

DISSERTATION

EXPLORING THE ACADEMIC EXPERIENCE OF COLLEGE STUDENT SURVIVORS OF  
SEXUAL VIOLENCE: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL INQUIRY

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## ABSTRACT

### EXPLORING THE ACADEMIC EXPERIENCE OF COLLEGE STUDENT SURVIVORS OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL INQUIRY

Approximately 21% of female undergraduates and 7% of male undergraduates report being sexually assaulted while in college (Krebs et al., 2016). Student survivors of sexual violence experience negative impacts on their academic performance, which can result in a lower grade-point average (GPA) and a decision to leave the institution where the incident occurred (Baker et al., 2016). To gain a better understanding of the academic experience of college student survivors of sexual violence, the author conducted a qualitative phenomenological study using the descriptive phenomenological psychological method developed by Giorgi (Giorgi, 2009) to answer the following research question: “How do college student survivors of sexual violence describe their academic experiences following an incident of sexual violence?” Six currently enrolled undergraduate college students completed semistructured interviews to explore their lived academic experiences following an incident of sexual violence. In-depth analysis of the data revealed the following essential constituents of the academic experience of participants following the incident of sexual violence: negative emotional and mental health consequences, shame and self-blame, isolation from classmates and professors, impaired ability to focus on academic tasks, losing motivation and questioning academic goals, finding ways to cope, healing and reconnection, and academic identity as more than GPA. These essential constituents constitute the general structure of the academic experience of participants following an incident of sexual violence. Results of the study provide a deeper understanding the

psychological mechanisms through which sexual violence negatively impacts the academic experience of college student survivors of sexual violence.

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## **CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION**

Seventy percent of all sexual assaults occur among individuals under age 25, making sexual violence an important issue for institutions of higher education (Breiding, Smith, Bastile, Walters, Jieru, & Merrick, 2014). Approximately 21% of female undergraduates and 7% of male undergraduates report being sexually assaulted while in college (Krebs et al., 2016). Sexual violence is an all-encompassing, nonlegal term that refers to crimes such as sexual assault, rape, and sexual abuse (RAINN, 2019). Research has demonstrated that students who attend universities that have more sexual violence resources are better supported following an incident of sexual violence (Eisenberg, Lust, Hannan, & Porta, 2016). Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, a federal civil-rights law that prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex in any education program or activity that receives federal funding, addresses sexual violence, sexual harassment, and any gender-based discrimination that may deny a person access to educational benefits and opportunities (White House Task Force, 2017). In addition, Title IX protects students' rights to pursue their education free from discrimination and harassment across all academic, educational, extracurricular, athletic, and other programs of the institution, whether the program or activity takes place on or off campus. Educational institutions are required to provide survivors of sexual violence with remedies that can facilitate the pursuit of their education. Institutions of higher education are required to provide appropriate academic accommodations, such as options to avoid contact with the accused individual, and modifications to the survivor's academic or living situation or both, so survivors can successfully complete their coursework and graduate from college (White House Task Force, 2017).

A review of the research literature on the consequences of sexual violence demonstrates the need for the legal protections that Title IX guarantees college student survivors of sexual



violence. Survivors of sexual violence commonly experience physical health impairments, negative psychological consequences, and adverse impacts on social relationships. Common physical health impairments include rape-induced pregnancy, gynecological complications, sexually transmitted infections, genital injuries, chronic pain, and gastrointestinal disorders (CDC/NCIPC/DVP, 2019). Negative psychological health consequences include posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), low self-esteem, major depressive disorder, alcohol abuse/dependence, anxiety, and panic disorder (Acierno, Resnick, Kilpatrick, Saunders, & Best, 1999; Messman-Moore, Walsh, & DiLillo, 2010). Many survivors also experience a shattering of their belief system, including their sense of safety and their identity or sense of self (Herman, 1992; Janoff-Bulman, 1992). Survivors may experience themselves as damaged, or unattractive; they may avoid contact with others to protect against expected rejection (Horowitz, 2015). Negative social impacts—such as strained relationships with family, friends, and intimate partners; less frequent contact with friends and relatives; and isolation or ostracism from family or friend groups—are commonly reported (CDC/NCIPC/DVP, 2019).

For college students who are survivors of sexual violence, attempts to avoid the individual who committed the violent act can result in the survivor also avoiding academic and social activities that are an integral part of a college education (Carr, 2005). The survivor may have the same classes as the accused individual, live in the same dorm, share the same friend groups, and attend the same social events. College student survivors of sexual violence experience negative impacts on their academic performance, which can result in a lower grade-point average (GPA) (Baker et al., 2016; Jordan, Combs, & Smith, 2014; Mengo & Black, 2015; Patterson Silver Wolf, Perkins, Van Zile-Tamsen, & Butler-Barnes, 2016) and a decision to leave the institution where the incident occurred (Baker et al., 2016; Duncan, 2000; Griffin &

Read, 2012; Mengo & Black, 2015). Data collected through a sexual-assault education and prevention course provided to more than 530,000 college students on more than 400 campuses across the United States reveal that, among female transfer students, the rate of victimization is about 50% higher than those in the aggregate (EverFi, 2015); this evidence speaks to the likelihood among survivors of transferring out of the institution they are attending following an experience of sexual violence.

### **Statement of the Research Problem and Research Question**

Research suggests that students' experience of an act of sexual violence while in college is associated with lower grade point average (GPA) and increased likelihood of withdrawing from the university (Baker et al., 2016; Jordan et al., 2014; Mengo & Black, 2015). Jordan et al. (2014) found that both female students who were sexually assaulted prior to college and those assaulted during their first semester had lower GPAs after their first semester in college than did women without a sexual assault experience. Similarly, Mengo and Black (2015) found that students who experienced physical/verbal abuse by an intimate partner and those who experienced an incident of sexual violence had lower GPAs following the incident when compared to their GPAs prior to the incident of violence. The students who experienced an incident of sexual violence also were more likely to leave their university than the students who experienced an incident of physical/verbal abuse by an intimate partner (Mengo & Black, 2015). Mengo and Black (2015) also found that first-year students who experienced physical/verbal abuse by a partner or an incident of sexual violence were more likely to leave their university than students at other academic levels who experienced an incident of physical/verbal abuse by a partner or an incident of sexual violence. The negative impact of sexual violence on academic performance and persistence has been documented in additional studies, as well (Baker et al.,

2016; Banyard, Demers, Cohn, Edwards, Moynihan, Walsh, & Ward, 2017; Patterson Silver Wolf et al., 2016).

Existing studies that have examined the relationship between sexual violence and academic performance have utilized quantitative research methods to measure associations between variables. These studies provide evidence that sexual violence is associated with poorer academic performance and increased likelihood of leaving the institution; however, as Draucker, Martsof, Ross, Cook, Stidham, and Mweemba (2009) stated, associations between variables “do not fully capture the dynamic and complex processes” that occur for individuals following an incident of sexual violence (p. 368). In the current study, interviews were utilized as the method of data collection to capture subtle features that participants may otherwise not share spontaneously in response to questions or instructions on a survey (Wertz, 2005). Creswell (2013) has recommended the use of qualitative research methods to “follow up” on the findings of quantitative studies and allow for a more “complex, detailed understanding” of the topic being examined.

The current study was the first to interview college student survivors of sexual violence about their academic experience following an incident of sexual violence. The primary research question in this study was “How do college student survivors of sexual violence describe their academic experiences following an incident of sexual violence?” Interview data was analyzed using the descriptive phenomenological, psychological method developed by Amedeo Giorgi (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003) and described in detail in Chapter 3.

### **Definition of Terms**

Definitions of the following terms are provided to ensure a common understanding of their use throughout discussion of the study:

*Academic experience:* A broad term that encompasses all aspects of a student's academic journey from enrollment through graduation. A student's overall academic experience includes any aspect of the student's college experience that directly or indirectly relates to academics. This can include class attendance; participation in class; studying, reading, and writing; talking with professors and classmates; performance on assignments, presentations, group projects, and exams; selecting classes; and choosing a major.

*Academic outcomes:* Any number of outcomes directly related to a student's academic performance.

*Academic performance:* A student's academic achievements, most often measured using the student's grade point average (GPA).

*Academic persistence:* Remaining in school through graduation.

*Alcohol/drug-facilitated sexual violence:* Acts committed when the victim is unable to consent due to intoxication from voluntary or involuntary use of alcohol or drugs (Basile, Smith, Breiding, Black, & Mahendra, 2014).

*Forced sexual violence:* Acts committed through the use of physical force or threats to bring physical harm to or against the victim, such as pinning the victim's arms, using body weight to prevent movement or escape, or the use of a weapon (Basile et al., 2014).

*Rape:* Term most often used to describe nonconsensual sexual intercourse, or sexual penetration; a form of sexual assault. Because the terms *sexual assault* and *rape* are legal terms, their definitions vary from state to state, depending upon the legal definition of the crime in that state (RAINN, 2019).

*Sexual assault:* Sexual contact or behavior that occurs without the explicit consent of the victim. Sexual assault encompasses a wide variety of behaviors ranging from nonconsensual sexual contact to nonconsensual sexual intercourse (RAINN, 2019).

*Sexual violence:* An all-encompassing, nonlegal term that refers to crimes such as sexual assault, rape, and sexual abuse (RAINN, 2019). According to Basile et al. (2014), sexual violence is a sexual act that is committed or attempted by another person without freely given consent of the victim, or against someone who is unable to consent or refuse. Sexual violence includes forced or alcohol/drug-facilitated penetration of a victim; forced or alcohol/drug-facilitated incidents in which the victim was made to penetrate a perpetrator or someone else; nonphysical, pressured, unwanted penetration (i.e., use of verbal pressure or intimidation); intentional sexual touching; or noncontact acts of a sexual nature (i.e., verbal sexual harassment, unwanted exposure to pornography, or unwanted filming of sex acts). Sexual violence can also occur when a perpetrator forces or coerces a victim to engage in sexual acts with a third party (Basile et al., 2014).

*Victim and survivor:* *Victim* most often refers to someone who has recently been affected by sexual violence. *Survivor* is most often used in reference to an individual who has gone through the recovery process (RAINN, 2019). Regarding the use of these terms when referring to an individual who experienced sexual violence, both terms are applicable; in practice, it is best to be respectful and ask which term the individual prefers.

### **Significance of the Study**

A college education allows students to achieve success in their chosen career path and establish long-term economic security (Hill & Silva, 2005). College students who are survivors of sexual violence suffer negative impacts on their education that result in lower GPAs and

increased likelihood of their withdrawing from the institution where the incident occurred (Baker et al., 2016; Jordan et al., 2014; Mengo & Black, 2015). College students who have lower GPAs or transfer out of their institution may not be admitted to certain majors or preprofessional programs, which can make them less confident in their ability to obtain a college degree (Hill & Silva, 2005).

To mitigate the effects of sexual violence on academic performance and allow students to reach their full academic potential, institutions need to provide students with sexual-violence resources that effectively support their academic needs. Offering this type of support begins with understanding the psychological mechanisms through which academic performance is impacted by an incident of sexual violence. As the first study to ask students to share their academic experiences following an incident of sexual violence, this research provides the basis for a deeper understanding of the impact of sexual violence on the academic experiences of college students and encourages the development of resources to effectively support college student survivors of sexual violence.

### **Researcher's Perspective**

As a higher-education administrator for more than 15 years, I have worked as a counselor, victim advocate, support person for students accused of sexual violence, conduct officer, Title IX investigator, and Title IX Coordinator, in addition to other roles within Student Affairs. These various roles have allowed me to gain an in depth understanding of the academic experiences of college student survivors of sexual violence. The current study allows others in the field of higher education to gain a better understanding of the academic experiences of college student survivors, which can inform their efforts to support student survivors on their campuses.

## **CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW**

Survivors of sexual violence experience an array of harmful physical and psychological consequences resulting from their victimization (CDC/NCIPC/DVP, 2019). College student survivors of sexual violence suffer these consequences in addition to the challenges they face as students. The research literature examining the impact of sexual violence on academic outcomes of college students is limited (Baker et al., 2016), and the few studies that do exist are quantitative in nature. The following sections provide an overview of the studies relative to the prevalence and consequences of sexual violence, and also research about the impact sexual violence can have on college students' academic experiences. The chapter concludes with a detailed description of the existing research literature on the relationship between sexual violence and academic performance for college student survivors of sexual violence.

### **Prevalence of Sexual Violence**

The CDC developed the National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS) to collect the most current and comprehensive national- and state-level data on intimate-partner violence, sexual violence, and stalking victimization (CDC/NCIPC/DVP, 2019). The most recent administration of the NISVS was conducted in 50 states and the District of Columbia from January 2011 to December 2011 using a national, random-digit-dial, telephone survey of English- and Spanish-speaking US adults age 18 and older (Breiding et al., 2014). Data was gathered on experiences of sexual violence, stalking, and intimate-partner violence (Breiding et al., 2014). Through the use of a dual-frame sampling strategy that included both landlines and cellular phones, a total of 12,727 interviews were completed (6,879 females, 5,848 males) (Breiding et al., 2014).

Results from the 2011 NSVS indicated that 19.3% of women and 1.7% of men experienced an attempted or completed rape, defined as penetrating a victim by use of force or through alcohol/drug facilitation, in their lifetime (Breiding et al., 2014). Approximately 6.7% of men reported that they were made to penetrate someone else during their lifetime. Additionally, 27.3% of women and approximately 10.8% of men reported experiencing some form of unwanted sexual contact in their lifetime (Breiding et al., 2014). Among female survivors of completed rape, an estimated 78.7% were first raped prior to age 25 (40.4% prior to age 18). Among male survivors who were made to penetrate a perpetrator, an estimated 71.0% were victimized prior to age 25 (21.3% prior to age 18).

Many researchers and practitioners in the field of sexual violence believe that existing national statistics underestimate the number of survivors of sexual violence (Breiding et al., 2014). The terms *unacknowledged rape* or *unacknowledged sexual assault* refer to instances in which an individual denies having been raped or sexually assaulted when asked directly, yet that person has experienced an incident that meets the behavioral definition of rape or sexual assault.

Wilson and Miller (2016) conducted a meta-analysis of the prevalence of unacknowledged rape across 28 studies (30 independent samples) containing 5,917 female rape survivors. Of the 5,917 female rape survivors, more than half (60.4%) did not acknowledge that they had been raped, despite reporting that they had experienced an incident that could be defined as rape. For example, in one study, respondents answered “yes” to having experienced “forced, nonconsensual sexual intercourse,” but “no” to the question, “Have you ever been raped?” The prevalence of unacknowledged rape and unacknowledged sexual assault suggests that some of the empirical evidence related to rape may not represent all rape survivors. In



particular, information collected using nonbehavioral measures of victimization may exclude more than half the population of rape survivors (Wilson & Miller, 2016).

As an example, women are more likely to label their situation as rape when the assailant is someone other than their boyfriend, who either used force to obtain intercourse or started to perform sexual acts while they were asleep, waking them up (Kahn, 2004). Cleere and Lynn (2013) examined unacknowledged sexual assault (defined as sexual contact, sexual coercion, attempted rape, and rape), and had similar findings. Individuals who acknowledged the experience as a sexual assault reported clearer refusal, more forceful assault, and more intense resistance against their attacker. Victims who did not acknowledge what happened to them as a sexual assault were more likely to endorse a prior romantic relationship with the attacker and a more recent assault (Cleere & Lynn, 2013).

Likewise, many sexual-assault survivors do not label their experience as rape but rather as “bad sex” or “miscommunication” (Wilson & Miller, 2016). Traumatized individuals may blame themselves for what happened to them and attribute their feelings of depression and anxiety to the self-blame (Janoff-Bulman, 1992). If the incident is not perceived or acknowledged as a sexual assault by the victim, it is not likely to be reported to authorities (Hertzog & Yeilding, 2009). Further, when victims do not conceptualize what happened to them as a possible sexual assault, they do not believe that related advocacy and support resources apply to their situation (DeLoveh & Cattaneo, 2017). Survivors who label their experience as a sexual assault early on tend to seek formal help more quickly (DeLoveh & Cattaneo, 2017). The impact of whether or not survivors acknowledge what happened to them as a sexual assault is difficult to determine because acknowledgement status is closely linked to other factors that

better account for adjustment, such as the level of violence involved in the assault (Wilson & Miller, 2016).

In summary, approximately 75% of incidents of sexual violence for both women and men occur prior to age 25 (Breiding et al., 2014). According to the CDC, 19.3% of women and 1.7% of men experience rape or attempted rape (Breiding et al., 2014). Many experts believe these numbers underestimate the number of survivors of sexual violence (Breiding et al., 2014). Depending on the nature and characteristics of the incident of sexual violence, survivors may not acknowledge what happened to them as rape or sexual assault (Wilson & Miller, 2016). Survivors who report clearer refusal, more forceful assault, and more intense resistance against their attacker are more likely to acknowledge what happened as a sexual assault (Cleere & Lynn, 2013). Survivors who were assaulted by a romantic partner and survivors who were assaulted more recently are less likely to acknowledge that what happened to them was sexual assault (Cleere & Lynn, 2013). Acknowledgement of the incident as rape or sexual assault influences the decision to seek help, report the incident to authorities, or both (DeLoveh & Cattaneo, 2017).

