

Gendered Violence and Interruptions to Education

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Abstract

Current higher education scholarship suggests that students stop out or drop out for myriad reasons, but few investigated the role of violence. This gap in the literature prompted us to undertake original research exploring the prevalence of violence in the lives of students at a public commuter university in the Midwest, its relationship to the gender of students, and its connection to retention. We hypothesized that experiences with violence follow gendered patterns and negatively impact students' retention. Our findings are disturbing. Over four out of five students report experiencing at least some form of violence. Women are more likely to experience sexual violence; however men and women are equally likely to experience physical violence and emotional violence. Students who report experiencing violence are more likely to take time off. These findings suggest that schools need to develop gendered responses to mediate the negative implications of violence on students' academic lives.

Key Words: Gender, Violence, Student Retention, Higher Education

1. Introduction

Feminist scholars, building on the work of violence against women advocates and activists, have found that experiences of violence have wide-reaching effects on those who are victims. Violence interrupts one's normal life patterns, and the response to violence can be an obstacle to individuals' pursuing their life goals, including their education. Over the past ten years, there has been great interest in and an increased focus on student retention and time to degree in higher education. Several comprehensive studies examine explanations that students give for stopping out (as it is known in higher education; another term for "taking time off") or dropping out of college.

These factors include financial aid cut-backs or insufficient availability of grants and loans, the need to work, and family obligations (Johnson and Rochkind, 2009). Other factors that students enumerate include their lack of preparation for college classes along with transportation problems (Bowen, Chingos and McPherson, 2009; Hess, Schneider, Carey and Kelly, June 3, 2009). Our findings, from a study of undergraduates at an urban commuter university, suggest that violence in both women and men students' lives is another significant factor in their ability to remain enrolled and make progress toward their degrees.

Johnson and Rochkind (2009) conducted the most comprehensive recent study of the reasons students give for stopping out and/or dropping out of college. They summarize previous research as follows:

Several thought-provoking studies have looked at the question in recent years and advanced many possible explanations: rising tuition costs, poor academic preparation and study skills, minimal student support and advisory services in higher education, too many young people going to college even though they really do not want to, and too many professors and advisers complaining because, as they see it, completion is the student's responsibility. [citations omitted] (p. 3)

Their findings highlight the financial challenges that students face, and they provide suggestions for making financial assistance more readily available. They also recommend that colleges and universities schedule courses during evenings and on weekends. Nothing in the report, however, makes reference to the issues that students who have experienced violence face and that affect their ability to successfully complete their coursework. In *Failing the Future: A Dean Looks at Higher Education in the 21st Century* (1998), Annette Kolodny mentions violence, but only in passing, in a section on family-friendly campuses. Relying on an article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (Leatherman, 1994), she wrote:

College administrators across the country every year "see evidence of domestic violence: female students drop out or transfer to get away from abusive boyfriends, first year students are stalked by the high school sweethearts they left behind. Foreign women who came to campus when their husbands enrolled suffer beatings from their spouses rather than risk having to return to their home countries." (Kolodny, 1998, p.144)

Clearly Kolodny, like other college administrators, recognizes a relationship between student retention and violence against women.

Kolodny's observations rang true for us as Women's Studies teachers and scholars, prompting us to create a research community of four faculty members and nine students to conduct a study on our campus to determine the effects of violence on our students' retention and time to degree. Because we are Women's Studies faculty and students, our initial focus was on women students. Data have been reported in student affairs and feminist journals regarding the effects of violence on women's success in life, including college and learning (Banyard and Cantor, 2004; Bidget-Tuner and Alina, 2006; Horsman, 1999; Smith, White, and Holland, 2003). Macmillan (2001) finds that "violent victimization in early life seems an important precursor to long-term or recurring psychological distress over the life course" (p. 7). Additionally, he reported that

Victims of abuse had lower IQ's, lower reading ability, lower intellectual ability, and lower educational attainment in adulthood. Victims were also more likely to have repeated a grade, more likely to be truant, more likely to have been expelled, and less likely to have graduated from high school. (2001, p. 10)

Banyard and Cantor (2004) summarized the literature about the effects on adults of childhood victimization, stating that college students are "a particularly at-risk population for further victimization while on campus [cites omitted] with prior victimization a risk factor for experiencing retraumatization while in college" (2004, p. 207). Romeo (2001) found that students who were being stalked were more likely to skip classes and drop out of school, interfering with their ability to attain a degree (2001, pp. 514-516).

