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FASHION & STYLE

Campus Sex ... With a Syllabus

By JESSICA BENNETT JAN. 9, 2016

HARTFORD — "Where did I learn about sexual consent?"

Jonathan Kalin was standing before an auditorium of Trinity College freshmen, pressing play on a clip from the movie "Superbad."

The 2007 film, you may recall, tells the story of two schlubby high school friends on a quest to lose their virginity before college. In this particular scene, the main characters, played by Jonah Hill and Michael Cera, are standing in the middle of a soccer scrimmage dissecting whether or not Mr. Hill's romantic interest wants to hook up with him. The evidence, in this case, is booze: She had asked him to help her buy some for her party.

Mr. Hill relays a familiar scenario to his friend: Girl gets drunk at party; girl has sex with guy; the next morning, girl regrets what happened. He pauses, excitedly. "We could be that mistake!"

The students in the room laughed, albeit hesitantly. This was a lecture about consent, after all.

"So what did we just learn about sexual consent from Michael Cera and

Jonah Hill?" Mr. Kalin asked.

"There wasn't any, really," a young man in the front called out.

"Exactly," Mr. Kalin said. "It's not just that it's *O.K.* to get drunk and have sex with them, it's that it's actually *cool*."

Mr. Kalin is the 24-year-old founder of a group called Party With Consent — a slogan displayed in neon behind him (and on T-shirts he would later hand out). On this Saturday, he had traveled from Providence, R.I., where he worked at the Swearer Center for Public Service at Brown University, to Hartford to speak to Trinity students about the importance of understanding what has become a campus buzzword of late: consent.

The lecture, which he would give four times on this day, to four different groups of students, was part of a sexual assault curriculum that Trinity College freshmen were required to complete (and had their attendance recorded to ensure it).

It was followed, later that night, by an actual "party with consent" — an all-ages event with bands, an open bar and bowls of colorful condoms that read, "Did you ask consent?" Trinity was one of the half-dozen campuses Mr. Kalin had visited since the school year began.

"In my experience, when you ask men on college campuses where they learned about consent, they sort of look at you blankly and say, 'What do you mean?'" Mr. Kalin said to a reporter. "This is meant to be like a pre-intro intro course. Hopefully it's a gateway to a larger conversation."

In the movies (that are not "Superbad"), sexual consent goes something like this: the lights dim, the mood swells, two people silently move toward each other at the same exact time, knowing what the other wants without speaking a word. Clothes come off seamlessly; lovemaking ensues. Consent is implied, not spoken.

But in real life — and, ever more frequently, on college campuses — what constitutes consent is wildly more complicated. Sometimes one person initiates; other times it's both; still other times it's hard to tell. Sometimes one party wants to engage in *part* of the sex act but not all of it; other times a person may consent to doing one thing at one moment, only to withdraw that consent as the thing actually begins to happen.

In some cases one party reads a signal — a physical cue, a look, a text message, something else — to mean one thing, while the other intended it to mean something entirely different.

No, most rape is not the result of a misunderstanding. To the contrary, one-fourth to two-thirds of rapists are serial attackers, studies show. And yet *how* we understand consent has been at the core of a number of recent rape cases, and it is a focus of a growing field of study. When it comes to young people today, and college, and hooking up, and drinking, and rape culture, and consent, there's enough confusion that the services of people like Mr. Kalin are in high demand.

The statistics by this point are familiar: More than one in five college women will become victims of sexual assault, most of them by somebody they know, with very few coming forward to report the crimes. In the vast majority of these cases (80 percent, according to a 2009 study), alcohol is involved, for both women and men.

More surprising, perhaps, is that the way men and women understand consent is in almost direct opposition to each other: One study found that 61 percent of men say they rely on nonverbal cues — body language — to indicate if a woman is consenting to a sexual act, while only 10 percent of women say they actually give consent via body language (most say they wait to be asked).

"People often ask, 'Why teach consent?'" said the sociologist Harry Brod, a professor at the University of Northern Iowa and a longtime lecturer on the topic of consent. His answer: "Because we often have entirely different

understandings of what it means."

Mr. Kalin's own lecture grew out of that realization, as part of a group he was involved in as an undergraduate at Colby College, where he was captain of the basketball team, called Male Athletes Against Violence. At the time, he had noticed a tasteless slogan cropping up on T-shirts on and around campus. It read, "Party With Sluts." Mr. Kalin decided to turn the slogan on its head.

He's no longer a rare voice, as college campuses across the country, responding to increased scrutiny, incorporate consent education programs into their curriculums.