### **Consequences of Sexual Violence**

Some of the physical consequences of sexual violence include rape-induced pregnancy, gynecological complications, sexually transmitted infections, genital injuries, chronic pain, and gastrointestinal disorders (CDC/NCIPC/DVP, 2019). Some of the immediate and chronic psychological consequences of sexual violence include shock, fear, confusion, denial, anxiety, shame or guilt, sleep disturbances, depression, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and generalized anxiety (CDC/NCIPC/DVP, 2019). There are also social impacts of sexual violence, such as strained relationships with family, friends, and intimate partners; less frequent contact

with friends and relatives; and isolation or ostracism from family or friend groups (CDC/NCIPC/DVP, 2019).

### **Shattering of Assumptions and Sense of Safety**

Traumas, including sexual violence, are events that are understood as happening to a person and are conceptualized and interpreted in a manner that suggests the person, or self, was affected or changed in some way by the respective events (Lilgendahl, McLean, & Mansfield, 2013). Experiencing sexual violence can “shatter” or violate a survivor’s basic assumptions about the world and cause significant distress (Janoff-Bulman, 1992). Following a sexual assault, the survivor may no longer believe that people are good and that the world is a safe place (Janoff-Bulman, 1992).

Survivors begin to question assumptions of being worthy and deserving of good fortune (Cason, Resick, & Weaver, 2002; Janoff-Bulman, 1992), and they may start to doubt the fairness or controllability of the world (Baumeister, 1991). A sense of uncertainty about the purpose of one’s life arises when long-held assumptions are shattered (Baumeister, 1991). Survivors may attempt to recreate a sense of security by constricting their normal activities, staying at home, and avoiding situations that resemble the setting of their assault (Draucker et al., 2009).

However, to fully understand the consequences of sexual violence, it is important to acknowledge that the same objective event, witnessing or experiencing sexual violence, can have different subjective effects (Allen, 2005). It is possible to be exposed to an objectively threatening event yet subjectively experience it as nonthreatening. Likewise, one person may appraise a situation as being far worse than it appears to be to another person (Allen, 2005). Sexual assault is not an objective event that carries a predetermined meaning and predictable response (McCann & Pearlman, 1992). Rather, sexual assault is an event that can be understood

only within the context of the survivor's framework of meaning (McCann & Pearlman, 1992). Sexual assault is traumatic only to the extent that the individual perceives the event to be traumatic (McCann & Pearlman, 1992). As stated by Allen (2005), "The subjective experience of the objective events constitutes the trauma" (p. 41).

Tummala-Narra, Kallivayalil, Singer, and Andreini (2012) utilized a grounded-theory approach to conduct a qualitative inquiry (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) that examined the dynamic nature of relational experiences of survivors of *complex trauma*. Complex trauma exists when individuals have endured multiple traumatic events in their lifetimes (Herman, 1992). The 21 participants in the study were engaged in individual or group psychotherapy treatment at an adult outpatient clinic. Of the 21 participants, 18 were female, 3 were male, and all were between the ages of 24 and 62. Nineteen participants self-identified as White, 1 as Asian American, and 1 as African American. All but two participants endorsed multiple traumas. Participants reported histories of child sexual abuse ( $n = 13$ ), child physical abuse ( $n = 15$ ), adult sexual assault ( $n = 11$ ), domestic violence ( $n = 7$ ), and neglect ( $n = 4$ ). The three broad domains that emerged for participants were (a) revisiting issues of safety, (b) forming new ways of relating, and (c) experiencing a changing sense of self. Participants continued to struggle with their internal sense of fear and a sense that the world is a dangerous place despite the fact that they were no longer in actively unsafe situations (Tummala-Narra et al., 2012).

### **Posttraumatic Stress**

Coping with trauma requires that a survivor think about and process the traumatic event while gaining control over both the painful emotions associated with the traumatic event and the self-protective defenses (such as avoidance) that the survivor used to protect against the painful emotions (Allen, 2005). A sense of instability arises when the survivor oscillates back and forth

between overwhelming emotion and attempts to avoid thinking about the event altogether (Allen, 2005). The intrusion of the past event into one's present state of being occurs through distressing memories, flashbacks, and nightmares (Allen, 2005). The combination of intrusive and avoidant symptoms constitutes the essence of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD; Allen, 2005). Healing involves making the painful and traumatic memories emotionally bearable (Allen, 2005).

**Formal recognition of PTSD.** The recognition of PTSD as a formal diagnosis in 1980 was closely related to the recognition of effects of trauma in the veterans of the Vietnam War (van der Kolk, McFarlane, & Weisaeth, 1996). According to van der Kolk et al. (1996), PTSD is understood as “the result of a complex interrelationship among psychological, biological, and social processes—one that varies, depending on the maturational level of the survivor, as well as the length of time for which the person was exposed to the trauma” (p. xi). After exposure to a traumatic event, involuntary intrusive memories serve the function of modifying the emotions associated with the trauma (van der Kolk et al., 1996). With the passage of time, however, some people are unable to integrate the experience, so they start organizing their lives around the trauma (van der Kolk et al., 1996). Over time, trauma-related information is either integrated into memory as an unfortunate event that occurred in the past, or the emotions and sensations related to the event begin leading a life of their own within the survivor, and long-term psychological problems ensue (van der Kolk et al., 1996).

It is the persistence of intrusive distressing recollections, not the actual experience of the trauma, that drives the biological and psychological dimensions of PTSD (van der Kolk et al., 1996). As previously noted, the critical element that makes an event traumatic is the subjective assessment of the trauma by the survivor (Allen, 2005). Koss, Figueredo, and Prince (2002)

found that personal characteristics of a woman who was raped had more influence on her recovery process than the characteristics of the rape. These results suggest caution against making assumptions that certain types of rape are more devastating than other types, and that two people who experience a similar trauma will be affected in the same manner (Koss et al., 2002). For each survivor of sexual violence, the person's gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and history of previous victimization can influence the way in which the individual experiences the traumatic event and may result in a more or less intricate pattern of harm and recovery (Wasco, 2003).

**Prevalence of PTSD.** Breslau, Troost, Bohnert, and Luo (2013) utilized data from the National Epidemiologic Survey on Alcohol and Related Conditions (NESARC) to study the influence of predispositions on PTSD following an extreme event. Prevalence of PTSD was assessed during the second wave of the study in a community sample of 34,653 respondents representing the civilian, noninstitutionalized population of the United States. Of the 34,653 respondents, the vast majority reported experiencing traumatic events; yet only a small minority (<10%) developed PTSD (Breslau et al., 2013). In this community sample, 9% of respondents had experienced sexual assault, 17% severe accidents, 16% disaster, and 42% unexpected death of someone close. In contrast, the probability of developing PTSD associated with sexual assault was 40%, markedly higher than the probability of developing PTSD following other types of traumatic events (e.g., severe accident, 10%; natural disaster, 5%; unexpected death, 9%). For all of these events, PTSD was more common for females than for males (Breslau et al., 2013). Wasco (2003) suggested that the experience of sexual violence may be particularly traumatic for females in a gendered society that maintains “victim-blaming attitudes, inadequate treatment from social systems, and social reactions that further the harm done to women by rape” (p. 318).

Another study of 119 women who self-identified as having experienced sexual assault within the previous month was conducted to identify distinct trajectories of PTSD symptomatology during the early aftermath of sexual assault (Steenkamp, Dickstein, Salters Pedneault, Hofmann, & Litz, 2012). The researchers utilized Internet-based recruitment and data collection to recruit a diverse sample of participants. Participants completed surveys on four occasions within 1, 2, 3, and 4 months after the assault. The number of participants who responded at all four assessment points was 65 (55%); at three assessment points, 33 (28%); at two assessment points, 10 (8%); and at one assessment point, 11 (9%). Participants' mean age was 33 years ( $SD = 10.55$ ; range, 18–65 years), and the mean number of days since the sexual assault was 18 ( $SD = 5.54$ ). At one month following the sexual assault, 78% of participants had probable PTSD. The rate of probable PTSD at Month 2 was 67%, at Month 3 was 48%, and at Month 4 was 41%. These results suggest that most survivors of sexual assault experience symptoms of PTSD immediately following the assault, and that most survivors also experience a decline in symptoms over time (Steenkamp et al., 2012).

In summary, survivors of sexual violence experience negative physical consequences such as sexually transmitted infections and rape-induced pregnancy, and negative psychological consequences such as PTSD, depression, and generalized anxiety (CDC/NCIPC/DVP, 2019). Social impacts of sexual violence include strained relationships with family, friends, and intimate partners (CDC/NCIPC/DVP, 2019). Survivors of sexual violence struggle with an internal sense of fear and a sense that the world is a dangerous place despite their no longer being in actively unsafe situations (Tummala-Narra et al., 2012). For each survivor of sexual violence, the person's gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and history of previous victimization can influence the way in which the person experiences the traumatic event, and so can result in a

more or less intricate pattern of harm and recovery (Wasco, 2003). The impact of sexual violence can be understood only within the context of the survivor's framework of meaning (McCann & Pearlman, 1992).

### **Sexual Violence and College Students**

For college student survivors of sexual violence, the negative consequences following the incident of violence are compounded by challenges unique to the university setting. Attempts to avoid the individual who committed the violent act can result in survivors avoiding academic and social activities that are an integral part of a college education (Carr, 2005). The survivors may have the same classes as the accused individual, live in the same dorm, and share the same friend groups. They often attend the same social events, and with the open inclusive nature of a campus community, it can be hard to modify their day-to-day environment without drawing attention to the changes (Carr, 2005). College life can become so stressful for survivors that they develop clinical symptoms of trauma, anxiety, depression, or other mental and physical health problems (Carr, 2005; CDC/NCIPC/DVP, 2019; McCauley & Casler, 2015).

Survivors of campus violence, including sexual violence, often leave school by either dropping out or taking a leave of absence to move back home to recover, regroup, or transfer to a different school (Baker et al., 2016). Data collected through a sexual-assault education and prevention course provided to more than 530,000 college students on more than 400 campuses across the United States confirms that many survivors of sexual violence transfer out of the institution where they were victimized (EverFi, 2015). If survivors remain in school, they can have problems concentrating, studying, and attending classes (Carr, 2005), which in turn results in lower semester and final-term GPAs (Baker et al., 2016).



## **Prevalence of Sexual Violence in College**

It is a commonly cited statistic that “1 in 5” female college students has experienced sexual assault (Krebs et al., 2016). The Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) of the US Department of Justice (DOJ) is the principal federal agency responsible for measuring crime, criminal victimization, criminal offenders, victims of crime, correlates of crime, and the operation of criminal and civil justice systems at the federal, state, tribal, and local levels. In August 2014, the US Office on Violence Against Women (OVW) funded the BJS to develop and test a pilot campus-climate survey to be used by schools or researchers to measure rape and sexual violence in self-report surveys. More than 23,000 undergraduate students (approximately 15,000 females and 8,000 males) completed the pilot surveys at nine institutions of higher education. The participating schools vary in terms of size, public vs. private status, 2-year vs. 4-year status, and region of the country. The study defined sexual assault as including both rape (nonconsensual sexual intercourse) and sexual battery (forced kissing, touching, grabbing or fondling) and found that 21% of female undergraduates and 7% of male undergraduates reported being sexually assaulted while they were in college (Krebs et al., 2016).

In a study published in the Journal of American College Health (JACH) in 2017, researchers surveyed 7,603 incoming, first-year college students at Virginia Commonwealth University (61.1% female, 38.9% male; mean age 18.53 years,  $SD = .065$ ) and found that 29.3% of women and 10.9% of men reported experiencing at least one sexual assault or other unwanted or uncomfortable sexual experience, or both, prior to college (Conley, Overstreet, Hawn, Kendler, Dick, & Amstadter, 2017). After entering college, 23.0% of women and 11.6% of men reported experiencing at least one sexual assault, other unwanted or uncomfortable sexual experience, or both. Among both men and women, victimization prior to college was related to a

greater risk of victimization while in college, and social support was a protective factor (Conley et al., 2017).

A study of 524 4-year or higher college and university campuses across the United States examined institutional factors that may influence the likelihood of sexual assault occurring (Stotzer & MacCartney, 2015). Results suggested that the following campus features are most closely associated with increased reports of sexual assault: type of athletic program, number of students who live on campus, and the institution's alcohol policy (Stotzer & MacCartney, 2015). The influence of athletics may be the result of parties and tailgating associated with athletic events (Stotzer & MacCartney, 2015). Living on campus brings people closer together in general, thus increasing chances for all interactions, both positive and negative (Stotzer & MacCartney, 2015). Alcohol use is associated with sexual assault such that more permissive alcohol policies likely account for this finding (Stotzer & MacCartney, 2015).

### **Alcohol and Other Drugs**

Among college student populations, women are at particular risk for being sexually assaulted while incapacitated because of the effects of drugs, alcohol, or both (Krebs, Lindquist, Warner, Fisher, & Martin, 2009). Sexual violence following alcohol or drug consumption is much more common than sexual violence accomplished through the use of force (i.e., use of a weapon, or physical force) among female college students (Lawyer, Resnick, Bakanic, Burkett, & Kilpatrick, 2010). After women enter college, their risk for alcohol/drug-facilitated sexual violence increases, whereas risk for forcible sexual violence decreases (Krebs et al., 2009). Studies suggest that, in more than 50% of acquaintance and date-rape incidents, the victim, the perpetrator, or both had consumed alcohol (Abbey, 2002; Marx, Nichols-Anderson, Messman-Moore, Miranda, & Porter, 2000).

Additionally, women who are victimized while under the influence of alcohol or other drugs are more likely to blame themselves for the incident and less likely to acknowledge their experience as an assault (Hertzog & Yeilding, 2009). If the incident is not perceived or acknowledged as a sexual assault by the victim, it is not likely to be reported to authorities (Hertzog & Yeilding, 2009). Further, when victims do not conceptualize what happened to them as a possible sexual assault, they do not believe that related advocacy and support resources apply to their situation (DeLoveh & Cattaneo, 2017).

In summary, approximately 21% of female undergraduates and 7% of male undergraduates report being sexually assaulted while in college (Krebs et al., 2016). Female college students are at particular risk for being sexually assaulted while incapacitated due to the effects of drugs, alcohol, or both (Krebs et al., 2009). For all college students, challenges unique to the university setting compound the negative consequences of sexual violence. Attempts to avoid the individual who committed the assault can cause significant disruption to the students' academic and social activities and result in their departure from the university (Carr, 2005).

### **Support for College Student Survivors of Sexual Violence**

Individuals who have experienced a traumatic event often need the support of others to allow themselves to remember and talk about the trauma (Joseph & Linley, 2008). Intimate dialogue allows for enhanced emotional connectedness and a potential for new bonds with acquaintances and others who share their own stories of victimization (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Although sharing how one truly feels tends to have a calming effect on a person (Pennebaker & Seagal, 1999; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004), interactions with others, such as professional counselors or close friends, can influence the individual's emotional states, coping

skills, and meaning attributed to an event, thus impeding or promoting the individual's processing of and healing from the traumatic event (Joseph & Linley, 2008).

DeLoveh and Cattaneo (2017) used grounded theory to explore how college student survivors of sexual assault make decisions about seeking help. In-depth interviews were conducted with 14 (13 female, 1 male) college student survivors of sexual assault ranging in age from 19 to 25 ( $M = 21.29$ ). One was a freshman, two were sophomores, four were juniors, four were seniors, and three were graduate students. The resulting model was titled "Deciding Where to Turn" and resulted in one of four choices: (a) cope on my own, (b) seek support from friends/family, (c) seek support from formal resources, or (d) use covert help-seeking in which needs are met without disclosing the assault. To decide whether they needed help, participants assessed three types of impact: physical, psychological, and social (DeLoveh & Cattaneo, 2017). Physical impacts included concerns around sexually transmitted infections and pregnancy. Psychological impacts were primarily related to symptoms of depression and PTSD, and included withdrawing from others, struggling with coursework, avoiding physical and emotional reminders of the incident, having difficulty sleeping, and experiencing anger (DeLoveh & Cattaneo, 2017). The social impacts were often related to the psychological impacts and included impacts on relationships, both current and future, such as temporarily withdrawing from friends; ceasing associations with friends; and experiencing an enduring hesitancy to trust friends (DeLoveh & Cattaneo, 2017). In this sample of 14 participants, 10 utilized a formal support resource and 13 disclosed the incident to at least one informal resource (DeLoveh & Cattaneo, 2017).

## Reactions to Disclosure

Social reactions, both positive and negative, can play an important role in how survivors conceptualize and respond to their sexual-assault experience (Orchowski & Gidycz, 2015).

Individuals who perceived others to be helpful following an experience of sexual violence reported less distress and more positive life changes (Frazier, Tashiro, Berman, Steger, & Long, 2004), while those who perceived social reactions to be negative experienced deleterious effects on healing (Littleton & Bretkopf, 2006).

