

op-ed: Alexandra Garcia No rape at Middlebury?

Gender violence should be on the hot list this week. There are those posters with Middlebury quotes, the posters with sexual violence statistics and a few Feminists all up in arms over the “insensitive” op-ed response to the posters. But what’s the big deal? Hasn’t anybody noticed that according to our own Public Safety, there is almost no sexual violence in this community? You might find this surprising — there is a long-standing debate in academic and political circles concerning the existence of “rape-free” societies — but Middlebury is apparently close to nullifying this debate.

The Clery Act of 1992 states that all cases “reported to campus security or local law police agencies” must “be open to public inspection within two business days of the initial report being made.” At the average college, one in four female students will, at some time, be the victim of rape or attempted rape according to the U.S. Department of Justice in 2003. That’s 35 victims for every 1,000 college women in a single academic year according to the Bureau of Justice Statistics in 2000. Yet, the statistics say Midd doesn’t have this problem. According to the College’s public records, since the beginning of 2005 there have only been two cases of sexual harassment and not a single case of rape.

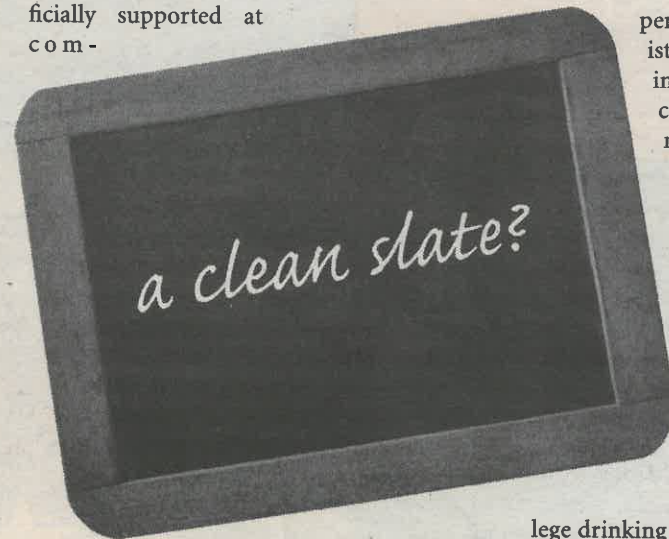
Perhaps even more amazing is how quickly Middlebury has arrived at this almost utopian state. Middlebury was not always perfect. In 1988 the College formed the Committee on Attitudes Towards Gender in response to a mutilated effigy of a female

body hung from a fraternity balcony. The committee collected information from surveys, informal discussions and even quotes from parties and dining halls to analyze gender attitudes on campus. Now, I don’t know about you, but I thought that the part about collecting campus quotes was interesting because as James O’Brien says, dining hall quotes “have nothing to do with sexual violence.” So, why would the committee use informal social language as a means of identifying “problem areas?”

Obviously things were different back then. What people said reflected how they thought. But we’re pretty lucky, because today at Middlebury, as the campus records show, there is no link between violent language recorded on posters and the actual physical experience of the student body. Middlebury didn’t even have to follow the recommendations of the Committee for the problems of the 1980’s to disappear — they did not make a standing committee on gender issues or a comprehensive follow-up study. The administration did organize a Task Force on the Status of Women six years later, but the study must not have been very important because the College again put off the recommended follow-up study for another 10 years.

So what has the College done to achieve this unprecedented sexual violence-free status? To see how Middlebury differs from rape-prone societies, let’s consider some sociological data. Rape-prone communities are marked by indiscriminate use of language referring to women in derogatory sexual terms

(“sluts”, “bitches”, etc.), use of pornography to learn about sex, homophobic attitudes and measuring masculinity through sexual conquest. Well, as we know from those posters, women *are* referred to as “sluts” and “bitches,” pornography is so acceptable at this educational institution that it is officially supported at
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ponsored parties, homophobic attitudes have always been an unspoken issue and have become increasingly public in the past two semesters, and, back to those informal conversations, is sexual conquest a bragging point for the guys? I’ll let you answer that.

Okay, so maybe we don’t neatly counter the definition of rape-prone societies, but maybe the College is doing something else. Maybe it’s magic. Yes, I think that must be

it. That must be it, because we have all the indicators suggesting there should be at least average levels of sexual violence, but the statistics given to us and to prospective students say that at Middlebury we are the magic community free of the ugly little problems that affect the rest of the U.S. If, perhaps, the College’s administration forgot to report an incidence here and there, who can blame them? As I’ve heard members of the administration suggest — I know this is hearsay, but this is also an op-ed — if students don’t report problems of harassment, it’s our own fault. Never mind that many victims feel ashamed because of stigmas and guilt, or that one of the major detriments to student reports, according to a 2005 federal report, was college drinking policies — talk to any senior about the increased severity of the drinking policy over those same three years that the sexual violence numbers have been at about zero.

After 10 years, another report has been commissioned by the Task Force on the Status of Women. But it seems when it comes to sexual violence their work will be light — since according to Middlebury it doesn’t exist.

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