Autobiographical writings (Rundle and Ysabet-Scott, Fall 1995) and our anecdotal experience about the effects of violence on student persistence conform to the results of a four-year longitudinal study conducted by Renae D. Duncan (2000) in which she reported that students who were survivors of early childhood sexual, physical and emotional abuse were more likely to drop out of college than students who had no such history. Jenny Horsman (1999) takes these findings a step further questioning the notion that violence is a rare experience (p. 42) and arguing that if indeed women and men experience high levels of violence then surviving and coping with violence needs to be reframed as "normal" (p. 52).

Our research community sought to determine the level of violence in the lives of students at our university and how experiences of violence impact students' educational attainment.

This research began with discussions among Women's Studies faculty and students about the experiences of violence in students' lives and their potential impact on student retention at our urban, commuter, and comprehensive university in the Midwest. We found that we were all familiar with students who had concerns about financial aid and family obligations that led to their working long hours, often producing conflicts with their ability to regularly attend classes. As faculty members, we were all aware of students who had taken time off from pursuing their education and/or had dropped out altogether due to current or past violence in their lives. This is not an issue that we had seen discussed in higher education literature related to retention and time to degree. Our findings bridge the gap between feminist-informed scholarship on violence and its implications in people's lives, particularly women, and scholarship on factors affecting student retention and time to degree. This work is a first step toward raising awareness of the importance of taking seriously violence in students' lives and its relation to college completion and meeting educational goals.

Additionally, we approached this research from a feminist standpoint, drawing on the work of Nancy Harstock (1998) and Sandra Harding (2004) that our experiences and points of view mattered to the research and analysis. To reflect our shaping of the work, we authored this from our point of view and discuss our findings in that manner. Locating the researcher(s) within the research is a common practice in some areas of feminist research (Cook and Fonow, 1991; Hesse-Biber, 2007; Roberts, 1990; Wickramasinghe, 2010).

2. Methods and data collection

Following a review of the literature and our reflection on the effects of violence on women, as well as on men, we created a questionnaire to gather information from women and men undergraduate students. Our choices in the construction of the questionnaire, described below, reflect feminist theoretical concerns with the ways that "violence" is characterized. We worked to construct multiple choice questions that would demonstrate the myriad ways violence can impact students' lives. We administered the questionnaire to students in a set of randomly selected undergraduate courses, which resulted in 769 useable responses, representing 8.6% of the undergraduate population of 8,987 students. As Table 1 illustrates, our sample mirrors the gender and racial/ethnic demographic composition of the undergraduate students at the university in fall 2008 when we administered the survey, allowing us to make inferences about the undergraduate student population. Because our university has a notably diverse student body in terms of race and ethnicity, our findings offer knowledge about the experiences of students whose lives are sometimes marginalized in academic research about students.

Surveying people about experiences of violence is methodologically challenging, from framing the questions to preparing for respondents' possible emotional reactions taking the survey. We constructed our questionnaire based on those of prior studies, theoretical concerns (for example, including a wide range of types of violence), and experiential input from research community members. As our goal was to examine the pervasiveness and effects of violence on students' education, we provided comprehensive definitions and examples of each of the types of violence (included below), providing students the ability to consider and include behaviors that they might not think of as domestic violence or sexual violence as they are commonly understood. As Levy (2008) discusses, "studies that ask directly 'Have you been raped?' result in low estimates of rape's prevalence. Meanwhile, studies that use descriptions with several elements [examples omitted] rather than single-word terms result in higher estimates" (Levy, 2008, pp. 108-09). This is a technique used by numerous interpersonal violence researchers who employ broad definitions of violence (e.g., Horsman, 1999; Rundle and Ysabet-Scott, Fall 1995), including "economic, verbal, and emotional abuse" (Levy, 2008, p. 109). For instance, a woman who was forced into having sex by a drunken male friend might not think of herself as having been raped, since she knew the man and otherwise thinks well of him. The man's behavior might have an effect on her, nevertheless. We wanted to include those types of acts as well as those more conventionally depicted as violence. We structured the questionnaire so that questions about the types of violence followed the descriptions. The respondents were informed that these were not limiting definitions.

In the questionnaire, we described three types of violence: physical, sexual, and emotional. We asked similar questions about each type of violence, inquiring whether students had experienced these types of violence from a variety of perpetrators.