A number of campuses have adopted a program called "Consent Is Sexy," a poster campaign and workshop series developed by a psychologist and a former campus minister that can be tailored to individual campuses. There is a traveling assault education improv show called "Sex Signals," while new students at Columbia must complete a course in "sexual respect." During the fall orientation at the University of California, Irvine, a video featuring student actors explained that "consent is knowing your partner wants you as much as you want them."

The rise of these programs lies in evolving federal guidelines about how universities must handle response to, and prevention of, sexual assault on campus. NotAlone.gov, the government website devoted to Title IX compliance, recommends that universities define consent for students, including language to indicate that, among other things, consent cannot be granted by somebody who is incapacitated; that past consent does not imply future consent; and that consent can be withdrawn at any time.

Trinity is among the estimated 1,500 colleges and universities that, along with state systems in California and New York, have adopted what is known as the "affirmative consent" standard, which requires students to consent with a clear indication of "yes" — sometimes every step of the way — in turn making the default response (or no response at all) "no."

It is a shift from the "no means no" mantra of a generation ago, the idea being that having to give, or ask for, a clear "yes" will help eliminate ambiguity.

And yet there is a learning curve.

Campuses like Trinity's have thick handbooks full of sexual assault resources, filled with pages upon pages of legal definitions and situational scenarios. But that doesn't mean that students necessarily understand the new policies. Yes, "consent" is now emblazoned on T-shirts and posters — it was the subject of a recent public service initiative at Columbia, "Consent is BAE," that was criticized by students — but even that does not ensure that students can define it.

"I think it's when two people agree to have sex, yeah?" a young woman, a junior at the Fashion Institute of Technology, said when approached on a recent day in Manhattan and asked if she could define "affirmative consent."

"Isn't that when only yes means yes? But not really?" said another woman, a dance and fashion major at N.Y.U.

"I know what consent is; is this different?" said a young man, a sports management major, also at N.Y.U.

And there is a whole new vocabulary to memorize, with terms like "enthusiastic consent," "implied consent," "spectrum of consent," "reluctant permission," "coercion" and "unintentional rape." Even "yes means yes," the slogan of the anti-rape movement is sort of confusing.

"It should be '*Only* yes means yes,'" said Dr. Brod, the sociologist. (And if you still can't tell, then ask.)

The questions from students are seemingly endless: Can consent only be given verbally, or can it be indicated by body language (and if so, how can I be sure it "counts")? What's the difference between "affirmative," "enthusiastic" and "effective consent," and why do all of these terms vary by campus (and

sometimes even within them)? How does a person gauge or indicate interest, or demonstrate consent, without having to awkwardly ask, "Is this O.K.?" a thousand times over again (or is this simply the new norm)?

Even in the best situations, it can take some getting used to.

Seated with a group of students in the women's center after Mr. Kalin's talk, Caroline Howell, a sophomore at Trinity, described a hookup scenario with a guy who — every step of the way — asked for her permission.

"As much as I was like, 'This is awesome,' I was like: 'This is weird. This is awkward,'" she said. "And then I was like, 'Wait, we went through that whole thing and I didn't ask a single question — shouldn't I be asking too?'"

Then there is the drinking issue. Campus policies are clear about the inability of a person to consent if she or he is drunk (or, in other words, if Jonah Hill acted out his wish, he could be considered a rapist). But what if a student has just one beer — or even just a sip?

"I think one of the biggest misconceptions about consent is around alcohol consumption," said Emily Kaufman, a sophomore at Trinity.

"Yes," another young woman said. "Like, if you have one sip of alcohol you can't consent."

"And girls too," Ms. Kaufman added. "They think, 'If I drink at all, I can't have sex that night?'"

Trinity's definition states that if a person is "mentally or physically incapacitated or impaired so that such person cannot understand the fact, nature or extent of the situation, there is no consent." But what does that really mean?

"These things are very tidy on paper, but in the private sphere, with two people going into a room, bringing with them expectations and assumptions,

very often they are not on the same page," said Jason Laker, a professor at San Jose State University, who, with a colleague, Erica Boas, created a project called Consent Stories, which aims to document how students communicate consent.

"There's a big gap between the laws and policies that stipulate consent, and people's understanding of it," Dr. Laker said.

There is also seemingly nobody keeping track of how it's being taught: no governing body to review these programs; no standardized definition of consent; nor much research into types of prevention strategies that work. It's not dissimilar, said Senator Kirsten Gillibrand, a Democrat of New York, to how campuses have handled their *response* to cases of sexual assault: with little uniformity. (Senator Gillibrand is the co-sponsor of a bill that would create a standard for those response procedures, including bringing in credentialed experts.)