In research that reflects this assessment, Orchowski and Gidycz (2015) utilized a prospective design to examine the relationship between social reactions to disclosure of sexual victimization and subsequent adjustment for college women. Participants were 374 undergraduate women living in first-year residence halls at a medium-size, Midwestern university. The participants had completed surveys for a larger study that examined the effectiveness of a sexual-assault prevention program in a primarily freshman residence hall (Gidycz, Orchowski, & Berkowitz, 2011; Gidycz, Orchowski, Probst, Edwards, Murphy, & Lansill, 2015). The majority of the 374 participants were 18 or 19 years old ( $n = 367$ , 98.1%), heterosexual ( $n = 367$ , 98.7%) and identified as nonmarried ( $n = 369$ , 98.7%). Participants predominantly self-identified as Caucasian ( $n = 353$ , 94.0%), and also as African American ( $n = 11$ , 2.9%), Asian American ( $n = 1$ , 0.3%), Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander ( $n = 3$ , 0.8%), and other ( $n = 5$ , 1.3%). Participants completed questionnaires at baseline (100%), in a 4-month follow-up, and in a 7-month follow-up ( $n = 297$ , 79.4%). At baseline, 35.8% ( $n = 134$ ) of women reported experiencing an unwanted sexual experience (sexual contact, sexual coercion, attempted or completed rape) since the age of 14. At the 4-month follow-up, 15% ( $n = 45$ ) of the 297 women had experienced sexual victimization during the 4-month period (Orchowski &

Gidycz, 2015). Of these 45 participants, 17.8% ( $n = 8$ ) reported completed rape. Unwanted sexual contact, sexual coercion, or attempted rape was reported by 82.2% ( $n = 37$ ). Twenty-four (53.3%) women told someone about the assault. Most disclosed to a peer ( $n = 22$ , 91.7%), and approximately 33% ( $n = 8$ ) confided only in one person. None of the women disclosed to a formal support provider such as the police or a counselor. The length of time from the experience until they disclosed their victimization ranged from immediately after the assault (20.8%,  $n = 5$ ), to within a week (8.3%,  $n = 2$ ), to 2 weeks following the assault (4.2%,  $n = 1$ ), to approximately 90 days after the assault (4.2%,  $n = 1$ ). Negative social reactions to the disclosures were associated with feelings of inadequacy, self-deprecation, or uneasiness, hostility, phobic anxiety (i.e., specific fears), and paranoia. Positive social reactions were not associated with any subsequent psychological symptoms (Orchowski & Gidycz, 2015).

### **Formal vs. Informal Support**

Sexual assault is known to be underreported to formal responders such as law enforcement (Breiding et al., 2014), so the responses of informal support networks to disclosures of sexual violence can play a key role in the recovery and healing of victims. In a sample of 63 female college student survivors of sexual violence (Caucasian,  $n = 53$ , 80.3%; African American,  $n = 3$ , 4.5%; Hispanic,  $n = 4$ , 6.1%; Native American,  $n = 4$ , 6.1%; Asian,  $n = 1$ , 1.5%; Other,  $n = 1$ , 1.5%) at a large Midwestern university, Borja, Callahan, and Long (2006) found that informal negative reactions to disclosures of sexual violence were associated with posttraumatic distress.

Dworkin, Pittenger, and Allen (2016) conducted a mixed-methods study to examine whom, among the peer social networks of college student survivors of sexual violence, survivors contacted for help following an incident of sexual violence, and how the survivors described

these decisions. Participants were recruited from an introductory psychology course and had to be 18 years of age or older. Of the 790 students who completed the survey, 206 endorsed an experience of sexual assault since age 14 (behavior ranged from unwanted sexual contact to completed rape) and were included in the study. Participants were mostly women (82.66%), heterosexual (94.22%), and with a mean age of 19.72 ( $SD = 1.32$ ).

Data collected via surveys and interviews revealed that survivors tended to disclose to a smaller proportion of their social networks when many network members had relationships with each other (Dworkin et al., 2016). This outcome was mainly because of concerns that the information would be shared more broadly than the survivors desired. The role of the perpetrators in the social network also impacted disclosures. In some cases, disclosure was withheld in an effort not to disrupt friendships others had with those close to the perpetrators. In other cases, disclosures were made because those close to the perpetrators were perceived as better able to understand the situation. In general, survivors were more likely to disclose their victimization to people they spoke with more often—to women, and to romantic partners and friends, rather than to family members (Dworkin et al., 2016).

Specifically, Holland and Cortina (2017) examined the reasons college student survivors of sexual violence ( $N = 840$ ) at a large Midwestern university did not access formal campus-support options available through the Title IX Office, the Sexual Assault Center (SAC), and housing staff. The majority of participants were White (71.8%,  $n = 204$ ). The rest identified as Asian American (11.3%,  $n = 32$ ), multiracial (8.1%,  $n = 23$ ), African American/Black (5.3%,  $n = 15$ ), Middle Eastern (2.1%,  $n = 6$ ), Latina (0.7%,  $n = 2$ ), or another race/ethnicity (0.7%,  $n = 2$ ). Most identified as heterosexual (77.5%,  $n = 220$ ), while others identified as mostly heterosexual (17.3%,  $n = 49$ ), bisexual (3.2%,  $n = 9$ ), gay or lesbian (0.8%,  $n = 2$ ), or another sexual identity

(e.g., queer; 1.4%,  $n = 4$ ). Two-thirds of participants were first-year students (68.9%,  $n = 195$ ), and the rest were in their second year (26.9%,  $n = 76$ ), third year (2.1%,  $n = 6$ ), fourth year (1.1%,  $n = 3$ ), or fifth year and above (1.1%,  $n = 3$ ). The mean age of participants was 18.6 years (range, 18–22 years). Of the total sample, 33.8% ( $n = 284$ ) had experienced at least one form of assault as a student: unwanted sexual contact 48.9% ( $n = 139$ ); attempted oral, anal, or vaginal penetration 26.8% ( $n = 76$ ); or completed oral, anal, or vaginal penetration 24.3% ( $n = 69$ ). Of these 284, only 16 survivors (5.6%) disclosed their assault to any of the three campus supports. Five reported the incident to the university, 11 sought help at the SAC, and 9 told someone who worked for university housing.

The most frequent reason given for not filing a report about a sexual assault was perceiving the sexual assault as not severe enough to warrant reporting it (Holland & Cortina, 2017). Participants expressed annoyance, anger, or fear, but still believed that sexual assault is an inevitable part of campus culture (Holland & Cortina, 2017). Other reasons for not accessing formal support services were related to logistical issues such as lack of time and knowledge, feelings of self-blame, or beliefs that made it seem unacceptable to use campus supports for fear of disrupting a friend group or of anticipating other personal consequences (Holland & Cortina, 2017). Alternative coping methods included utilizing informal sources of support or ignoring or denying the assault (Holland & Cortina, 2017).

### **Institutional Resources**

Eisenberg et al. (2016) examined data from the College Student Health Survey (CSHS) conducted annually by the University of Minnesota's health service to examine associations between the presence of resources that address sexual violence and mental health for women who have experienced sexual violence. Examples of resources included a sexual-violence



hotline or 24-hour contact, presence of paid staff to address sexual-violence issues, a safe-walk or escort service, activities or events to raise awareness of sexual-violence issues, support groups or counseling for survivors, and pamphlets or posters around campus. The sample consisted of 495 female college students (mean age = 22.7 years) who experienced sexual assault.

Participants identified as White (n = 396, 80.0%), African American (n = 25, 5.1%), Hispanic (n = 12, 2.4%), Asian/Pacific Islander (n = 27, 5.5%), Native American (n = 16, 3.2%), and Other race/ethnicity (n = 19, 3.8%).

After adjusting for relevant personality characteristics of participants, the presence of sexual-violence resources on college campuses was positively associated with mental health for female survivors of sexual assault (Eisenberg et al., 2016). Students at colleges with fewer sexual-violence resources had a greater number of days when their health interfered with daily activities such as studying or attending classes (Eisenberg et al., 2016). The presence of resources on campus was found to be beneficial to women's mental health regardless of the type of sexual violence experienced (i.e., forced sexual touching without intercourse and forced sexual intercourse; Eisenberg et al., 2016).

In summary, when determining whether or not to seek help following an incident of sexual violence, college students assess the physical, psychological, and social impact of their victimization (DeLoveh & Cattaneo, 2017). Survivors may choose to cope on their own, seek help from family and friends (informal support), seek help from formal support resources (counseling, Title IX Office, etc.), or seek support without disclosing the incident of sexual violence (DeLoveh & Cattaneo, 2017). Reasons for not accessing formal resources include a belief that sexual assault is an inevitable part of campus culture and logistical issues such as lack of time (Holland & Cortina, 2017). Among peer social networks, college students are less likely

to disclose their victimization to family members and more likely to disclose to people they speak with often, to women, and to romantic partners (Dworkin et al., 2016). For college student survivors of sexual violence, interactions with others, such as professional counselors or close friends, can influence emotional states, coping skills, and the meaning attributed to the sexual assault; thus, these options can promote or impede the survivor's ability to process and heal from the incident of sexual violence (Joseph & Linley, 2008). Institutional resources dedicated to survivors of sexual violence are positively associated with mental health for female college student survivors of sexual violence (Eisenberg et al., 2016). Students at institutions with fewer resources reported a greater number of days when their health interfered with their daily activities (Eisenberg et al., 2016).

### **College Students, Sexual Violence, and Academic Outcomes**

Somatic symptoms for survivors of sexual violence can include difficulty concentrating, taking longer to think, restlessness, fatigue, and insomnia (Ulirsch et al., 2014), all of which negatively impact the survivors' abilities to study and focus in class. Given the high prevalence of sexual violence in individuals under the age of 25, and the harmful psychological consequences of sexual violence, including PTSD, a fuller understanding of the impact of sexual violence on the academic performance of college students is warranted. Following is a review of existing research studies examining sexual violence and academic outcomes among college students. Information pertaining to gender, race, ethnicity, and other personal characteristics of college student survivors of sexual violence is noted where provided by the authors of the study.

### **Research Studies on Sexual Violence and Academic Outcomes**

Several studies have explored the relationship between sexual violence and academic outcomes. Hill and Silva (2005) examined the academic impact of sexual harassment in a

sample of 2,036 (1,096 female, 940 male) college students (58% White, 17% Black/African American, 16% Hispanic, 3% Asian or Pacific Islander, 3% Mixed racial background, 3% other or declined to answer) who experienced sexual harassment. Data were weighted to reflect the US population ages 18 to 24 who, according to demographic variables, were college students. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) students were more likely than heterosexual students to be harassed by peers (92% vs. 78%), teachers (13% vs. 7%), and school employees (11% vs. 5%). For sexual harassment involving physical contact, there were no statistically significant differences by race/ethnicity (Black 33%, Hispanic 29%, White 32%).

Only about 3% of students left their institutions because of the sexual harassment; however, they did report academic challenges such as avoiding particular buildings or places on campus (female 27%, male 11%), difficulty studying or paying attention in class (female 16%, male 8%), and participating less in class (female 10%, male 6%). Students also reported trouble sleeping (female 16%, male 6%) and being more likely to skip a class or drop a course (female 9%, 4% male) as a result of the sexual harassment. LGBT students were especially likely to have their educational experience disrupted by sexual harassment such that 9% actually transferred to a different school (Hill & Silva, 2005).

In other research, Jordan et al. (2014) conducted a longitudinal study of 750 college freshman women (89% Caucasian, 8% African American, 3% Asian, <1% Native American or Pacific Islander). Data was collected from participants at three different time points: in the summer prior to arrival on campus, at the end of their first-semester freshman year, and at the end of their second-semester freshman year. The students were asked about experiences of sexual assault (defined as unwanted touch, intoxication prior to encountering an assailant, and

coerced/forced attempted intercourse) and rape (defined as penetration of any orifice by any object). Students' GPAs were self-reported at each time point (Jordan et al., 2014).

For the 750 participants, the rate of prior sexual assault upon their entering college was 40% (Jordan et al., 2014). An additional 24% reported rape or sexual assault in their first semester, and 20% reported rape or sexual assault during their second semester. Women who were survivors of sexual assault or rape prior to college were more than three times more likely to have a GPA below 2.5 at the end of their first semester of college compared to nonvictimized female students. And they also were almost twice as likely to have a GPA below 2.5 at the end of their second semester compared to nonvictimized female students. GPA upon entry to college was not associated with rape or sexual assault, which suggests GPA did not predict whether or not one would become a victim.

In this study, the level of impact on GPA was related to the severity of the victimization (Jordan et al., 2014). Sexual assault (unwanted touch, intoxication prior to encountering an assailant, and coerced/forced attempted intercourse) during the first semester of college predicted lower GPA at the end of the first semester but not at the end of the second semester. Rape (penetration of any orifice by any object) during the first semester predicted lower GPA at the end of the first and second semester of college. Specifically, 14.3% of students who experienced rape, compared with 5.9% of those who were not raped, had a GPA lower than 2.5 at the end of the second semester. Also statistically significant was that an experience of sexual assault since age 14 also predicted lower GPAs at the end of the first and second semesters (Jordan et al., 2014).

In yet another study, Mengo and Black (2015) found that college students who sought services following an incident of sexual assault self-reported a decrease in GPA following the

assault. Data was collected from 145 individuals who utilized a Relationship and Violence Sexual Assault Program at a large public university in the Southwest. The program collected information from individuals who reported an incident of violence. The case files were reviewed by the researchers, and 74 participants were included in the final sample. The majority of participants were female (88%), single (81%), and 30 years of age or younger. Ethnicity was dummy coded into European American ( $N = 30$ , 40.5%) and Minority (African American, Hispanic, Asian American, American Indian, Pacific Islander, International students, and multiple ethnicities;  $N = 44$ , 59.5%) (Mengo & Black, 2015).

In this study, both physical/verbal violence from an intimate partner and sexual victimization were negatively related to GPA. Of the 34 participants who reported sexual victimization, the mean GPA was 2.72 ( $SD = .81$ ) prior to the incident and 2.60 ( $SD = .82$ ) after the incident. This difference was statistically significant [ $t(34) = 2.77$ , ( $p < .05$ )]. Also, the students who experienced sexual violence were significantly more likely to leave the university when compared to students who experienced physical/verbal violence from an intimate partner— $[X^2(1, n = 14) = 4.82, p < .05]$  and  $[X^2(1, n = 14) = 6.00, p < .05]$ , respectively. The dropout rate for students who were sexually violated (34.1%) was higher than the overall dropout rates (29.8%) for the university (Mengo & Black, 2015).

Sociodemographic variables of age, ethnicity, marital status, gender, type of victimization (physical/verbal vs. sexual), and student status (graduated, dropout) were not associated with the type of violence experienced and were not related to decrease in GPA following an experience of violence (Mengo & Black, 2015). Only one sociodemographic variable, academic level, was related to school dropout, such that first-year students were more likely to leave the university after experiencing violence than students at other academic levels (Mengo & Black, 2015).

More recently, Krebs et al. (2016) surveyed approximately 15,000 females and 8,000 males at 9 institutions of higher education that varied in terms of size, public vs. private status, 2-year vs. 4-year status, and region of the country. The study defined sexual assault as including both rape (nonconsensual sexual intercourse) and sexual battery (forced kissing, touching, grabbing or fondling). In general, consequences for survivors of rape were more severe than those that survivors of sexual battery experienced. Across the schools, 30.7% of rape survivors reported negative impacts on schoolwork or grades. In addition, rape survivors reported thinking about taking time off from school, transferring, or dropping out (21.7%), and about dropping classes or changing their schedules (8.4%) (Krebs et al., 2016).

In their research, Baker et al. (2016) conducted a series of studies to examine the relationship between sexual violence and academic performance. Rather than relying on self-reported academic performance, the researchers measured academic performance using three measures: high-school rank, standardized test scores, and conscientiousness. In Study 1, 192 female participants were recruited from an introductory psychology course and were assessed at the beginning and end of one semester. Most of the participants were from 18 years to 21 years of age (98%) and White (77%). Asian American/Asian was the second largest ethnic group (10%), and the remaining 13% of participants were African American/Black, Hispanic/Latino, Native American, and Native Hawaiian. Participants included 38% freshmen, 42% sophomores, 14% juniors, and 6% seniors. For the 22% who reported experiencing at least one form of sexual violence (nonconsensual sexual contact as an adolescent, 9%; as an adult, 7%; as a child by a similar-age peer, 6%; as a child by someone older, 5%), sexual violence predicted lower end-of-semester GPAs after controlling for known predictors of academic performance (Baker et al., 2016).

