

# Middlebury Unmasked Critiques Sexual Assault Policies in Video

**By Jenna Lifhits**

A girl, the same girl that could have been sitting next to you in macroeconomics or literary theory, is now sitting in front of a camera, telling you about an experience – a couple of minutes – that transformed her life. Her face is covered with a mask that depicts another student at the College's face. She tells you about the painstaking judicial process she had to go through and the maze of bureaucracy she had to navigate. You are left wondering how here, at the College, a sexual assault case could have lasted 146 days, and what we can do to assure that that does not happen again.

This video is Middlebury Unmasked, a ten-minute documentary that features six student survivors sharing their experience coping with sexual assault at the College. Through the survivors' powerful narratives, student activists hope to inspire dialogue about sexual assault as well as spark a shift in campus culture. Simultaneously, they wish to systematically improve the College's sexual assault policy.

Michelle Peng '15, one of the student activists who produced the video, elaborated on the genesis of Middlebury Unmasked and its goals.

"Survivors were able to come together and figure out that a lot of people did not have good experiences with the judicial process," she said. "They saw, 'oh, my experience isn't an outlier, this is actually a pattern.' [The video] is a critique toward Middlebury but also Title IX judicial processes. So many people are having these bad experiences. Why? What can we do to make them better?"

Middlebury Unmasked was released during mid-March in anticipation of Sexual Assault Awareness Month (SAAM). During the month of April, the College holds various workshops, discussions, and training sessions in order to encourage dialogue and awareness about sexual assault. SAAM is a chance for members of the College community to educate themselves about sexual assault on campus, so that they are better able to imbue policy – and their interpersonal relationships – with compassion.

Maddie Orcutt '16, one of the video's producers, commended the College for fostering awareness through SAAM.

"I think that the College's commitment to using the Department Of Justice funds to honor Sexual Assault Awareness Month is a step in the right direction," Orcutt said. "I hope that this month will create more stakeholders who are interested in promoting sexual respect."

However, she added that there is still room for improvement regarding the breadth of awareness that should be reached:

"There are some difficult conversations that need to be had regarding how to integrate all of these services and speakers in a streamlined way. If the same people are showing up to these events time and time again, how much progress is really being made?"

While SAAM is a positive step forward, the activists behind Middlebury Unmasked hope to radically reform Middlebury's sexual assault policy. Over the last two weeks, administrators have met with the activists behind Middlebury Unmasked in order to discuss possible changes.

The activists made several demands, one of which was to institute a feedback loop between students and administrators. This would allow survivors the opportunity to express their satisfaction or dissatisfaction with sexual assault policy on paper and its implementation in reality.

In addition, students suggested numerous revisions to the judicial process, including revising the College's definition of consent to mirror the definitions used by Amherst College or the state of California.

“In California there is affirmational consent, meaning you need to have free, voluntary, obvious actions that say ‘Yes, I am into this.’ Right now Middlebury College does not have that,” Peng said. “Most of the NESCAC colleges have affirmational consent, including Amherst. But we don’t have the same caliber of consent definition which makes this issue even more grey than it already is.”

The activists also suggested a safety policy, which would assure that students involved in an ongoing sexual assault case couldn’t prolong the judicial process or graduate.

“A perpetrator can have his lawyers drag out the process to the point where the perpetrator ends up graduating,” Peng said. “Right now we don’t have any systems in place to prevent that at our school. We can’t have lawyers dragging these things out – there should be a time limit on this.”

The weekend prior to meeting with administration, the activists behind Middlebury Unmasked travelled to Amherst College for the Amherst Step Up Summit Conference on Sexual Respect. They identified concrete ways to improve campus culture through reforming the structure of sexual assault policy. For example, Amherst has a panel of 12 to 15 students who are paid to direct sexual respect workshops and education; they have also hired a sexual respect educator. The students who attended the conference want the College to develop similar positions and resources.

The language used when discussing policy is crucial: Amherst encourages education and awareness about sexual respect rather than sexual assault. Activists at the College aim to foster a similar culture of sex positivity through reframing sexual assault as sexual respect.

Peng commented, “‘Don’t sexually assault someone’ is different rhetoric than ‘Let’s sexually respect everyone.’”

This concept is further described in the list of demands Middlebury Unmasked presented to the administration last week. The point concerning sexual respect reads as follows: “In more than just a symbolic way, moving beyond language that is focused on compliance with the letter of the law and moving towards a goal of fostering a sexually respectful campus community shows a commitment to creating positive change rather than responding to the worst parts of our sexual culture on campus.”

As groups like It Happens Here highlight, negative sexual experiences that are not sexual assault occur with some regularity on our campus. These experiences are often followed by confusion because we do not discuss what a good sexual experience looks like – we do not discuss sexual respect. We have excellent resources that one may utilize in order to understand what an example of a bad experience looks like. These resources teach one what not to do; however, they do not teach what to do – what is respectful.

While it is very necessary to understand sexual assault, it is equally as necessary to understand sexual respect. If one understands both negative (what not to do) and positive (what to do instead) aspects, the relationships students share will improve on the whole.

“A lot of people are having negative sexual experiences that aren’t necessarily defined as assault but that can definitely be improved, and that has to do with sexual respect,” Peng explained. “We don’t have any groups on campus that consider – what does a good sexual experience look like?”

After preliminary discussion between the activists of Middlebury Unmasked and the administration, SGA Junior Class Senator Josh Berlowitz ’16 and the organizers of It Happens Here drafted a bill that included several of the aforementioned reforms. The bill proposes changes to the judicial process, administrative reforms, and the creation of a new cabinet position on the SGA to help promote sexual and relationship respect.

Berlowitz added that the administration responded positively to the proposed bill.

“The administration reviews and changes policy over the summer,” Berlowitz said. “By passing this resolution with all of the recommendations, we are giving the activists support and credibility. The student body as a whole believes that these are good policy changes. The administration can incorporate them when they update policy this summer.”

Campus-wide support of SAAM and reforms to Middlebury’s sexual assault policy are two crucial steps towards reducing the number of people affected by violence on our campus. However, our approach to raising awareness about sexual assault and making Middlebury a safer place cannot be static; it must gradually evolve.

“There should never be a point where we say, okay, this is good enough, we’re doing everything right,” Peng said. “Because in my mind, fifty years ago we thought a good idea would be to have a jury and a perpetrator sitting in the same room. That was best practices at some point. From my standpoint we are fifty years from somewhere. And you don’t want to look back on this time and say, wow, we really got that wrong.”