"I think a certain amount of chaos is expected when you're going through social change," said Jaclyn Friedman, a longtime sex educator and the co-editor of a book called "Yes Means Yes!" "But I also think there's still a lot of confusion."

Mr. Kalin hopes he can try to close the gap, or at least make students think about the culture that surrounds it. At Trinity, he peppered his talks with pop culture details and references to LeBron James in an effort to speak to students in "their language." He also discussed "sexist foundations," "notions of masculinity," "social constructs of gender," "social hierarchies" — gender studies terminology to which many in his audience appeared to stare blankly.

He shared some of his most vulnerable stories: the death of his father in an auto accident, when he was 12, and how it affected his perceptions of manhood; finding out in college that a woman he knew had been sexually assaulted (and assuming that that type of crime could never happen on his campus).

But if his message at times gets lost in the nuance, others are lost in the simplicity.

At N.Y.U., one part of the sexual misconduct training freshmen are required to attend takes the form of a musical. "I mean, N.Y.U. is a great school, it has is a great drama program, but it's still a musical about consent," said Meghan Racklin, a senior. Ms. Racklin is a founder of a photography initiative called #BetterSexTalk, which asks students to answer the question, "If you could give one piece of advice to a younger sibling about sex, what would it be?" ("A crash-course in sexual respect during college orientation," the group's website reads, "will never atone for years of inadequate sex ed.")

Some schools use the language of traffic lights (if you're in the yellow, you must get to red or green), while others show a popular YouTube video that compares consent to tea ("If you say 'Hey, would you like a cup of tea?' and they're like, 'Uh, you know, I'm not really sure,' then you can make them a cup of tea, or not, but be aware they might not drink it," the video explains.)

In one workshop in Manhattan, led by Dr. Brod, an audience member told a story of a sex educator in Philadelphia who uses a pizza analogy to explain consent. ("When people decide to eat pizza, there's a discussion about toppings," the man said.) Sports analogies are useful. So is candy. ("If I know Jessica likes candy, and I've shared it with her in the past, is it O.K. for her to take my bag of candy without my consent, even if I'm putting it in front of her face?")

Back at Trinity, Abdul Staten, the training and program coordinator at the Women & Gender Resource Action Center, which hosted Mr. Kalin, described using a roller-coaster analogy: If you're trying to convince a friend to go on a roller-coaster ride with you, but they don't want to, what are you going to do to try to convince them?

"The students respond with things like, 'I'd bribe her,' 'I'd give her pretzels,' 'I'd offer to hold her hand,'" Mr. Staten said. "They yell out all these

things that are somewhat coercive, and then I say: 'So let's say you're in a dating situation and someone says all these things to you, and you go along with it. Are you giving consent?'

"I get that that's a really surface way of looking at it," he continued, "but with a lot of survivors, it's not about being held down. It's like, 'He kept asking, so I finally said yes,' or 'I didn't want to be rude,' or 'He wouldn't leave so I just did so he would.'"

Of course, part of the teaching is all about context. What do you actually say if you want to say stop, or are unsure, or need a minute to think about it? Are there ways to indicate you're into it without having to say yes over and over again?

And what about the larger cultural framework? How do you tackle these concepts in a world where women are empowered to say yes — but taught that they must be coy when they do it? When they've been socialized to think that "yes" means you're a slut, "maybe" means you're a tease, and "no" means you're a prude — or that, from the male perspective, as one friend recently put it, "no is always negotiable"?

"I think that if you're going to teach about consent, you need to also talk about culture," said Jing Qu, a junior at Columbia who has been involved in activism around consent education on campus. "It's the oversexualization of female bodies on TV and in magazines. It's this idea of like: 'Oh does she want it? She won't give me a straight answer.' It's the idea that she's 'asking for it.' It's literally like Justin Bieber saying" — while rolling around half-naked on a bed with a woman in his new video — "'What do you mean?'" (It's the title of his new song.)

Mr. Kalin, for what it's worth, tries to fit his talk into the bigger context. Back in the auditorium, he asked the Trinity students which nights were the "party nights" on campus.

The room was silent.

"Now tell me: On a party night, before men go out, what do we tell them to do?" he asked.

"What about women?" he said. "What do we tell *them* to do before a night out?"

The students suddenly became animated.

"Stick together," a woman in the front said.

"Travel in groups," another called out.

"Don't put down your drink." "Dress appropriately."

"Put your keys between your knuckles."

Mr. Kalin nodded. "Does anyone have any idea where I'm going with this?"

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