Possible perpetrators included the following: 1) past intimate partner, spouse, boyfriend, or girlfriend; 2) current intimate partner, spouse, boyfriend, or girlfriend; 3) parent, guardian, or other family member; 4) authority figure, such as teacher, coach, boss, religious leader, or baby-sitter; 5) peer such as acquaintance, friend, co-worker, or class-mate; and 6) stranger. The frequency response scale we used was Never - Once or twice - Rarely - Occasionally - Frequently. The ordinal scale thus has a subjective element to it, as the respondent had to decide the operational definitions of “rarely,” “occasionally,” and “frequently.” We chose to approach our scale this way because our main concern was not to determine absolute frequency of violence experienced, but to explore the perception of experiences of violence in relation to school attendance and progress toward degree.

We described possible forms of physical violence as including: hitting, punching, kicking, choking, slapping, biting, pushing, shoving, throwing objects, threatening or hurting with a weapon or object, physically grabbing or holding someone against their will, and/or putting someone in fear of any of these acts. We described possible forms of sexual violence as including: forcing someone into unwanted sexual activity, touching someone in a way that makes them uncomfortable, engaging in sexual activity with someone who is unable to consent, coercing someone to watch or participate in pornography, coercing someone to engage in sexual acts with others, coercing someone to take off their clothes, and/or rape or attempted rape. We described possible forms of emotional abuse as including: repeated name-calling, put-downs, intimidation, being insulted in front of others, being threatened, controlling the way you look/dress, having your money withheld or being controlled by some one, being isolated from family and friends (by controlling your time, repeatedly calling), being forced to become or stay pregnant or end a pregnancy, stalking, cyber-stalking, and/or being followed.

As in any study, both theoretical concerns and practical constraints imposed some limitations on our findings. Our theoretical approach emphasized comprehensiveness in asking about violent experiences, at the expense of distinguishing severity of violence. We recognize this limitation to our findings, but given our concerns as feminist educators to expand what “counts” as violence, our goal was to gather data that took a broader picture of the respondents’ experiences. We saw the research process not as a completely abstracted activity, but as embedded in larger social relations. By responding to survey questions that framed violence broadly, we hoped that respondents might be prompted to rethink their own framing of “violence.” In addition, to ensure a reasonable response rate and a representative sample, we decided to administer the survey to a set of randomly selected *classes* that met certain criteria. But this imposed time constraints, as we were asking faculty to give up class time. For this reason, we decided to forego open-ended questions. In the next phase of our research, we plan to collect further qualitative data either in focus groups or by using a larger, anonymous survey as we did with the first survey. Despite the limitations imposed by our methodological decisions, our findings offer useful data that can be built on in further research.

Members of the research community received training from counseling and student services staff to prepare for possible emotional distress triggered by the survey. In addition, respondents were given a brochure with resources for rape crisis, domestic violence, and similar services. We saw this as providing support for possible distress, and also as education about the issue of violence. A student and a faculty member of our team were present for each class in which we distributed the survey, typically during the final 20 minutes of a class period.

3. Findings

3.1 Prevalence of Violence

Our most compelling finding is that 83.3% of the undergraduate sample reported having experienced some type of violence. Table 2 presents these data: 69.6% of the students answered yes to having experienced some form of physical violence; 30.8% responded that they had experienced a form of sexual violence; and 70.2% had experienced some form of emotional abuse. Looking at all of the students who answered yes to any of these forms of violence, we realized that our students experience an inordinate and troubling amount of violence in their lives. Far from being exceptional, violence is the norm among our students.

Men and women students were as likely as one another to have experienced physical violence (70.4% vs. 68.9% respectively). Women students were significantly more likely to have experienced sexual violence than men (41% of women vs. 17% of men); this difference is statistically significant.¹

¹ Statistical significance throughout this paper was determined by converting all ordinal variables into dichotomous variables indicating whether or not students had experienced a type of violence, taken time off, etc. Using *Statistical Package for the*

Women were also more likely to report having experienced emotional violence (73.3% vs. 67.7%), though this difference was not statistically significant.

Table 3 shows that more than a quarter of the students had experienced all three types of violence (physical, sexual, and emotional). More than one-third of the students said that they had experienced two types of violence, and more than one-fifth said that they had experienced only one type of violence.