In Study 2, the findings of Study 1 were replicated and extended by including the longer-term outcomes of final overall GPAs and whether the students remained at the university. For this study, 390 female participants were recruited from introductory psychology courses. Most were age 18 years to 21 years (89%) and White (83%), with Asian American/Asian as the second largest group (12%). The remaining 5% were African American/Black, Hispanic/Latina(o), and Native American. Participants were 30% freshmen, 24% sophomores, 24% juniors, and 22% seniors. Similar to Study 1, 20% of participants reported experiencing one or more forms of sexual violence (nonconsensual sexual contact as an adolescent, 10%; as an adult, 8%; as a child by someone older, 5%; as a child by similar age peer, 4%). The researchers found that sexual violence predicted a GPA at graduation above the contributions of well-known predictors of academic performance. And sexual violence was the only factor related to participants leaving college. Membership in the ethnic-minority grouping was unrelated to final-term GPA and leaving college. In both studies, exposure to more types of sexual violence predicted poorer college academic performance (Baker et al., 2016).

In an examination of the impact of violence and relationship abuse on grades of American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) undergraduate college students, Patterson Silver Wolf et al. (2016) utilized self-reported health data from the American College Health Association National College Health Assessment (ACHA-NCHA; ACHA, 2017). The researchers accessed data from fall 2008 ( $N = 26,685$ , 40 institutions), spring 2009 ( $N = 87,105$ , 117 institutions), fall 2009 ( $N = 34,208$ , 57 institutions), and fall 2010 ( $N = 30,093$ , 139 institutions); 117,430 students met inclusion criteria for the study (was male or female; was an undergraduate within 3 years of the typical age progression for a full-time undergraduate student; attended university in the United States or Canada; reported a GPA).

In this sample of undergraduate students, the researchers analyzed positive responses on the following items to assess a possible relationship between violence and GPA: physical fight ( $n = 9,711$ , 8.29%); physical assault ( $n = 5,641$ , 4.81%); verbal threat ( $n = 27,419$ , 23.42%); sexual touch without consent ( $n = 8,484$ , 7.25%); attempted sexual penetration without consent ( $n = 3,198$ , 2.73%); completed sexual penetration without consent ( $n = 1,865$ , 1.60%); and stalking ( $n = 8,433$ , 7.22%). Participants were also asked whether they had been in a relationship in the past year that was emotionally abusive ( $n = 11,815$ , 10.10%); physically abusive ( $n = 2,757$ , 2.36%); or sexually abusive ( $n = 1,923$ , 1.65%). All undergraduate participants who had experienced any type of violence and abuse had lower GPAs than those who had not experienced violence. In regard to completed sexual penetration without consent, participants who experienced completed penetration without consent ( $n = 1,857$ ) had a mean GPA of 3.04 ( $SD = 0.73$ ), while those who had not had this experience ( $n = 114,592$ ) had a mean GPA of 3.20 ( $SD = 0.68$ ). This difference was statistically significant ( $p < .001$ ).

To examine these issues of violence among AI/AN students specifically, the authors separated the responses of students who identified as AI/AN only ( $N = 491$ ) and students who identified as AI/AN and White ( $N = 935$ ); they then used the remaining students as the reference group ( $N = 115,566$ ). Students who identified partially or fully as AI/AN reported lower grades and higher rates of all types of violence and nearly all types of abuse than the reference group. Both AI/AN ethnicity and each type of violence and relationship abuse were negatively associated with grades (Patterson Silver Wolf et al., 2016).

Finally, Banyard et al. (2017) examined the relationship between academic outcomes (college stress, scholarly conscientiousness, institutional commitment, and feelings of efficacy as a student) and experiences of sexual violence, intimate partner violence, and stalking



victimization in a sample of 6,482 undergraduate students (men = 2,207, women = 4,275) enrolled at one of eight universities (five public, three private) in New England. Participants' mean age was 19.99 years ( $SD = 1.40$ ; range, 18–24 years); 92.6% identified as Caucasian with Black/African American, 0.9%; American Indian/Native Alaskan, 0.4%; Asian, 2.2%; Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, 0.1%; Hispanic/Latino, 1.3%; and two or more races, 2.4%. Participants were nearly evenly distributed in year of school (freshmen = 27.6%, sophomores = 23.3%, juniors = 24.0%, seniors = 25.0%). Participants were recruited via an email sent by each respective institution to undergraduate students.

Survey responses revealed that unwanted sexual intercourse, relationship abuse, and stalking were associated with significant differences on academic outcomes (Banyard et al., 2017). Victimization of any kind was associated with lower academic efficacy, higher stress, lower institutional commitment, and lower scholastic conscientiousness. Polyvictimization was also significantly associated with academic outcomes such that more instances or types of victimization were associated with less desirable academic outcomes. All analyses controlled for sex and year in school (Banyard et al., 2017).

In summary, college students who have experienced sexual harassment report academic challenges that include avoiding certain places on campus, participating less in class, and having difficulty studying (Hill & Silva, 2005). Students with a history of sexual violence, including those who experience physical/verbal abuse by an intimate partner, have lower GPAs than students with no history of sexual violence (Baker et al., 2016; Jordan et al., 2014; Mengo & Black, 2015; Patterson Silver Wolf et al., 2016) and are less likely to persist to graduation (Baker et al., 2016; Duncan, 2000; Griffin & Read, 2012; Mengo & Black, 2015). There is some evidence to suggest that individuals from racial and ethnic minority groups (Patterson Silver

Wolf et al., 2016) and LGBT students (Hill & Silva, 2005) experience more severe adverse academic impacts than students not in those categories. This evidence also suggests that first-year students who experience sexual violence are more likely to leave the institution than students at other academic levels who experience sexual violence (Jordan et al., 2014). Evidence also suggests that the severity of sexual victimization is related to the level of impact on GPA (Jordan et al., 2014).

### **Literature Review Summary**

Estimates of the prevalence of sexual violence in the US population suggest that about 20% of women and 2% of men have been victimized (CDC/NCIPC/DVP, 2019). In the US college student population, estimates are similar, at 21% for college women and a slightly higher 7% for college men (Krebs et al., 2016). All survivors of sexual violence, whether in college or not, feel serious psychological, physical, and social impacts following sexual victimization. For college students, these negative consequences can impact their ability to complete their undergraduate education and earn a college degree.

Only a few studies have examined the academic impact of sexual violence for college students (Baker et al., 2016). The existing studies are quantitative in nature and identify important relationships between variables. Researchers have taken an important first step in recognizing the negative impact of sexual violence on academic performance. The next step is to gain a better understanding of the underlying mechanisms that account for the negative impact. The current study utilized qualitative research methods to look beyond the academic performance indicators of GPA and persistence through graduation in order to explore the impact of sexual violence on the overall academic experience of college students. Academic experience refers to all aspects of a student's academic journey from enrollment through graduation; this

experience can be fully understood only by asking individuals to describe their lived academic experiences following an incident of sexual victimization. Toward that end, this study addressed a gap in the research literature by utilizing qualitative research methods to further the professional understanding of the negative impacts of sexual violence on the academic experience of college students.

## CHAPTER 3: METHOD

A growing body of quantitative research has examined the negative impact of sexual violence on the academic performance of college students (Baker et al., 2016; Jordan et al., 2014; Mengo & Black, 2015). What is missing from the literature is a basis for understanding how sexual violence impacts the academic experience of college students from their perspective. As Creswell (2013) stated, qualitative research methods are used to “follow up quantitative research and help explain the mechanisms or linkages in causal theories or models”; these methods allow for a “complex, detailed understanding” of the phenomenon under study (p. 48). The current study employed a qualitative lens and descriptive phenomenological psychological research methods to answer the following research question: “How do college student survivors of sexual violence describe their academic experiences following an incident of sexual violence?” As defined in Chapter 1, the term *academic experience* is

a broad term that encompasses all aspects of a student’s academic journey from enrollment through graduation. A student’s overall academic experience includes *academic performance*, as measured by grade point average (GPA); *academic persistence*, defined as remaining in school through graduation; and *any other aspect of the student’s college experience that directly or indirectly relates to academics*. (Chapter 1, p. 5)

This overall academic experience “can include class attendance; participation in class; studying, reading, and writing; talking with professors and classmates; performance on assignments, presentations, group projects, and exams” (Chapter 1, pp. 4–5); selecting classes; and choosing a major.

### Methodology

To guide the research design and analysis of data, the current study utilized the descriptive phenomenological psychological method developed by American psychologist

Amedeo Giorgi (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003). *Phenomenology* as a research method originated in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century with the philosopher Husserl (Moustakas, 1994). Husserl influenced modern science by formulating scientific methods that allow for the investigation of human consciousness (Wertz, 2005). Husserl posited that sciences seeking knowledge of human experience must account for subjective processes that assign language and meaning to what is observed and experienced (Wertz, 2005). While Husserl utilized “philosophical articulations of the phenomenological method” (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003, p. 245), Giorgi drew from his own experiences as a psychologist using a phenomenological lens as he studied psychological data to create an adaptation of Husserl’s philosophical method better suited for psychological inquiries (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003, p. 245). I describe Giorgi’s adaptation of the phenomenological method developed by Husserl in more detail in the data-analysis section of this chapter.

Phenomenology is a qualitative methodology focused on participants’ descriptions of the phenomenon under study (Creswell, 2013). The researcher sets aside personal expectations and instead focuses on the descriptions provided by participants in a process referred to as “epoche, or bracketing” (Creswell, 2013, p. 80). The aim of the researcher is to describe as accurately as possible the phenomenon under study by remaining true to the facts as experienced and described by the participants (Groenewald, 2004). For example, in the current study, I as the researcher set aside my expectations based on previous experiences working with college student survivors of sexual violence to remain open to hearing from the participants their academic experiences as they had lived them. Unlike positivist and postpositivist research approaches, phenomenology does not form theories, operationalize variables, test hypotheses, or calculate statistical probabilities (Wertz, 2005). Rather, phenomenological research seeks understanding for its own sake and supplies the basis for a fuller understanding of human experiences

(Polkinghorne, 1989). Because the phenomenon under study is interpreted through the individual lens of personal context and history, language determines meanings and allows for collective understanding of an experience (Wertz, 2005).

Philosophically, phenomenological research allows for a holistic approach to answering the proposed research question and recognizes the unique aspects of each individual's experience while at the same time seeking greater understanding of what constitutes the essence of that experience for all participants (Creswell, 2013). Phenomenology is based upon the belief that psychological reality has essential features that can be faithfully discovered through rich description of meanings and subjective processes (Wertz, 2005). Because consciousness contributes to the meaning of objects, and "the ultimate outcome of a phenomenological analysis is to determine the meaning(s) of an experience" (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003, p. 252), it is more rigorous to acknowledge the role of consciousness and take it into account than to ignore it (Giorgi, 1997). Accordingly, the current study utilized an interview format to explore participant experiences rather than collecting data through a survey with multiple-choice response options predetermined based upon the research literature. As the researcher, I used probing questions to gain an understanding of how the participants interpreted and assigned meaning to their lived academic experiences following their incidents of sexual violence.

## **Participants**

In phenomenological research, the goal is to describe the structure of an experience, not the characteristics of the group who had the experience (Polkinghorne, 1989). Therefore, fewer participants are needed and a small sample size allows the researcher to focus on the individual experiences (Creswell, 2013; Roberts, 2013) through extensive, in-depth interviewing that fully captures the life experiences of the participants (Groenewald, 2004). The objective of participant

selection is to obtain richly varied descriptions of the phenomenon by choosing an array of individuals, typically from 5 participants to 25 participants, who provide a variety of specific experiences of the topic being explored (Polkinghorne, 1989).

The actual number of participants in a phenomenological study depends upon the nature of the research problem and the potential yield of findings, so that number is not always possible to determine before one conducts the data analyses (Wertz, 2005). The researcher may deliberately continue to recruit participants to uncover a broad range of experiences for a fuller understanding of the research topic (Wertz, 2005) while seeking saturation. Saturation occurs when sufficient redundancy is achieved to fulfill the research goals (Wertz, 2005). In the current study, I was satisfied that saturation had been reached after I had interviewed six participants. At that point, the answers to the interview questions were consistent enough across all interviews that I was collecting no new data.

Participants in this study were currently enrolled, undergraduate college students, age 18 and older, who had survived an incident of sexual violence while enrolled in college. I asked all participants to verify that they met the eligibility requirements, which would mean they were currently enrolled in a US college or university. To protect the identity of participants, no information was collected regarding which college or university they attended. Six female college students responded to the recruitment efforts and were interviewed. Four of the participants were age 20, one was age 22, and one was age 28. Two of the participants identified as Mexican American or Latina, two as White or Caucasian, one as half White/half Latina, and one as Filipino American. Two participants were in their sophomore year of college, three were in their junior year, and one was in her senior year. The interviews of these six participants provided sufficient redundancy to achieve saturation.

## **Recruitment Process**

Participants were recruited on the West Coast of the United States through fliers (see Appendix A) posted at nonprofit organizations with a mission to support survivors of sexual violence. Fliers were also posted at colleges and universities. Individuals who were interested in participating in the study could contact me directly via phone or email, or complete a Google form that verified their eligibility to participate in the study and collected their contact information (see Appendix B). Once the participants completed the Google form, a confirmation message appeared that included sexual-violence resources. The resources included both online access and phone contact information for the National Sexual Assault Hotline. Callers to the Sexual Assault Hotline are automatically routed to their nearest sexual-assault service provider.

The confirmation message also notified participants that within 24 hours they would receive an email and a phone call from me as the researcher. The email contained more information about the study and included a consent form to participate (Appendix C). The informed-consent document notified participants of their rights, including the right to remove themselves from the study at any point, the details of the study, and a list of support resources for survivors of sexual violence. The phone call from me allowed participants to ask any questions and schedule a date and time for an interview. I collected signed consent forms at the time of the interview. Participants had the option to interview online using Zoom, or in person. All participants opted for an in-person interview at a location of their choosing where privacy and confidentiality were maintained. In appreciation for their time, the study participants each received \$25 in the form of cash or an Amazon Gift Card.



## **Data Collection**

Long interviews are typically conducted in phenomenological research (Moustakas, 1994) and are recommended when the phenomenon of interest is complex and contains subtle features that participants may not share spontaneously in response to questions or instructions (Wertz, 2005). These interviews usually begin with open-ended questions and utilize prompts and follow-up questions to capture details not initially offered by participants (Wertz, 2005). In psychological phenomenology, data collection is structured to gather details of lived situations and not hypotheses or opinions regarding the phenomenon under study (Wertz, 2005).

In this study, I collected data during an in-person interview with each participant. Before starting the recorded portion of the interview, I reviewed the informed-consent information with each participant to be sure she understood her rights and was able to ask any additional questions. Next, I engaged in rapport-building dialogue to allow each participant to become more comfortable speaking with me. Once I felt that the participant was at ease, I asked the participant if she was ready to begin the recorded portion of the interview. I obtained the participant's consent to record the interview before starting the recording.

I recorded the interviews using two portable audio-recording devices, with one device providing a back-up recording. The recorded files did not contain any information that would reveal the identity of the participants. As soon as an interview was completed, I uploaded the audio recording of the interview to the Rev.com site and kept the audio files on the recording device until I completed the transcript (within 4 hours to 6 hours after the recording). Rev.com provides secure and confidential transcription of audio/video files, and I used those services to transcribe the interviews. Once I received the transcription and reviewed it for accuracy, I deleted the audio recording.

## **Interview Process**

I opened each interview with a review of the purpose of the study and a reminder that the participant would not be asked for details about the incident of sexual violence. Participants were given permission to share as much or as little about their respective incidents of sexual violence as they felt necessary to provide context for describing their academic experience following the incident. I shared a brief overview of my professional background working with college student survivors of sexual violence. I also provided this information in writing on the Google form for participants to review before they consented to participate. This disclosure was intended to assist in the process of rapport building and establishing a relationship of trust between the participants and me as the researcher.

Interviews were semistructured and lasted from 1 hour to 2 hours. This included time for rapport building prior to the interview and conversation at the conclusion of the interview. To ensure confidentiality for participants, the conversation preceding and following the recorded portion of the interview was not recorded. I notified participants of precisely when the recording was started and when it was stopped, so they could choose what information was shared while I was recording the conversation. In one interview, the concluding dialogue led to a topic that the participant wanted to share on the recording; so I resumed recording to capture that information.

The interviews were conversational in nature, using a broad set of questions to guide the interview (see Interview Guide in Appendix D). All interview questions were based upon the review of the research literature in Chapter 2. I gathered basic demographic data, including information about each participant's age, gender, race/ethnicity, current year in school, and how much time had passed since the incident of sexual violence. After gathering demographic data, I

reviewed the definition of academic experience to be sure each participant understood what she was being asked to describe. I shared,

Academic experience refers to all aspects of your academic journey from enrollment through to graduation. This can include class attendance; participation in class; studying, reading, and writing; talking with professors and classmates; performance on assignments, presentations, group projects, and exams; selecting classes; and choosing a major.

After clarifying what the term *academic experience* meant, I provided further context for the interview by explaining that there were no right or wrong answers to the questions, and encouraging the participant to share her academic experience as she lived it, without worrying that her experience may have been different from the experiences of others. I encouraged each participant to ask questions if she needed further explanation on any of the questions.

