who we are when it's our namesake."

Interview Participant

The Future of Prevention Programming at Lafayette

To conclude this report, we wish to underscore the consistency and uniformity of insight that research participants provided concerning the current gaps in prevention programming at Lafayette College. We encourage campus stakeholders and decision-makers to take advantage of the current energy and motivation within the community to address the limitation of current sexual misconduct prevention programming efforts. We hope the findings and recommendations from this report serve as a roadmap for stakeholders and decision-makers to discuss next steps and to implement a strategic plan for how the community will improve sexual misconduct prevention programming now, and into the future.

As we conducted this project during the COVID-19 pandemic and alongside the college's overall success in safely bringing students back to campus, we cannot but help to draw comparisons between Lafayette's response to COVID-19 and sexual misconduct. **We urge Lafayette to consider what it might mean to address sexual misconduct and other forms of systemic violence on our campus with the urgency it demonstrated in mitigating the harms of COVID-19.** What might it mean to reframe sexual misconduct and white supremacy as public health crises that require robust prevention plans to further their spread? What might it mean to demand a culture of bystander intervention in the same way we called for collective responsibility to keep our community healthy and safe during the pandemic? What might it mean to reallocate resources to achieve the goal of a campus culture free of systemic violence in the same way we dedicated resources to testing, contact tracing and enhanced technologies to overhaul our pedagogies and teach/learn remotely? The college's overall successful response to COVID-19 demonstrated what is possible with resources and a commitment to center a shared value system that prioritizes the collective over individuals. We encourage Lafayette to embrace the same sense of obligation to meaningfully prevent sexual misconduct, white supremacy and other forms of systemic violence from occurring on our campus.

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