In addition to the gendered variations in types of violence, women's and men's experiences of violence differed in terms of the perpetrators of violence against them. The perpetrators of physical and emotional violence against women students were most likely to have been past or current intimates or family members, while men were more likely than women to have been victimized physically or emotionally by a stranger, peer, or authority figure. Consistent with national crime victimization rates (BJS Statistics, 2009, p. 4), women were more likely than men to be the victim of sexual violence by all categories of perpetrators with the exceptions of sexual violence committed by authorities or current intimate partners which were not statistically different in our sample.

Our racially/ethnically diverse campus allowed us to test for differences by race/ethnicity in the experiences of violence. We found that white students and students of color were as likely to report that they have been victimized by physical violence (71.9% vs. 67.6%), emotional violence (73.7% vs. 68.6%), and sexual violence (28.4% vs. 32.6%). We also disaggregated race and ethnicity into subgroups of students and tested for statistical differences in violence across more specific racial/ethnic groups. These disaggregated racial and ethnic categories reinforced the aggregated racial/ethnic categories, with no statistical difference emerging in rates of violence across racial or ethnic groups.

Our survey did not ask students about their economic and social class categories. The university is a commuter campus, and is one of the most affordable universities in Illinois; full-time undergraduate tuition and fees totaled just over \$2000 in fall 2008. A high percentage of our students are first in their families to attend college. Thus, our students represent an economic range from poor to middle income. The combination of our location, the racial/ethnic diversity and the class representation might limit the generalizability of our findings to populations that are not in urban areas, are more homogeneous or more socially privileged.

From the data reported above, it is clear that our undergraduate students have encountered a great deal of violence in their lives. For some, the violence is currently happening; for others, it is a past occurrence. In the questionnaire, we distinguished between past and current violence only in the intimate partner category. The students' responses reveal that 14.6% reported experiencing current physical violence from an intimate partner (spouse, boyfriend, girlfriend) (N=112); 4.6% were experiencing current sexual violence from an intimate partner (N=35); and 21.6% were experiencing some form of current emotional abuse (N=166). These figures culminate in 26.9% of students currently experiencing at least one type of violence. This is a great deal of current violence that students must negotiate in order to attend the university, much less to succeed.

Our findings also suggest that in addition to violence being widespread in our students' lives, the types and sources of that violence follow patterns consistent with scholarship on the gendered dimensions of violence. In keeping with extant scholarship, we found that women students are more likely to experience sexual violence, typically at the hands of people they know: intimate partners, peers, and family members. Moreover, women are more likely than men to experience all three types of violence; one third reported all three types of violence. Another 29 percent reported experiencing two types of violence. We found high rates of violence among our men students, primarily physical and emotional violence at the hands of peers and authority figures. Nearly half (44%) of men experienced at least two types of violence with another 13.8 percent having experienced all three types of violence. These findings suggest that the violence experienced by women and men students are not only gendered in terms of the types and sources of violence, but are also complex and interrelated.

3.2 Violence, Retention, & Academic Performance

Do these experiences with violence affect students' time to degree and retention from year to year? To determine this, we asked students about their progress toward their degree. Early in the questionnaire we asked the simple question: "Have you taken time off of college since you started, excluding summer semesters/terms?" (Q #11) This question follows a question about their total credit hours.

Social Sciences (SPSS), the results across groups were then compared for each variable, and statistical significance was determined by calculating the Pearson Chi-Square values for a two-by-two table ($p < .05$).

We do not ask the students to explain in this question why they took time off. We found that a large number of students reported taking time off from college classes. Of the sample of 769 students, 278 (36%) had taken off one or more semesters since they began taking classes. Men and women were equally likely to have taken off one or more semesters (37.6% of men vs. 35.4% of women). White students (39.8%) and students of color (33.3%) were also equally likely to have taken time off, as the racial difference in the percentage of students taking time off was not statistically significant.

As demonstrated in Table 4, students who reported that they had experienced violence were more likely than students who did not report violence to have taken off one or more semesters. Table 4 compares the percentage of students who report taking at least one semester off with the percentage of students who report different types of violence. With the exception of physical violence, the relationship between violence and taking time off is statistically significant. For example, 38.8 percent of students who have experienced any form of violence report taking time off while 23.6 percent of those who did not experience violence took time off. This is a 15.2 percentage-point difference, suggesting that an experience with violence translates into a 64.4 percent increase in the likelihood that students will take time off. While our data analysis cannot demonstrate causality, the findings strongly suggest that students who have experienced violence are more likely to stop out of college classes. While we are not claiming a direct causal link, there may be other life factors that accompany the experiences of violence that inhibit students' ability to continue their education uninterrupted. For example, we have known women students whose experiences with a stalker have caused disruptions in their ability to consistently attend work, resulting in the loss of employment. For working-class students, this type of employment disruption is likely to affect their ability to pay for tuition and other school-related expenses, forcing them to take time off from their education. In this case, violence indirectly affects students' time to degree. This example, of course, is largely speculative and would require qualitative methods to fully uncover the complexities of the relationship between violence and its potential ripple-effects to other life events. Our findings that experiences of violence are strongly correlated with an increase in the likelihood of taking time off from school underscore the need for such qualitative studies.