As the researcher, I engaged in dialogue with each participant and encouraged rich description of meanings and subjective processes (Wertz, 2005) the participant had experienced. Given the conversational nature of the interview, each participant answered some of the interview questions in response to the initial question, “Please describe your academic experience following the incident of sexual violence.” I then used prompts (see Appendix D) to gather more details about specific aspects of each participant’s academic experience following the incident of sexual violence. In closing, I asked each participant to share any additional thoughts she had about any of the topics discussed.

### **Data Analysis**

Once the interviews were completed and transcribed, I conducted the data analysis of the responses of each participant in accordance with Amedeo Giorgi’s descriptive phenomenological psychological method (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003). According to Giorgi and Giorgi (2003), “the whole purpose of the method is to discover and articulate the psychological meanings being lived by the participant that reveal the nature of the phenomenon being researched” (p. 252). Using

the descriptive phenomenological psychological method, I examined the lived experience of participants through a psychological lens in the 4-step process described in the following subsections (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003). I adhered to this 4-step process rigorously, and it should be noted that “the method is judged by its outcome, not by intermediary stages” (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003, p. 252).

### **Step 1: Read for a Sense of the Whole**

The first step for me as the researcher was to read entirely through the written transcription of each participant to get a general sense of the whole description of the participant’s experience (Giorgi, 2009). Because the phenomenological perspective is a holistic one (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003), this initial reading was to grasp the “big picture” of the participant’s academic experience following the incident of sexual violence. According to Giorgi, “One cannot begin an analysis of a description without knowing how it ends” (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003, p. 251–252). In this initial reading, I did not “do” anything about what I read; rather, I gained a sense of the overall experience for each participant before working through the next steps in the analysis (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003, p. 252).

### **Step 2: Determination of Parts: Establishing Meaning Units**

The aim of Step 2 was to establish “units of meaning” contained within the description provided by the participant (Giorgi, 2009). The establishment of *meaning units* is in line with the phenomenological approach of seeking the meaning of an experience for the participant. (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003). Each time I experienced a relatively significant difference in meaning in the transcript, I noted the place in the transcript where I perceived the change (Giorgi, 2009). Meaning units are not objective units of text, and different researchers may identify different places where a transition in meaning occurs (Giorgi, 2009). The meaning units depend upon the

psychological sensitivity of each researcher and make the description manageable for the next step of the analysis (Giorgi, 2009).

As an example of this process, following is an excerpt from a current participant's transcribed interview, with slashes separating the respective meaning units:

Attendance was like, iffy. I feel like some days when I felt like the depression would hit harder, I just couldn't get out of bed. My limbs would get up. I'd wake up. But I would just lay there in bed. It was kind of just like, "Oh." I think my brain was giving me every good excuse not to go, you know? And then I just wouldn't go. / But then, at the same time, because I did feel ashamed of it, my pride kind of won the battle sometimes to go. / But then I wouldn't as much participate. I would just go to show my face and, yeah...

In this one section of text, I found three different meaning units. In the first meaning unit, the participant is talking about her experience of depression. Then, her meaning shifts to her feelings of shame and how her pride would sometimes win over her depression to get her to attend class. In the last meaning unit, the participant is talking about how the depression affected her class participation. She would attend class, but not participate. These meaning units are all related to the participant's depression, but each one has a slightly different meaning. As stated previously, the meaning units are not objective units of text; rather, they reflect the places where I sensed that a transition in meaning occurred in the participant's description (Giorgi, 2009).

### **Step 3: Transformation of Meaning Units Into Psychologically Sensitive Expressions**

The heart of the descriptive phenomenological psychological method is the third step of data analysis (Giorgi, 2009). In this step, I examined the extracted meaning units and transformed them into language that allowed for a more generalizable understanding of the feelings and thoughts that underlay what the participant experienced (Moustakas, 1994). As noted previously, this transformation of the language allowed for easier integration of data from various participants into common general structures for the phenomenon being researched (Giorgi, 2009). As Giorgi (2009) stated,

even if facts differ, the psychological meaning can be identical. Thus, even though sensitive to the context in which they appear, psychological meanings can be expressed in such a way that the data of several participants can be integrated with them. (Giorgi, 2009, p. 132)

In articulating the transformed meaning units, Giorgi and Giorgi (2003) recommended that personal contextual details of each participant's experience be pursued only to the extent that the details are helpful in explaining the underlying psychological meaning of the experience (p. 253). These researchers also recommended that the use of psychological jargon be avoided and instead "ordinary language twisted toward psychologically heightened revelations" be used in the articulations of the transformed meaning units (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003, p. 253).

In accordance with this guidance, I transformed each meaning unit for a particular participant from first person to third person and created a general psychological description independent of the unique characteristics of that participant's circumstances (Giorgi, 2009).

Continuing with the example provided for Step 2, the meaning unit

Attendance was like, iffy. I feel like some days when I felt like the depression would hit harder, I just couldn't get out of bed. My limbs would get up. I'd wake up. But I would just lay there in bed. It was kind of just like, 'Oh.' I think my brain was giving me every good excuse not to go, you know? And then I just wouldn't go.

was transformed to read as follows:

Attendance for P3 was inconsistent. Some days her depression was worse than others and she could not get out of bed. She would wake up and just lay in bed thinking of reasons not to go to class, and then she would not go.

Table 1 shows the organization of the meaning units determined in Step 1 and the transformed meaning units created in Step 2. I completed this process of identifying the meaning units and transforming them for all six participant transcripts.

Table 1

*Meaning Unit Determination and Transformation*

Excerpt From Transcript	Unit #	Participant Meaning Unit	Transformed Meaning Unit
Attendance was like, iffy. I feel like some days when I felt like the depression would hit harder, I just couldn't get out of bed. My limbs would get up. I'd wake up. But I would just lay there in bed. It was kind of just like, "Oh." I think my brain was giving me every good excuse not to go, you know? And then I just wouldn't go. / But then, at the same time, because I did feel ashamed of it, my pride kind of won the battle sometimes to go. / But then I wouldn't as much participate. I would just go to show my face and yeah.	1	Attendance was like, iffy. I feel like some days when I felt like the depression would hit harder, I just couldn't get out of bed. My limbs would get up. I'd wake up. But I would just lay there in bed. It was kind of just like, "Oh." I think my brain was giving me every good excuse not to go, you know? And then I just wouldn't go.	Attendance for P3 was inconsistent. Some days her depression was worse than others and she could not get out of bed. She would wake up and just lay in bed thinking of reasons not to go to class, and then she would not go.
	2	But then, at the same time, because I did feel ashamed of it, my pride kind of won the battle sometimes to go.	When P3 did overcome her depression and go to class, she said it was her pride that would make her go. She felt ashamed of the incident, and her pride could override her depression.
	3	But then I wouldn't as much participate. I would just go to show my face and yeah.	When P3 did make it to class, participation was a challenge. She would go to class to show her face, but she would not want to engage with class discussion.

**Step 4: Determination of the Structure**

In the final stage of the descriptive phenomenological psychological method, the researcher uses imaginative variation to uncover the essential psychological constituents of the structure of the phenomenon under study (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003). The process of imaginative variation is conducted by varying or removing specific dimensions of the experience under

examination (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003). If the object, or experience, under study collapses as a consequence of removing a key dimension, then that dimension is considered essential to the structure of the object or experience (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003). Giorgi and Giorgi (2003) provided an example of the use of the process of imaginative variation to determine the *essential constituents* of a cup. The cup may be the color black, but is the color black essential to the “cupness” of the cup (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003)? Changing colors using imaginative variation would involve considering the cup to be blue, or red, or another color. None of these changes affects the “cupness” of the cup (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003). The cup could be made of ceramic, or glass, or metal and still be a cup. It could not, however, be made of a porous material such as net and remain a cup. Thus, nonporous material is an essential aspect of a cup (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003). This process could continue by varying other aspects of the cup such as a handle or the size of the cup (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003). The essential aspects, or essential constituents, that are uncovered constitute the “general structure” of the phenomenon under study (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003).

To begin Step 4, I reviewed the transformed meaning units from all participants to allow me to look for meaning units that possessed similar psychological meanings across participants. I clustered together meaning units with similar psychological meanings and identified meaning-unit themes. For example, Table 2 shows the meaning units that clustered under the meaning-unit theme “Impaired Ability to Focus on Academic Tasks.”

Table 2  
*Example of Meaning Units Within a Meaning-Unit Theme*

Meaning-Unit Theme	Meaning Units
Impaired Ability to Focus on Academic Tasks	P3 states that it was hard for her to focus. She was not thinking about the incident, but she would find herself staring at her computer and wanting to do her assignment. She just kept staring and could not do her work.



(Table 2, Continued)

Meaning-Unit Theme	Meaning Units
	P3 states that she was not feeling emotionally upset. She just truly could not focus on her work enough to get it done, but she could focus on distracting things that kept her happy.
	P3 had particular difficulty with assignments that required extensive reading, analysis, and synthesis of material. She did not have the focus or the stamina to finish these types of assignments because the information was difficult for her to process.
	P5 could not focus on studying. All she could think about was what happened. Everything else seemed unimportant. She was worrying about whether she was pregnant and what she would do if she was. She kept going through the “what ifs” in her mind, and studying seemed pointless with her mind consumed by thoughts related to the aftereffects of the incident.
	During her classes, P6 has to leave the classroom when she cannot focus. She does not want others to see her show emotion, so she leaves and goes to the office of her counselor and support staff. P6 will talk or cry, and then go back to class once she has composed herself and her eyes are no longer red.
	P4 ended up changing her major. She was caught cheating in a class over an easy homework assignment, and she realized how distracted she was that she could not do an assignment that should have been easy to her.
	P4 did not want her professors to think her studies were not important to her, but she could not handle the triggering content of the class. Watching stories of women who were abused and sexually assaulted made her think about her own experience too intensely.
	When P6 really starts to think about the details, that is when she starts to feel a lot of emotions. In class, she may hear a topic, or even one word can trigger a feeling, and then she cannot focus. Not being able to focus is her problem.

Because the meaning units were all interconnected within the academic experience of participants following their respective incidents of sexual violence, many of the meaning units fell within more than one theme. For example, the following meaning unit from Table 2,

During her classes, P6 has to leave the classroom when she cannot focus. She does not want others to see her show emotion, so she leaves and goes to the office of her counselor and support staff. P6 will talk or cry, and then go back to class once she has composed herself and her eyes are no longer red.

fits within the theme “Impaired Ability to Focus on Academic Tasks,” described in Table 2.

This meaning unit could also cluster within the theme “Finding Ways to Cope.” Because the

psychological aspects of the experience are in relationship with each other and interconnected, I reviewed meaning units in relation to multiple meaning-unit themes of which they were a part.

Through the process of imaginative variation previously described using the cup example, I varied, adjusted, removed, and replaced meaning units and meaning-unit themes to determine which themes represented essential psychological aspects of the academic experiences of participants following their incidents of sexual violence. The meaning-unit themes had to be redescribed or reworded throughout this process to ensure that they best captured the psychological meanings of the experiences the participants lived (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003). I analyzed the meaning-unit themes using the imaginative-variation process repeatedly until I was satisfied that the final eight themes, as worded, constituted the eight essential constituents of the academic experiences of participants following the incidents of sexual violence.

The eight essential constituents discovered through this process represent the overarching psychological meaning of the academic experience of participants following their incidents of sexual violence, even if not all constituents were experienced in the same way by each participant (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003). Chapter 4 provides in-depth analysis of the eight essential constituents, including descriptions of the meaning units related to each constituent and participant quotes that contextualize the academic experiences of the participants.

In the final phase of Step 4, I composed a statement of the general structure of the academic experience of participants following their incidents of sexual violence; this statement is based upon the following eight essential constituents:

- a) Negative emotional and mental health consequences;
- b) Shame and self-blame;
- c) Isolation from classmates and professors;

- d) Impaired ability to focus on academic tasks;
- e) Losing motivation and questioning academic goals;
- f) Finding ways to cope;
- g) Healing and reconnection; and
- h) Academic identity as more than GPA.

According to Giorgi and Giorgi (2003), the statement of the general structure “is a second-order description of the psychological essence or structure of the phenomenon by the scientific researcher” (p. 251).

### **Trustworthiness**

The value of a qualitative research study is strengthened by its trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The evaluative criteria for trustworthiness, according to Lincoln and Guba (1985), include establishing *credibility*, *transferability*, *dependability*, and *confirmability*.

Credibility refers to confidence in the truth of the finding and is one of the most important factors in establishing trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). One way to ensure credibility, that there is truth in the finding, is to use well-established methods of data analysis (Shenton, 2004). Strict adherence to the descriptive phenomenological psychological research method developed by Giorgi (2009) ensured that this study was conducted in accordance with established protocols for data analysis. The four steps of the process of data analysis previously described were adhered to with rigor. Another element of credibility is the researcher’s familiarity with the culture of participating organizations (Shenton, 2004). My experience working in higher education with survivors of sexual violence for more than fifteen years indicates a familiarity with, if not a knowledge of, this experience for college students and so further enhances the credibility of the research.

Transferability refers to showing that the findings have applicability in other contexts, a characteristic that can be facilitated through thick description (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Using sufficient details to describe a phenomenon allows for evaluation of the extent to which the conclusions made are transferable to other times, settings, situations, and people (Amankwaa, 2016). I utilized the descriptive phenomenological psychological method of data analysis developed by Giorgi (2009) to ensure that sufficient details were included regarding the academic experiences of participants following their incidents of sexual violence. Detailed information about the participants, and the use of participant quotes, were included in the study to convey the rich detail captured using the phenomenological psychological method of data analysis. The level of detail provided in the findings allows readers of the study to determine how the results might be applied in other settings.

Dependability means that the research findings are consistent and can be repeated (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Descriptions of the research design and its implementation, the operational details of data gathering, and the researcher's reflective appraisal of the findings ensure dependability (Shenton, 2004). As the researcher, I supported findings and interpretations I made by using direct quotes from participants to allow others to verify that the conclusions I made were supported by the data (Amankwaa, 2016).

Confirmability is the extent to which findings of a study represent the perspectives of the respondents as opposed to those of the researcher (Amankwaa, 2016). According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), *reflexivity* is one way to establish confirmability and involves paying close attention to the construction of knowledge, especially to the effects of the researcher, throughout the research process. In this study, I maintained documentation of each step in the analysis of data to help ensure that conclusions reached were based upon the data collected and not my

personal perspective (Amankwaa, 2016). To protect the confidentiality of participants, the early phases of analysis, which included full transcripts, are not shared here. However, quotes from participants regarding each of the eight essential constituents are shared to clearly demonstrate the perspectives of participants based on the findings.

### **Validity**

In positivist and postpositivist research, validity is achieved by ensuring that the measuring instruments actually measure what they claim to measure (Polkinghorne, 1989). In phenomenological psychological research, validity is viewed more generally as a sufficiently persuasive argument (Polkinghorne, 1989). Statistical procedures cannot be relied upon to communicate the conclusive power of arguments made (Polkinghorne, 1989). The degree of validity of the findings depends upon the extent to which the reader is convinced that the findings are accurate (Polkinghorne, 1989). In this study, I have provided direct quotes from college student survivors of sexual violence as evidence that the conclusions reached through the analysis are valid (Polkinghorne, 1989).

Issues that can negatively impact validity include researcher bias, inaccurate transcripts of interviews, failure to consider alternative possibilities and explain why they are less probable, and failure to describe essential situation-specific factors (Polkinghorne, 1989). In this study, I was careful to remain focused on the descriptions provided by participants in the analysis of the data, and I used a professional transcription service to ensure accuracy of the transcriptions. The service provided the audio recording that tracked along the transcription so I could click on a word or phrase in the transcription to play the audio recording of that statement and compare what was written to what the participant had said. I strictly adhered to the descriptive phenomenological psychological method utilized in the study to ensure that alternative

possibilities for findings were explored and only those essential to the structure of the phenomenon under study were included in the findings. I shared essential situation-specific factors through the use of participant quotes, which provide unique details of participants' experiences in their own words.

### **Role of the Researcher**

A researcher's perspective is influenced by her understanding of, and experience within, the community being studied (Suzuki, Muninder, Agnes Kwong, & Jacqueline, 2007). My experience working with college student survivors of sexual violence for more than fifteen years prepared me well to establish rapport with participants in this study. Establishing rapport was critical to the success of this research process (Suzuki et al., 2007). My goal was to provide for participants a safe, judgment-free space for them to feel comfortable being honest about their academic experience as college student survivors of sexual violence. Participants conveyed that they had experienced a sense of empowerment knowing that they contributed to a project that will lead to better academic support for college student survivors of sexual violence.

## CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

The current study was the first to use qualitative research methods to examine the academic experience of college student survivors of sexual violence. The main research question of the study was “How do college student survivors of sexual violence describe their academic experience following an incident of sexual violence?” As indicated in Chapter 1, the term *academic experience* is a broad term that encompasses all aspects of a student’s academic journey from enrollment through graduation. Students’ overall academic experience includes multiple aspects: academic performance, as measured by grade point average (GPA); academic persistence, defined as remaining in school through graduation; and any other aspect of their college experience that directly or indirectly relates to academics. These facets can include class attendance and participation; studying; reading; writing; conversations with professors and classmates; performance on assignments, presentations, group projects, and exams; and selecting classes and choosing a major.

As the researcher, I collected data during an in-person interview with each of the six participants. All participants were female, college student survivors of sexual violence who were currently enrolled at their university. Two of the participants identified as Mexican American or Latina, two as White or Caucasian, one as half White/half Latina, and one as Filipino American. Four participants were age 20, one was age 22, and one was age 28. Two participants were in their sophomore year of college, three were in their junior year, and one was in her senior year. The time that had passed since the incident of sexual violence to the time of the interview ranged from 2 months to 2 years. Table 3 displays participant information.

Table 3  
Participant Overview

	Gender	Age	Self-Identified	Year in School	Time Since Incident	Year/Term Incident Occurred
P1	Female	20	Hispanic/Mexican	Sophomore	1 year	Freshman/fall
P2	Female	22	Half White/Half Latina	Senior	2 years	Sophomore/spring
P3	Female	20	Mexican American/ Latina	Junior	Just over 1 year	Sophomore/fall
P4	Female	20	Filipino American	Sophomore	1½ years	Freshman /fall
P5	Female	20	White	Junior	Almost 2 years	Freshman/spring
P6	Female	28	Caucasian	Junior (not consecutive years in school)	2 months	Junior/ break between fall and spring

### Essential Constituents

As described in Chapter 3, the method used for data analysis in this study was the descriptive phenomenological psychological method developed by Amedeo Giorgi (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003). The analysis of the data included four steps. In Step 1, I reviewed transcripts to get a general sense of the whole description of each participant’s experience (Giorgi, 2009). In Step 2, I created meaning units by noting the places in the transcripts where I perceived a change in meaning (Giorgi, A., Giorgi, B., & Morley, 2017). In Step 3, I transformed the meaning units into language that allowed for a more generalizable understanding of the feelings and thoughts that underlay what the participants had experienced (Giorgi, 2009). Once all meaning units were adequately transformed, I grouped together those that possessed similar psychological meanings and assigned “higher-level categories” that represented the psychological meaning but were not “embedded within the same contingent facts” (Giorgi, 2009, p. 132). Finally, in Step 4, I synthesized the transformed meaning units and higher-level categories determined to be essential (“essential constituents”) into a single general structure to describe the psychological essence of



the academic experience of these college student survivors of sexual violence (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003).

As identified by the participants' experiences in this study, the essential constituents of the academic experience of these college student survivors of sexual violence following an incident of sexual violence were as follows:

- (a) Negative emotional and mental health consequences;
- (b) Shame and self-blame;
- (c) Isolation from classmates and professors;
- (d) Impaired ability to focus on academic tasks;
- (e) Losing motivation and questioning academic goals;
- (f) Finding ways to cope;
- (g) Healing and reconnection; and
- (h) Academic identity as more than GPA.

I describe each essential constituent in more detail in the following sections. The detailed descriptions of these constituents highlight the unique aspects of the constituents for each participant. Participant quotes provide a basis for more fully understanding the academic experience of each participant. Following the description of the essential constituents, I present the general structure of the academic experience of these college student survivors of sexual violence.

### **Negative Emotional and Mental Health Consequences**

Following the incident of sexual violence, the negative emotional and mental health consequences for participants included experiences of shock, denial, confusion, fear, anxiety, and insomnia, and other mental health challenges such as depression. Attending to their personal

safety and mental health needs became an urgent priority that demanded the participants' attention. These consequences were most acute in the days and weeks immediately following the incidents for most participants. For Participant 1 (P1), her depression emerged the semester following the incident of sexual violence.

Participant 1 (P1) was a 20-year-old sophomore who was sexually assaulted during the fall semester of her freshman year of college. Initially, her attendance was not affected too much; but as her depression grew worse, attending classes was more of a challenge. She would complete her homework assignments but never turn them in to her professor. P1 recognized that she was depressed when she no longer could participate in activities she enjoyed.

One of the reasons why I fell into depression was because I was so used to doing so many things; and then after the incident, it was really hard for me to just get back up and do all the things that I used to do, like volunteer a lot, and just continue with my hobbies and stuff.

Participant 2 (P2) was a 22-year-old senior who was sexually assaulted during the spring semester of her sophomore year in college. P2 described a sense of dissociation immediately after the incident. She did not want to accept the idea that her mind and body were connected because that would mean that someone took advantage of all of her, not just her body.

The incident itself almost made me separate my mind from my body, just because I didn't want to accept the fact that those are connected; because if my body was being taken advantage of, I didn't want all of me to [be taken advantage of]. In a way, I separated myself from that, and it reflected on my academics because I just stopped caring as much because things, in my mind, were all separate entities. I didn't really have to take care of it all as a whole anymore.

Participant 3 (P3) was a 20-year-old junior who was sexually assaulted during the fall semester of her sophomore year of college. She also struggled with depression and experienced an increase in feelings of irritability following the incident of sexual violence. She would have days when she "just couldn't get out of bed." "My limbs would get up. I'd wake up. But I would just lay there in bed. . . I think my brain was giving me every good excuse not to go. . .

And then I just wouldn't go." She also found herself "getting irritated with everything" and began missing classes and work. P3 was not able to predict what would trigger her emotionally after she was sexually assaulted. Her depression would come and go in waves such that one day she was "super fun and bubbly and myself," and the next day she would find herself not wanting to talk to anyone and "just crying the whole night."

Participant 4 (P4) was a 20-year-old sophomore who was sexually assaulted in the fall semester of her freshman year of college. She described feeling "in a different place, a deep, dark place" after the assault. Being in the dorms made her think about her assault, but she would not let herself cry because she did not want her roommates to hear her crying and ask what was wrong. Holding her emotions inside led her to experience "so much tension and so much anxiety constantly." Her anxiety would keep her awake at night, and she described feeling "tired, exhausted, empty, and broken down emotionally."

Participant 5 (P5) was a 20-year-old junior who was sexually assaulted during the spring semester of her freshman year in college. She was in denial about what happened and could not focus on school as she tried to piece together the incident.

For two weeks I was like, 'n-n-no, that couldn't have happened.' I just kept trying to grab the memories from my head as to exactly what happened. I couldn't focus on [school]. The only thing I could think about was what had happened.

P5 was seeing a counselor at the time to assist with her adjustment to college. Because she was not ready to process what had happened to her, she told the counselor a different version of events. The counselor made P5 doubt what she knew to be true when she disclosed that she had been sexually assaulted. This contributed further to her sense of confusion.

I was so much in denial that I basically told my counselor a completely different story from what actually happened; so then, when I was really ready to open up about it and just be like, "Okay, what do I do from here?," my counselor was like, "But you didn't say that. That's not what happened." Then it was almost like she tried to convince me the story that I told her was what actually happened. So I had two very conflicting things,

which made it even more difficult to try to attend class or talk to my peers or focus on literally anything but the rape.

Participant 6 (P6) was a 28-year-old junior who was sexually assaulted during the semester break between the fall and spring semesters of her junior year in college. She also described feeling in a “dark place” and not having the ability to pull herself out of that place in the initial days and weeks following the incident. The incident “brought up a lot of my panic disorder, and so I started having anxiety attacks just randomly.” She was fearful about leaving her house and going places by herself.

You feel like some outer experience is controlling your ability to function. It just sucks to not feel like you have control over your life. . . . I would think that maybe he could get into my car and be in the backseat like you see in the movies, so I didn’t feel safe parking on campus. He has another remote key to my car so also he could just get in whenever, so I don’t know, I just . . . I didn’t feel safe on campus. I knew that he knew my schedule as well, so it just made me not want to be there at all.

Following the incidents of sexual violence, participants experienced depression, anxiety, fear, confusion, dissociation, and other negative emotional and mental health consequences. They were fearful for their safety and felt as if they had no control over their lives. Participants stopped participating in activities that they previously enjoyed, and they tried to hide their emotions from others.

### **Shame and Self-Blame**

Participants’ feelings of shame and self-blame exacerbated negative mental health consequences, prompted isolation from friends and professors, and held participants back from seeking help. They felt ashamed that they had been sexually assaulted in part because they blamed themselves for the respective incidents. They felt that they drank too much alcohol or did not say *no* clearly enough, or they showed affection before the incident that was mistaken for consent. They replayed the incident in their minds, thinking about what they could have done differently to try to prevent the incident of sexual violence, even when they knew intellectually it

was not their fault. All participants experienced these feelings, which complicated their ability to readjust to academic life following the sexual assaults.

P2 described her feelings of self-blame for the incident of sexual violence. She blamed herself because she did not use her voice to say *no*; but she also shared, “I was afraid that if I were to say *no*, that he would have just kept going anyways; and that scared me more than just letting it happen.” P2 was struggling emotionally and decided that she needed to share with her mom what had happened to her. When she shared with her that she had been sexually assaulted, her mother “basically told me it was my fault and blamed me; and so from that, I blamed myself.” P2 eventually spoke with a few close friends about the sexual assault but did not want to disclose to anyone who worked at her university. “I was just afraid to reach out to people higher than that because part of me thought it was my fault.” P2 was aware that she needed help, but her shame and self-blame kept her from connecting with support resources. She would schedule an appointment for counseling, and then change her mind the day of the appointment.

My sophomore and junior year I definitely went to counseling services multiple times to say, “I want an appointment; I need to talk to somebody”; and then the day of the appointment would come, and I would text them saying I’m not coming. There was [*sic*] countless times . . . four or five, six times . . . that I would schedule an appointment and then I never showed up. I don’t think I ever actually went to a real university session.

P5 felt ashamed when her friends insinuated that she was overreacting to her boyfriend sexually assaulting her. A friend of hers who was also friends with the boyfriend who sexually assaulted her responded by saying, “So? He’s your boyfriend. You have to have sex with him. Stop complaining about it. Just have sex. It doesn’t matter.” The friend also told P5 she was overreacting, and that it did not matter that she was drunk because she “technically never said *no*, so it’s fine.” From that point forward, P5 decided not to tell anyone else about the assault. She would share that she and her boyfriend broke up, but she would not share that it was because he had sexually assaulted her.

P4 had a similar experience, with friends downplaying the significance of what happened to her. When P4 disclosed to friends that she had been sexually assaulted, she found that her friends would “brush it off” because they were friends with the student who perpetrated the assault. P4 felt a sense of betrayal that her friends would remain friends with him after P4 told them about the incident. They would downplay the seriousness of what happened by saying “He’s just a creep” or a “weirdo,” which implied to P4 that either they thought she was overreacting or they did not believe her. These responses from friends made P4 ashamed and less likely to disclose to others what happened.

P1 shared an interaction with a professor in which his lack of education regarding sexual violence was made apparent. This professor was reviewing the Title IX statement on the course syllabus with the class. This syllabus statement was intended to notify students that, if they disclosed an incident of sexual violence, the professor would have to report it to the institution’s Title IX Coordinator. While talking about his obligations as a professor, he said, “It’s a shame, though, about how some girls might report that and use it to their advantage even though an incident may have not been true.” P1 was made particularly uncomfortable by this statement because friends of the person who sexually assaulted her were in the same class. She feared that hearing this from a professor might lead them to conclude that she made up the story that she had been sexually assaulted.

This sense of shame participants experienced was exacerbated by the negative reactions they received when they disclosed their sexual assault to others. Once they had received a negative response, they were less likely to trust others to respond well. This experience led to a sense of their needing to handle it on their own. P1 described another interaction with a professor that further discouraged her from asking for help from others:

I had one professor who I had last school year tell me, like, “Oh; you’re still kind of down about that? You should get back up and. . .” she didn’t use “get over it,” but that’s kind of how it felt. It just kind of made me feel like I didn’t really want to talk about it anymore, and just try to see if I could handle it on my own.

P3 also shared her experience with shame. P3 described herself as a “proud Latina,” and she did not want others to pity her because she had been sexually assaulted. Her approach was to pretend that everything was okay, with the philosophy “Fake it ‘till you make it” carrying her through the difficult period after she was assaulted. She described her feeling of shame and her approach to keeping the sexual assault private from others:

It was definitely like faking it till I made it because as much as I wanted people, professors that knew me to maybe kind of ‘know’ to be more lenient, it was still like, ‘Well, no, I don’t want to talk about it. I feel ashamed about it. I don’t want pity. My pride is too high. I don’t want that.’ So. . . because I just didn’t want people to know, I just did my best to try to be the old me.

Overall, feelings of shame and self-blame made it difficult for survivors to reach out for assistance. When participants did disclose that they had been sexually assaulted, the responses they received were often uninformed and caused more hurt for themselves. The negative responses to their disclosure of the sexual assault further exacerbated the negative emotional and mental health consequences by causing participants to blame themselves that the assault occurred and to feel shamed for overreacting to what they experienced.

### **Isolation From Classmates and Professors**

Following their individual incidents of sexual violence, participants did not want to interact with their friends and classmates for fear that someone would notice a difference in them and figure out that they had been sexually assaulted. They were not ready to talk about what had happened to them in part because of the feelings of shame and self-blame. They became less likely to participate in study groups and reach out to a classmate to discuss questions about their

course work. The isolation impacted relationships and also collaborative academic opportunities such as study groups.

All participants became more isolated following the incident of sexual violence. They needed space to process their emotions, so they limited interactions with others to allow them to focus on their own emotional and mental health needs. Daily tasks such as getting to and from classes took all their energy and left them feeling exhausted. P3 stated that she was “stepping back, secluding” herself after the assault. Instead of walking to and from class with friends or classmates, she just focused on getting herself to class and back home.

Participants worried that others would know that something had happened to them. Their efforts to avoid social interactions led to problems with class attendance. P5 described feeling as if it was her against the world after her assault. People tried to help her, but she was not accepting the help. She would say she was fine, nothing happened, and ask people to leave her alone.

I didn't want anything to do with anyone. Didn't want to run into anyone. I felt like somebody would somehow know that something with me had changed, and I didn't want them to know because I didn't want to talk about it, so I just hid. . . One of my classmates straight-up texted me, asking me if I died, because I hadn't attended class in like 2, 3 weeks. I eventually ended up trying to reconnect with some of my classmates, but I never really told them what happened, either, because I wasn't about to tell a bunch of strangers. They did their best to help get me back on my feet; but I wasn't really accepting their help, either. I didn't really want to talk to anyone or get help from anyone or have anything to do with anyone, because I was afraid that they would somehow find out what happened.

For P6, limiting interactions with others was critical to ensuring her safety. She was in the process of securing emergency housing in a confidential location to keep her away from the person who sexually assaulted her. She had to be sure he would not find out that she was leaving her current residence, and that he would not be told of the location of her new residence.

I can talk to people. I don't really have a problem with it, but I know that just in general I'm kind of standoffish in terms of I don't want anyone to know me too well. I guess my



position right now, which may not be pertaining to this, but I'm having to relocate and so a lot of the things that I'm doing are confidential; and I don't want anyone to find out. I don't want the person to find out, so I just feel like everyone knows him and everyone might tell him where I'm going; and so I just keep a lot of things to myself about that sort of stuff, like personal stuff, but I get to know them on an academic level. We'll laugh and giggle about the assignment, related things, but nothing too personal.

Participants who were sexually assaulted in their first semester of college (P1, P4) were still in the process of meeting other freshmen and making friends at their university. They had yet to establish friend groups, which made the isolation even more emotionally challenging. As P1 described,

For me, I don't know if *isolated* is the right word; I was too nervous, I guess, to make new friends here at school because I didn't know who knew what; and I've heard other people just talk about knowing my situation. I didn't really do study groups or anything, and I felt like it was easier to focus on myself and my academics.

P4 lived with two roommates in her dorm room, so it was difficult for her to find time to be alone. She shared that she had an expensive bill for Uber services that semester. She would take an Uber to get away from campus and walk around the city by herself to cry alone and process her thoughts and emotions. She did not want her roommates to see her upset.

In addition to social challenges with classmates, participants also had to manage interactions with their professors. Because of the power differential between professors and students, participants experienced stress about how to manage these interactions. Professors provide the grades for the courses, so participants were concerned about what the professor would think of them if they shared that they were sexually assaulted. Even to share that they were experiencing depression or anxiety, without revealing the source of the depression or anxiety, was challenging, given the stigma surrounding mental illness. On the one hand, participants felt that sharing what they were going through would help the professors understand the reasons behind the change in their academic performance and perhaps allow some leeway on deadlines for coursework. On the other hand, though, this type of disclosure required trust and

vulnerability on the part of the students. And there was no guarantee that the response to the disclosure by the professor would be positive and supportive.

Participants had a difficult time balancing the need for their professors to understand that something had happened that was affecting their academic performance with also not wanting to share that they were sexually assaulted. P2 took the approach of letting her professors know something was going on without telling them any details:

When I didn't feel up for it, I just wouldn't go. I would still reach out to them; but usually I would just send emails from afar and just say, "I'm going through a hard time. I can't show up."