Later in the survey, following the questions about experiences with the three types of violence, we asked whether the respondents "ever had trouble attending school as a result of violence or abuse" in their lives (Q #33). The next question (Q #34) asked if the students had "ever decided to leave school as a result of violence or abuse" in their lives. Through these questions we were asking students to make the link between their behavior in terms of school enrollment and the violence they had experienced. Students who experience violence often suffer fall-out and negative ramifications from that experience (lose employment, lose self-esteem) and those effects could lead to stopping out or dropping out from school (MacMillan, 2001) much as Kolodny (1998) claimed in her earlier cited passage. As Strong (1998) comments, "[a]t every level—psychologically, socially, and biologically—the sexually abused girls have fared worse than their nonabused counterparts," including in school (1998, p. 81).

The gendered aspect of the impact of violence is reinforced by our finding when we asked the students if they had had trouble attending school due to violence or abuse, 15.2% (N=117) answered yes. Comparing this with the types of violence they reported having experienced in earlier responses, a statistically-significant pattern emerges across all types of violence, with those reporting experiences with violence being far more likely to report having trouble attending school. Students who experienced sexual violence were the most likely to report having had trouble attending school (24.1%), and as previously mentioned results show (Table 2), women are much more likely to be victims of sexual violence than men (41% of women vs. 17% of men). These data are illustrated in Table 5. When we asked the students directly if they had ever decided to take time off from classes because of violence or abuse, 7.2% (N=55) answered yes. As Table 6 shows, the relationship between experiences of violence and taking time off of classes because of that violence is significant for physical, sexual, and emotional violence. Again, students who had experienced sexual violence were most likely to have taken time off.

Compared with the positive correlation we found between taking time off from school and experiences with violence, relatively few students responded that they took time off *because* of the violence. This suggests that they do not make the link between the two that we found. This is consistent with findings on the effects of violence: oftentimes, victims blame themselves for what happened to them and minimize its effects on them. Nevertheless, the effects become apparent sometimes months or years after the violence (Levy, 2008, pp. 83-85). Our primary concern in our research was to explore the connection between student retention in college and their experiences with violence, hypothesizing that experiences with violence in the past or present would be positively correlated with taking time off from school.

After asking about their individual experiences with the three types of violence, we were curious about the effects of violence generally in their home communities. We asked students if they had ever had trouble attending school because they feared violence in their home community (Q #35). Fifty students answered yes to this question (6.5% of the respondents). Of the women respondents, 7.1% (N=30) indicated yes; of the men, 5.4% (N=18) responded yes.

We asked students if they had had flashbacks or recurring thoughts about a traumatic experience that made them not want to attend classes. Almost one-fifth of the respondents answered yes (18.5%, N=142); 21.5% of the women and 14.5% of the men, a statistically significant gender difference. Whether or not students are stopping or dropping out of school, the experience of flashbacks or recurrent thoughts suggest that some students may be missing classes because of past or current violence. We know that students who miss classes may receive lower grades, which affects their decision to persevere through graduation (Bowen, Chingos and McPherson, 2009).

Students in abusive relationships might face barriers constructed by their abusive partners. Abusers “threatened by their [partner’s] efforts at education, training, and employment, often sabotage these activities by means of violence” (Raphael, 2000, p. 145). We asked the students in our sample, “have you ever been in a relationship (romantic or otherwise) with someone who deliberately made going to school difficult?” (Q #38) More than one tenth of the students (11.7%, N=91) said that they had. Women were slightly more likely than men to answer yes to this question (12.8% vs. 10.9%), although the gender difference in this case is not statistically significant.