P1 had difficulty communicating with her professors because she was afraid they would think she was making up excuses not to go to class. She heard other people mention that they were depressed fairly often, and she did not want to be perceived as using her depression as an excuse. Because she was worried about her professors thinking she was making up excuses, she never communicated with them about how much she was struggling academically.

P3 and P5 had professors ask them directly whether they were doing okay following the incident of sexual violence. P3 described herself as a student who always has something to say in class; so when her level of participation and engagement in class changed, it was noticeable:

When I would get called out by the teacher, like, "You're not participating like you normally would," it would kind of like make me feel some type of way, where it is kind of like, "Oh; I don't want to go to the next class because they're just going to call me out again. . . and I don't want people next to me to know."

Similarly, P5 was a student who always talked with her professors before and after class to maintain a relationship with them. After the incident, she stopped talking with them, and it was a noticeable change in her behavior.

I kinda scurried in and out of the room when I did attend class. Because one of my professors was my advisor, he even talked to me. He was like, "Are you okay? You haven't been attending class. You always talk to me about class afterwards with any questions you have or anything you want to learn more about, and you haven't been

doing that. Are you okay?” I definitely lied. I said, “Yeah, I’m fine” and just kind of scurried on through.

Participants faced the challenge of making themselves vulnerable to further hurt not only from other persons in general by disclosing their sexual assault or any subsequent anxiety and depression. Likewise, they were challenged to protect themselves emotionally by not sharing what they were going through with their professors and potentially receive a lower grade in a course. If professors knew the context for the participants’ class absences and lower rate of participation, the professors would have had the authority to take that information into account as they determined the students’ academic outcomes in the course. The participants who did not access support resources had to manage interactions and communication with their professors on their own.

### **Impaired Ability to Focus on Academic Tasks**

As participants experienced these negative emotional and mental health consequences, they were unable to focus on their learning, and their performance on academic tasks was impaired. Participants would find themselves staring at their laptops unable to complete an assignment, or sitting in classes and not absorbing any of the information being shared by the professors. Some participants described their lack of focus as due to their constantly thinking about the incident of sexual violence and the aftereffects. Others experienced more of a sense of being “checked out” mentally, in which they were not thinking about the incident, or anything else; they described more a sense of not really feeling present in their own mind.

Following the incident of sexual violence, it was frustrating for participants to try to study, read, and write their assignments while feeling as though they were not processing the course information in the same way they had before the assault. They were good students who

expected to perform well on assignments. When they realized their efforts were no longer producing the same caliber of work, they experienced a sense of wanting to “give up” on school.

To get by in her classes, P4 began copying work from her classmates rather than trying to do it on her own. She also relied on her knowledge from high school, which helped her to get through some of her classes. Eventually, P4 was caught cheating on a homework assignment. “When I got caught for it, it really woke me up in the fact of I could have done this assignment easily. But I just wasn’t into it for some reason. What is this thing that’s distracting me?” She realized she had not been absorbing any of the content of her classes over the past year (since the incident), and she ended up changing her major.

P5 said she “barely made it out” of the semester in which she was sexually assaulted. She described turning in an essay that was due right after the incident, and her professor commented on the change in performance because she “usually writes pretty good essays.”

Everything else just seemed not important in the slightest because I was freaking out, trying to figure out, “Am I pregnant from this? What am I going to do if I am pregnant?” . . . ; with all of these “what ifs,” looking at a book for a test . . . was just pointless. Oh, yeah. That [incident] was all I thought about.

P6 described feeling confused about her “entire life” after she was sexually assaulted. “I guess I just got confused about my entire life, and where I wanted to go, and what I wanted to do, if anything, because I wanted to give up.” She would procrastinate about completing her assignments, and sleep to avoid thinking about what she needed to do. Then she would wake up all through the night at odd hours and stay awake for no reason. In class, she would have to take breaks to compose herself when she was overcome with emotion and could not focus.

When I’m at school, I’ve noticed there are times when I’ll leave class because I can’t really focus; and I don’t really want other people to see me show emotion, so I would leave and go to . . . one of the counselors or workers so that I could just maybe talk to them for a second or cry or whatever. . . and then go back to class once I’ve composed myself and my eyes aren’t red or anything.

P3 described finding herself staring at her computer and wanting to do her assignment; but instead, she just kept staring and could not do her work. She was not feeling emotionally upset; she “just truly could not focus” on her work enough to get it done.

I can still remember sitting there in front of my laptop and wanting to do just a freaking assignment, and like staring. And just I couldn't. I wasn't even thinking about the incident. It was just I really just couldn't focus to get something done. . . it was just so baffling because it was not intentional. I will sit there like, “Okay, let's try again. Let's try again.” Or I would literally be reading something; and then all of a sudden, I'm like, “I don't know what I'm reading.”

Two participants described their experiences with emotionally triggering content (triggers) in their courses. These triggers could be related to a class discussion, or even smells and sounds that unlocked a memory or reminder of the sexual assault. P6 described feeling unsure about what would trigger her emotionally. She said there could be “any topic, and something, just one word, might trigger a feeling and so I just , , , I can't focus.” She would “have all these feelings inside” and no longer be able to hear the professor. According to P6, when she was triggered, “It's like I'm not there.”

P4 described a course in which they were viewing a documentary and reading a novel about violence against women in cultures around the world. P4 had to miss class on the days this topic was discussed.

It was just way too triggering for me that I couldn't go to class. . . I don't want my professors to think that I'm not attending, that my studies aren't still important to me; but I just can't handle that content. It was really triggering for me because, of course, seeing those women and seeing what they had to go through, and thinking back to me and myself, it was really hard.

For P4 and P6, when these episodes happened, the students were not able to fully participate in the learning offered in their courses. They would have to miss the class or leave during class, which significantly disrupted their ability to learn the course material.

To remain in school and finish their degrees at their respective universities, participants had to complete their coursework while experiencing an impaired ability to focus on their academic tasks. Participants described spending hours to read a short portion of text or complete a basic assignment that previously would not have been a challenge. One participant described copying homework from others because she was too distracted to do her own work. Another described having to take breaks from studying and class because she would feel too overwhelmed by her emotions and she could not focus on what was going on around her. Because participants were not always able to predict what would trigger an emotional response or cause them to be unable to focus, they existed in a constant state of vulnerability and felt that the incident of sexual violence had taken control of all aspects of their lives, including their academic life.

### **Losing Motivation and Questioning Academic Goals**

Following the incident of sexual violence, participants described losing their motivation and sense of academic purpose. They recognized that their ability to perform well academically had been impaired, and they began to complete academic work to “get by” rather than feeling excitement and passion about the work. When participants did exert full effort toward their academic work, they were left feeling drained. They needed to conserve their energy to be sure they could complete their other academic tasks.

*Losing motivation.* P1 remembers some points in time where she would “feel really good” and put her full effort into her work, and then there would be times where she just was not capable of that same level of effort. P1 found that accessing her passion and putting her best effort into the work drained her too much. She opted to “stick to more like, I wouldn’t say the

bare minimum, but just enough work to get by. I do have that passion to put in all the work, but sometimes when I do it just drains me a little.”

Placing pressure on themselves to excel in academics meant participants could potentially face additional shame and negative emotions if they failed to meet their goals. By limiting academic risks, they could feel more in control of their academic work and be required to complete only academic tasks they knew they could handle.

For instance, P2 no longer cared about school. She described feeling a

sense of hopelessness and just waiting for [school] to end. . . . Nothing seemed as important to me as it once did my freshman year and my sophomore fall. It just all seemed mediocre, and I didn’t really understand how I took it all so seriously previously, considering how I felt then.

P2 started taking classes that she knew would not be as challenging for her. She registered for classes she knew she could pass, rather than registering for those that genuinely interested her. She opted for a service learning site that was familiar to her rather than one that would present a new challenge. “I was just choosing whatever I could to take the easy route, and doing the least I could just because I didn’t want to put in the effort because I just didn’t find the significance in it anymore.” P2 described the change in her approach to completing her schoolwork:

Following the incident, I would just say my level of care and consideration for the work that I produced changed, whereas before, I would really want to give my professors my best. I was proud of what I could show if I really put my work into it; and I wanted them to know me as my smartest self, my best self. And then, after that point, I was just gonna give them what they wanted to hear; and it didn’t really matter if I could be better than that because I know that I could be better than that, and that’s all I cared about. I just did not care anymore what people thought of me, and if they looked at me as smart or not. I was like, “Well, that’s what you want, that’s what you got.”

P2 also decided against a second-language minor that she had previously been excited about adding:

At that point, it was no question. There was no way I was gonna take another minor. . .  
“I’ll just keep doing what I’m doing, and I don’t need to add anymore because what’s already on my plate seems like enough.”

*Questioning academic goals.* In addition to limiting academic risks, participants reevaluated their choices of major and future professional path. They had lost confidence in their abilities and wondered whether they would be able to succeed on their chosen career path. They doubted themselves in areas that, before the incident, they had never considered to be a potential risk or challenge. For P5, the desire to keep her sexual assault private served as a motivating force for her to “keep it together” academically. “I didn’t obviously feel like studying either, at all. I was not motivated. But I was motivated enough to keep it together, to make sure that nobody knew what was wrong with me.” P5 described second-guessing her choice of major. “What am I going to do if one of my clients comes to me and says, ‘Hello, Doctor; I just got raped. Please help me get through it,’ [when] I couldn’t get through it?”

Participants had a difficult time seeing themselves having a successful future during their struggle to recover from the incident of sexual violence. P3 had been passionate and excited about her major, and then, after the incident, she lost some of that passion and instead worried about whether she could even be successful in that field. Getting her work done was so difficult for P3 that she reached a point at which she felt like quitting. “It just got to a point where it was just so difficult that a part of me did just give up on trying because I was like, ‘I’m not succeeding. I can’t do this.’”

P6 questioned whether she should continue with classes at all when what she really wanted to do was stay home and try to feel safe and secure. “I just felt unsure of myself. If I was even capable or if I even wanted, I guess, to go into the profession that I was going towards, because I wasn’t sure that I could handle it.” Participants had lost confidence in their ability to



succeed in their majors and subsequent career path after graduation. P1 described her thoughts around changing her major:

When the incident happened, it happened in my first semester here at school. I did end up declaring [a major], but because of the incident, I started to struggle with some of my classes. I took the introductory course for the major that following semester after the incident, and I didn't do very well in that class; so then it kind of pushed me down to think like, 'Oh, if I can't even get through this class, how am I going to want to major in it?' So I switched back to undeclared.

*Thoughts about leaving school.* P1, P4, and P5 considered leaving their universities following their incidents of sexual violence. P1 stated, "I did consider leaving. I wanted to leave mostly because, not for the academics, but just the social aspect." P1 was sexually assaulted by a male friend. Some of their mutual friends were upset with her for reporting the incident to the university. Because they shared the same friends, P1 often overheard others talking about her and in some cases supporting the person who sexually assaulted her. Despite these social challenges, P1 decided to stay at her university because of her professors. She felt that she had their support even if she did not tell them exactly why it was needed.

P4 also shared that she thought of leaving her university "all the time, even now." For P4, the individual who had sexually assaulted her was in two of her classes. It was her first semester in college, and she felt pressure not to "make a big deal" about what he had done to her because they shared the same friend group. She wanted to fit in and not cause a disruption among their friends by saying anything about the sexual assault. Seeing the person who sexually assaulted her in class was a constant reminder of the incident. This person would speak to her as if he had done nothing wrong. P4 kept "moving on" through her first semester of college with a "constant wall up." She was afraid to speak in class or engage with classmates in any way that could make her feel vulnerable. She said, "I didn't feel like I wanted to connect to my professors at all because part of me felt still mad at the school, and just mad at everybody, just mad at the

world.” P4 was sexually assaulted in the dorms, so she had to move off campus to escape the reminders of her assault. Moving off campus also helped her limit contact with friends who were also friends with the person who had assaulted her. She felt that the only way she could continue at school was to live alone.

P5 also considered leaving her university. She had been sexually assaulted in her own dorm room and

wanted to get as far away from everything as possible. . . because the rape had happened on campus, in my own dorm room. I wanted to get as far away from it as I could. I didn’t want to have to see the building, want to walk by the room that it happened, didn’t want to see the people who knew my ex.

As participants questioned their previously established major areas of study and career paths, they lost their sense of academic purpose. They were unsure what they wanted to study and questioned whether they would be able to succeed in the careers they had been working toward since entering college. Three of the participants considered leaving their university. These three participants had been sexually assaulted in their first year at their universities. Of the participants who were not sexually assaulted in their first year of school, two (P2, P6) considered a leave of absence but did not take one, and one (P3) did not consider leaving her university but said, “part of me did just give up on trying.” Feeling lost and unsure of the path they were on in school contributed further to poor academic outcomes and negative emotions for participants.

### **Finding Ways to Cope**

Over time, participants realized they had to find ways to cope with the aftereffects of the incidents of sexual violence if they wanted to remain in school. They had to contact professors, study for assignments, write papers, and reengage with classmates. This process was different

for each participant and occurred over different timelines. For all participants, the healing process took time and required support from others.

*Formal support.* For some participants, accessing formal support resources, such as counseling, helped them to heal following the incident. P4 worked with a university counselor and said, “I do still go to counseling. And it’s not really just about what happened to me. But it’s how what had happened to me is still intertwined with everything.”

P3 also utilized counseling services at her university, though she was hesitant at first because she felt ashamed that she needed counseling. She was afraid of the stigma associated with using counseling services despite the fact that she often had recommended the services to other students. At the encouragement of her professor, however, she agreed to make an appointment for counseling.

I did counseling, and that was actually super helpful. Even though I actually didn’t discuss too much of the incident there. . . but I was able to discuss other stuff to, like, lessen my load of emotions, which was really nice. But we did obviously cover some of it. But I think it was so close to it that it was still kind of triggering, so I didn’t want to talk about it.

Participants who accessed support services were able to receive assistance in managing their interactions with professors. They could trust the counselor or victim advocate, and that person could facilitate communication with professors. As an example, P6 accessed formal support resources available through her university. She had already been connected with support resources before the incident of sexual violence, so she decided to disclose the incident to her case worker after it happened. Once she disclosed that she had been sexually assaulted, P6 was referred to a counselor who specialized in healing from sexual violence. The counselor worked at a community agency but would come to her campus to meet with students. P6 also had an academic support worker who assisted with getting her books, reaching out to professors, and

being there for her when she needed to talk. The support staff reached out to a professor on behalf of P6, which helped her to feel confident enough to speak with the professor on her own.

I was really supported. . . The services are just awesome. . . They help you with your academics, and they have the resources, and they're really respected on campus; so they can move things around and have people really help you the way that she did with my professor. But also they're people you can talk to. They're the ones that I would leave class [and go to] when I couldn't focus at all, and they're there to talk to you. Sometimes that's all that I need to get back to where I need to be.

*Informal support.* For the participants who did not utilize formal support resources, such as counseling or a victim advocate, the support of friends was essential to their healing from their incidents of sexual violence. P5 described her experience of regaining trust in others and how that helped her recover academically. She said she began trying in her classes and studying for exams about a year after the incident.

I essentially decided I wanted to start trying somewhere in the middle of the second semester of sophomore year—about a year after, because I had friends who were helping me through it. I had a boyfriend who was more than understanding and who taught me that it's okay to say *no*. You can have your own thoughts, you can do what you want; or if you don't want to do something, you don't have to do it. It just kind of helped me regain trust in people; and it helped take my mind off of it a little bit so I can start focusing on schoolwork again, instead of just how much I couldn't trust anyone anymore.

P2 turned to the use of substances to escape the negative emotions she felt as a result of the sexual assault:

I started being more loose [*sic*]when it comes to trying substances and just not caring as much . . . trying hallucinogens, trying all these things . . . trying ecstasy just like, "Oh, who cares? That'll make me escape reality."

P2 also credited the support of friends with helping her to recover after the incident of sexual violence:

Just at this point, my senior year, now a year and a half, almost 2 years from the incident, I would say that I'm kind of finding just the appreciation for myself and my body again, and trying to make that connection once again, which I tried to separate for so long; and really just trying to holistically take care of myself. It feels good, but it definitely took a whole 2 years and a lot of support around me; and if I didn't have the support I have around me, I can definitely see myself being very low in terms of all sorts of life . . .

academic, social, everything. I really owe it to the people around me to have helped put myself back up, as well as myself.

For participants to cope with the aftereffects of the incident of sexual violence, they had to talk about what happened to them and be open to receiving support from others. Some participants disclosed their sexual assaults to formal resources, and others disclosed the incidents to a close friend or family member. As participants began to rebuild their trust in others, they were slowly able to reduce their need for isolation and reintegrate into their academic communities on their own terms.

### **Healing and Reconnection**

Over time, and with the support of others, participants were able to readjust to academic life following their respective incidents of sexual violence. They rediscovered their academic motivation and were able to focus less on the incidents of sexual violence and more on other aspects of their lives, including academics. As participants began to heal, they started to feel like they had more control over their lives, and they were able to recommit themselves to their academic tasks. One way the participants reconnected with their sense of academic purpose was to remind themselves of why they were at their university and the goals they had established before the incidents of violence.