Abuse also can take the form of controlling one’s source of funds for education (Levy, 2008, p. 6). We asked the students, “Have you ever been in a relationship (romantic or otherwise) with someone who controlled your money in a way that made going to/paying for school difficult?” (Q #37) Forty-nine students answered yes (6.4%). Women were much more likely than men to answer yes to this question (7.1% of women vs. 1.8% of men); this difference is statistically significant.

Our university is a commuter institution; there are no dorms, and most of the students live outside of the school’s neighborhood. We were curious whether they had fears of violence and/or mistreatment on campus. We asked “Have you ever had trouble attending school because you fear violence on campus?” (Q #36) Fifty-one students answered yes (6.6%); 7.6% of the women and 4.8% of the men, although this gender difference is not statistically significant. We also asked whether the students have “ever felt discouraged, intimidated, embarrassed, or insulted by teachers or classmates in ways that made you question continuing with your education?” (Q #31) Twenty-eight percent of the students said yes (N=215); 29.4% of the women respondents and 26.6% of the men, a gender difference that was not statistically significant. As women’s studies faculty, we were not surprised by these results, as we have all encountered situations in which students have been humiliated, disrespected, stalked, harassed, or even physically assaulted by peers, authority figures or intimate partners on campus. While residential colleges and universities may have problems of date rape on campus, a commuter campus is not immune from violence affecting students’ on-campus lives. These responses reveal issues over which campus communities have some control. We can take steps to insure that students feel safe and respected on campus.

4. Discussion

Our findings suggest that violence, as we have defined it, is a common rather than exceptional experience, takes many forms, and affects students’ educational experiences. Eighty-three percent of our sample reports some experience with violence—physical, sexual, and/or emotional. While there were gender differences in the most common types of violence and in their perpetrators, both women and men students reported a sobering amount of violence in their lives, both past and present. We found a correlation between the experience of violence and interruptions in higher education, consistent with other research. We found that gendered sexual violence was the type of violence that was most correlated with such interruptions.

There are many reasons that students stop out or drop out altogether from an institution of higher education, as enumerated in the introduction to this paper. The data from our study suggest that there are students who are negatively affected by their home, community, institutional, and/or personal lives in such a way that they find it difficult to continue with college. In our questionnaire, we employed only multiple-choice questions with no sections for open-ended questions and answers. As a result, we have no in-depth comments from the students explaining their reasons for stopping out. We know from exit interviews conducted previously at the university that a large number of students stop out for the traditional reasons: Lack of funds, the need to work, and/or family obligations.

It is apparent, however, that students who report violence either in their past or present are more likely to take time off from the university than those who report no experiences with violence; this is not a question that had previously been asked in exit interviews at our institution. We argue therefore that experiences of violence should be added to the constellation of factors affecting college attendance.

The students that we sampled resembled the undergraduate population at our university. We can infer from this that over 80% of our undergraduate students have encountered violence in their lives and that this is a source of distress for them that may interfere with their ability to attend college classes. We could only survey students who were present in their courses on the day of the survey. What about the students who were not there because of the violence they had experienced or were at the time experiencing? What about the students who had already dropped out of the university because of their experiences with violence? One study posited that only those survivors of early trauma who had developed substantial coping skills actually enrolled in college, and hence were available for studies of the effects of trauma on college attendance (Banyard and Cantor, 2004). If this is correct, the students we surveyed had already self-selected, and were among those who had developed some coping skills.

Given the high rates of violence experienced by students attending our university, we suggest, following Horsman (1999, p. 55), that institutions take into account that the new “normal” is that students arrive at universities and colleges having experienced or currently experiencing violence. Where the overwhelming majority of students have experienced some form of violence in their lives, universities and those of us concerned with supporting student success in higher education must engage with this reality. We cannot close our eyes to the impact of this on students’ lives and their ability to succeed in college. The university must understand as part of its mission recognizing the personal impact of violence and must support students accordingly. Violence, and coping with its effects, is a common experience for our students, and institutions of higher education should incorporate ways to recognize and address its effects.

How might our research help colleges and universities address the connections between experiences of violence and problems with retention? The first step is for administrators, faculty members, and other campus staff to become aware that this is an issue. In the wake of dramatic and terrible incidents of campus violence such as campus shootings, many schools have created responses to try to prevent and address these forms of potential violence on campus. However, those incidents are thankfully rare; our research suggests a more commonplace and pervasive issue with violence that affects students every day. Many campuses have adopted a philosophy in planning and policy-making that entails treating students as whole people, with strengths and challenges. Our findings suggest that addressing the violence in their past and current lives outside of school should be part of any initiative to create student-centered institutions.

Among the policies that can help students to be resilient and enable them to progress toward their degrees, we recommend that counseling, student support services, and campus police departments be prepared to handle the stresses that come from experiences of violence. Campus communities can offer programming that opens up dialogue about violence and building non-violent relationships. Faculty and staff orientation and professional development should include information about the prevalence of violence in students’ lives and the potential effects of violence on students’ performance and ability to proceed academically. More generally, the higher education profession should engage with community-based efforts to reduce all forms of violence in the broader society. For example, at new student orientations the effects of violence on higher education should be discussed and students should be informed of the myriad of ways that people on campus can support student success. Rather than waiting for students in crisis to have to go looking for support, institutions should advertise the availability of services, and educate students about the benefits of accessing them before they are enveloped in crisis.

Overall, we advocate that colleges and universities devote resources not only to supporting students academically, but also socio-emotionally. In addition to tutoring, universities need sufficient counseling and responsively trained student support services to aid students both in their educational goals and in coping with the impact of violence on their lives. For example, many institutions have first year experience programs in which all incoming students participate; these programs would be a perfect location for students to learn that there is a high prevalence of violence in students’ lives; that they are not alone; and that the university has many programs, discussion groups, and counseling options to support their success. In addition, many institutions are developing service learning programs, in which students engage in internships with community-based organizations. Developing partnerships with community organizations that address violence could be another avenue for raising awareness about violence and connecting students with resources.

Lastly, campus women's services centers traditionally have provided support groups and education in areas of violence prevention and intervention. Colleges and universities need to continue to allocate resources to these centers.

All of these recommendations are part of the project of making higher education responsive to the real lives of students. As the opportunity for a college education has spread to previously excluded groups, including women, institutions have faced the need to respond to a wider range of challenges in order to ensure that access is genuine. Even though women now represent the majority of college students, the need for gender-sensitive programs and services has not been eliminated. Our research helps demonstrate why that is so, and suggests way to improve the climate for all students. On the other side, our work is part of the project of infusing feminist responses to violence throughout society. Violence is pervasive, and must be addressed in multiple venues. Our contribution focuses on how and why that must be done in higher education.

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Table 1

Gender	Sample (n=769, 8.6% of NEIU undergraduate students)	NEIU undergraduates (N=8987)
Women	56.0%	58.7%
Men	44.0%	41.3%
Race/ethnicity		
Native American	1.2%	0.3%
Asian	10.1%	11.2%
African American	8.5%	10.0%
Latin@s	31.2%	30.9%
White	45.8%	40.4%

Demographics of the Study Sample and Undergraduate Student Body, Fall 2008

Table 2

Type of Violence	% of Students Experiencing	% of Women Experiencing	% of Men Experiencing	Total Number of Students Experiencing
Physical violence	69.6	68.9	70.4	533
Sexual violence	30.8	41	17	236
Emotional violence	70.2	73.3	67.7	540
Any form of violence	83.3	83.3	83.3	634

Student experiences of violence

Table 3

Type of Violence	% of Students Experiencing	% of Women Experiencing	% of Men Experiencing	Number of Students Experiencing
No violence	16.7	16.8	16.8	127
1 type of violence	21.8	19.1	25.1	166
2 types of violence	35.6	29.1	44.3	271
3 types of violence	25.9	35.0	13.8	197

Amount and types of violence experienced

Table 4

	Physical violence		Sexual violence*		Emotional violence*		Any violence*	
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
Percent who Report Taking Time Off	37.1%	33.0%	43.0%	33.3%	39.1%	29.4%	38.8%	23.6%

* These differences were statistically significant (p < .05).

Experiences of Violence & Taking Time Off

Table 5

	Physical violence*		Sexual violence*		Emotional violence*		Any violence*	
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
Percent who Report Having Trouble Attending School	17.3%	4.3%	24.1%	8.7%	16.9%	4.5%	15.2%	3.1%

* These differences were statistically significant (p < .05).

Violence and Trouble Attending School

Table 6

	Physical violence*		Sexual violence*		Emotional violence*		Any violence	
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
Percent who Report Taking Time Off Due to Violence or Abuse	8.8%	3.4%	13.0%	4.7%	8.8%	3.6%	7.9%	3.1%

* These differences were statistically significant (p < .05).

Violence and Taking Time Off from School