P1 described how attending her university had been a long-term goal:

Moving to this area had been a goal for me for a very long time, since I was in high school. I didn't want to let something really control my whole life, so that's why I've been trying to just stay out here and finish.

P4 also shared that, as she healed, she was determined not to let the incident change the path she had created for herself:

Before that incident even had happened, my education, my career plan, was always there. And I'm not gonna let that change because of what he did to me. . . So definitely my grades are a lot better. And that's just because I'm more into my classes. And I'm doing research now because I reached out. And my internship now is because I reached out, and

got my own mentor, and got myself on track. And even with the apartment and everything, just being on my own, being able to be in charge of things, and getting back into the things that I wanted to be into when I first started college.

P6 was interviewed about two months after she had been sexually assaulted. She shared that she was also sexually assaulted as a teenager. She felt that her experience recovering from an incident of sexual violence in the past helped her to move through the stages of healing more quickly than if this had been the first such incident she had experienced. Because only 2 months had passed between the incident and her interview, P6 was able to describe in detail the changes between how she felt immediately after the event until the time of the interview.

I guess closer to the more recent time, it was just like I'm reaching out more, and I'm talking more about the experience, and I'm able to articulate it in a way where it can help me because I know what I need to think about in order to bring myself out of that place where I'm depressed and don't want to get my kids ready and go to school that morning, and don't necessarily . . . I just want to drag my feet and not think about what I need to do or why I'm doing it. I know what to do to pull myself out of there now. Right after the incident, I wasn't worried about pulling myself out of there. I wanted to fully . . . Maybe I didn't want to fully feel those feelings, but I wasn't ready to *not* feel it because I guess I didn't know how. Now I feel like I do. I have an idea of like, "Okay, think about your goals; think about why you're doing what you're doing; think about the fact that, even though I do feel it—and I know the research on this—but even though I feel like it was my fault, I know that I didn't have control over somebody else's actions." And so the most control that I can take is over allowing myself to continue on and do what I had on my mind before it. That's kind of where I'm at now.

For P5, it took about a year for her to reengage academically. She believed her academic recovery was due to the support system of her friends. She had a new boyfriend and no longer stayed in contact with friends who supported her ex-boyfriend after the incident of sexual violence. As she reconnected with a new set of friends and a supportive partner, P5 was able to renew her focus on academics.

It's definitely better. I'm definitely actually trying in my classes now. It doesn't bother me as much anymore, because I've gotten a much better support system since then. I'm able to try in my classes, study for exams. It's definitely gotten a lot better. It took like a year.

Two participants described feeling that they were not quite the same students they were before the incident of sexual violence. While all participants described how they were different as students following the incident of sexual violence, P3 and P2 described the changes they experienced as more permanent. P3 spoke of trying to be like her “old self” after the incident. She described the aftereffects of the sexual assault as “still lingering,” in that she never really recovered her confidence:

To this day, I’m still ashamed of that. So it’s kind of I need to prove. . . this and that. But I wouldn’t say that it’s necessarily altogether gone. And I think also because it’s not fully addressed yet. I wish it was over with, but it’s not. I know it’s different times for everybody. So it’s just kind of like it still lingers in a way. . . And I feel like I’m a bit slower, and I think that brings down my confidence in classes. . . But then also, definitely aside from academic, definitely personally, I do feel a little bit different just in the things that I do or say or how I deal with stuff, which I feel then reflects academically. I feel like they reflect on each other.

P2 said the student she was her freshman year “never really returned” after the incident of sexual violence. She accepted the changes that had occurred and found peace with the new type of student she had become following the incident:

Now we’re just ready for the next step after college and moving on from there. . . I really have never gotten back to that freshman year self who just wanted to be on top of everything and wanted to care about everything and wanted to give my best. That person just never really returned. I’ve adapted to who I am now . . . who I am in school, at least . . . my academic self. I would just say that she never came back after it happened. Now we’re just working with a different type of person.

As participants healed from the incident of sexual violence, they were able to reconnect with classmates and friends, and they regained a sense of control in their lives. They reminded themselves of the academic goals they had set for themselves before the incident, and they could see a future in which they could be successful in their academic pursuits. The process of healing and reconnection was unique for each participant, and the timeline varied. For some, the changes that occurred within them as students felt permanent; and though they were able to readjust to their academic life, they did so as a different type of student.

## Academic Identity As More Than GPA

A college student's GPA is a critical marker of academic success. For participants who were receiving financial aid, maintaining a specified GPA was required to receive their funding. A minimum GPA is also important for applying to graduate programs and pursuing other opportunities after graduation. Participants shared an awareness of the potential impact their actions would have on their GPA, and they felt a sense of frustration that their GPA would not be able to capture all they overcame following the incident of sexual violence. P1 described her sense of awareness regarding her GPA:

My GPA from my first school year—last year, ended with like a 3.0. It kind of made me feel a little bad because it was pretty low for me; but then I looked back and I realized that I was handling a lot, so I wasn't too upset about it because I know that I tried. Then, I kind of think about it, and I think, "Well, I know I'm trying to do my part, but I know the world won't see that in a way"; and I can't explain to everybody, and I wouldn't want to really explain to everybody, why I didn't do so well. That's a little overwhelming.

Participants who had always been successful students and maintained a certain GPA now found themselves with a GPA that did not accurately reflect their academic abilities. Participants reported the most significant drop in their GPA either during the semester in which the incident of sexual violence occurred, or the semester immediately following that semester, or both. As P2 described,

I've always been, in the past, a pretty straight-A, straight-B student; so just having Cs on there was something very out of the ordinary for me. Same with my junior year. I had a lot more Bs than As. . . To an average person, it would probably still be considered good. Bs, some Cs here and there, and then some light As here and there. But for me and the student I was prior, it [the incident] definitely reflected on my academics.

For some participants, maintaining a GPA of 3.0 or above was required to maintain financial support. They were very aware that, no matter how much they were struggling, they had to keep their overall GPA above a 3.0. P4 said that keeping her scholarship was "why I really kept it together." She had missed many classes the semester in which she was sexually



assaulted; and one of her friends reminded her that, if she failed her classes, she would lose her scholarship. It was this conversation with a friend that motivated her to return to classes and do what she could to salvage her grades that semester.

P3 was also under pressure to maintain a 3.0 GPA to keep her funding. For P3, her GPA fell below a 3.0, and she lost a scholarship she had been receiving. She had to take out a loan to cover the difference. When she lost her funding, P3 was “shaken up,” and she rededicated herself to her studies. She was able to make all As in following semesters to raise her GPA back above a 3.0, but that did not change the fact that she had already lost her scholarship.

Participants expressed awareness of their GPAs and the potential impacts depending upon what type of grades they received in the semesters following the incident of sexual violence. Their academic identities were tied to a number that would forever remain on their academic transcripts as an inaccurate reflection of their academic abilities. For participants who usually did well in school, even a small decline in GPA would serve as a reminder of the permanent damage that resulted from the incident of sexual violence.

### **General Structure of the Academic Experience of Participants**

To summarize, the eight essential constituents of the academic experience of participants following their personal incidents of sexual violence were (a) negative emotional and mental health consequences; (b) shame and self-blame; (c) isolation from classmates and professors; (d) impaired ability to focus on academic tasks; (e) losing motivation and questioning academic goals; (f) finding ways to cope; (g) healing and reconnection; and (h) academic identity as more than GPA.

Using the descriptive phenomenological psychological method developed by Amedeo Giorgi (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003) in the next phase of Step 4 of the data analysis, I synthesized the

eight essential constituents into a single general structure to describe the psychological essence of the academic experience following the incident of sexual violence for all participants (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003). As Giorgi and Giorgi (2003) stated,

The purpose of the structure is to help understand the empirical data in a more methodical and systemic way (p. 255). . . .The structure generalizes in a psychologically meaningful way and it helps deepen the essential understanding of the experience by reducing myriad details to their essential components. (p. 256)

The following summary statement/paragraph of the general structure of the academic experience of participants provides the answer to the primary research question of this study, “How do college student survivors of sexual violence describe their academic experience following the incident of sexual violence?”:

Following the incident of sexual violence, *P* experiences negative emotional and mental health consequences, including shock, denial, confusion, fear, anxiety, insomnia, and depression. Her attention is pulled away from academics toward concerns of personal safety and health. She replays the incident in her mind, wondering what she could have done differently, despite knowing intellectually it was not her fault. This sense of self-blame is the basis of the shame she feels. *P* does not want anyone to know what happened. She genuinely fears how others will respond if she discloses the incident. She knows she should get help, but she does not want to talk about it. *P* retreats into isolation. She needs to protect herself, and she cannot trust others to help her. She also knows that if she wants to remain in college, she will have to return to class and interact with her classmates and professors. *P* puts up an emotional wall and only speaks in class when doing so is essential to passing her courses. She has difficulty focusing and concentrating on her academic tasks. She feels emotionally drained if she puts her full effort and passion into her academic work, so her motivation wanes. *P* starts to question her ability to succeed at anything and worries she will fail in her chosen career path. She thinks about quitting school. *P* realizes she must find a way to cope with the aftereffects of the sexual violence if she wants to graduate from college. She finds a way to cope on her own, through friends, or through formal support resources. Over time, *P* begins to heal from the incident of sexual violence. She starts to regain trust in others and feel more in control of her life. She reconnects with friends, classmates, and professors. As *P* heals and rebuilds her support network, she may no longer be the same student she was before the incident of sexual violence; but she finds a way to reengage in academic life. *P* is aware of the potential impact of the incident of sexual violence on her GPA, and that she must accept that her GPA may no longer accurately reflect who she is as a student.

## **CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION**

The current study addressed a gap in the research literature by providing the basis for gaining a deeper understanding of the psychological mechanisms through which sexual violence negatively impacts the academic experience of college student survivors of sexual violence. As presented in Chapter 4, I analyzed interview data using the descriptive phenomenological psychological method developed by Amedeo Giorgi (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003) to reveal eight essential constituents that interact with each other to constitute the general structure of the academic experience of participants following an incident of sexual violence (see Chapter 4, “Essential Constituents”). The general structure of the academic experience of participants who experienced sexual violence (see Chapter 4, “General Structure of the Academic Experience of Participants”; Appendix E) “deepen[s] the essential understanding of the experience by reducing myriad details to their essential components” (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003, p. 256) and provides the answer to the research question in this study, “How do college student survivors of sexual violence describe their academic experience following an incident of sexual violence?”

### **Impact of Sexual Violence on Academic Experience**

The discussion in this chapter begins with a review of the impact of sexual violence on the academic experiences of study participants. The impact is identified using the eight essential constituents as they relate to relevant research discussed in Chapter 2. The chapter concludes with delimitations and limitations of the study, implications for practice/application, and suggested areas for future research.

### **Psychological Consequences**

The *negative emotional and mental health consequences* participants experienced were consistent with those documented by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC). According to the

CDC's National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Division of Violence Prevention (CDC/NCIP/DVP, 2019), some of the immediate and chronic psychological consequences of sexual violence include shock, fear, confusion, denial, anxiety, shame or guilt, sleep disturbances, depression, PTSD, and generalized anxiety. Research has suggested that most survivors of sexual assault experience symptoms of PTSD immediately following the assault, and that most survivors also experience a decline in symptoms over time (Steenkamp et al., 2012). For most participants in this study, the negative psychological and emotional consequences followed this pattern of initial intensity, with a reduction in symptoms over time. Depending on when in the academic term the incident occurred, students reported both different and differing levels of impact on their academic performance. When the incident of sexual violence occurred later in the semester, students had completed the bulk of the work for the course, and thus the most severe negative emotional and mental health consequences they experienced affected fewer course assignments. One participant, however, did not share this same pattern of negative emotional and mental health consequences. For this participant, it was after she went home for the holiday break and returned to campus that she began to experience symptoms of depression. Although the exact psychological consequences varied, as did the timeline of the intensity of the symptoms, all participants experienced negative emotional and mental health consequences.

### **Self-Protection**

All participants also experienced feelings of *shame and self-blame*, which contributed to their *isolation from classmates and professors*. Similar to the findings of Holland and Cortina (2017), feelings of self-blame were one of the main reasons participants did not want to disclose their respective incidents to anyone, including counselors and other support staff. Even when

participants knew intellectually that their sexual assault was not their fault, they found themselves replaying the incident in their minds to think about what they could have done differently. This sense of self-blame is the basis of the shame they experienced. Consistent with the findings of Draucker et al. (2009), these survivors experienced the incident of sexual violence as a betrayal of trust that resulted in their protecting themselves by ending contact with other people, avoiding new relationships, and keeping the sexual violence secret to prevent potential negative or hurtful responses to a disclosure.

Following sexual assault, survivors feel a sense of vulnerability and begin to constrict their daily activities, staying at home, and avoiding situations that resemble the setting of their assault (Draucker et al., 2009). For the participants in this study, their experience was similar to what Draucker et al. (2009) discussed. The daily activities that were constricted for participants included attending classes and interacting with classmates and professors, both of which are essential to performing well academically. All participants shared that they did not want their professors to know what had happened to them. Initially after the incident, some of these students stopped attending classes, with no communication to their professors regarding why they were absent. Others contacted their professors to let them know they were going through a hard time and had to miss class, but they did not share any details. For participants who regularly contributed to class discussions, the change in behavior was more noticeable. All these participants were forced to sacrifice both collaborative learning opportunities and potential relationships with other students and faculty after their incidents of sexual violence. They described not attending classes, going places by themselves instead of walking with friends, and refraining from engaging in social events and campus activities.

## **Social Impact**

According to the CDC (2019), the social impact of sexual violence includes strained relationships with family, friends, and intimate partners; less frequent contact with friends and relatives; and isolation from or ostracism by family or friend groups (CDC/NCIPC/DVP, 2019). Consistent with the findings of Krebs et al. (2016), participants in the current study were greatly affected by the social impact of the incident of sexual violence. According to the Krebs et al. (2016) findings, the most common set of problems college student survivors of sexual violence cited in a survey conducted at nine college campuses was problems with friends, roommates, or peers (Krebs et al., 2016). These problems included getting into more arguments than before, not feeling friends could be trusted as much, and not feeling as close to friends as they had before the incident of sexual violence (Krebs et al., 2016). Four of the six participants were in the same friend group with the person who sexually assaulted them. These individuals described interactions with mutual friends in which they were not believed and were treated as though they were overreacting to the incident. One reason negative reactions are so common is the existence of cultural “rape myths.” Examples of these myths include the false belief that failing to say “no” verbally is consent, or that a current dating relationship constitutes consent to sexual activity, or that women commonly “make up” stories of sexual violence. In some instances, the responses of friends led participants to permanently end their relationships with those friends. In addition to suffering from the loss of the relationship, participants also suffered from the negative emotional impact of the friends’ negative responses to their disclosure.

## **Cognitive Effects**

According to the research literature, student survivors of sexual violence have problems concentrating, studying, and attending classes (Carr, 2005). They are not able to think as quickly

as they did previously, and they experience restlessness, fatigue, and insomnia (Ulirsch et al., 2014), all of which negatively impact their ability to study and focus in class. Survivors also struggle to maintain their focus on academic work while they are focused on avoiding physical and emotional reminders of the incident (DeLoveh & Cattaneo, 2017).

Similar to the findings of Carr (2005), Ulirsch et al. (2014), and DeLoveh and Cattaneo (2017), participants in this study spoke of the challenges they faced when they were unable to focus on their schoolwork and when they encountered emotionally triggering content in their courses. They would feel overwhelmed with emotion and find they could not pay attention to their professors during class. Participants described the difficulty they had retaining information as they read an assignment or tried to write an essay. As participants suffered an *impaired ability to focus on academic tasks*, they began *losing motivation and questioning academic goals*.

Participants who were early in their academic track when the incident occurred considered changing their majors. Participants who were further along in their degree track at the time of the incident experienced self-doubt in their major area of study; they registered for easier courses, and they selected less challenging field-work opportunities.

### **Persistence to Graduation**

Mengo and Black (2015) examined the impact of sexual and physical/verbal violence on the academic performance of college students. They found that college student survivors of sexual violence were less likely to persist to graduation than students who experienced physical/verbal victimization (Mengo & Black, 2015). And first-year students were more likely to leave their institution after an incident of relationship violence (physical or sexual) than students at other academic levels (Mengo & Black, 2015). In the current study, when asked about whether they thought of leaving their universities, the three participants who were sexually

assaulted in their first year of college said “yes.” For the remaining participants, the incident of sexual violence did not occur in their first year of college. When asked the same question, two participants said they had considered a leave of absence or taking time off from school rather than withdrawing from the institution, and one participant did not consider leaving her university.

These responses may offer some support for the findings of Mengo and Black (2015), that students who experience an incident of violence during their first year in college are more likely to leave the institution than students who experience an incident of violence at other academic levels. The students in the current study who experienced an incident of sexual violence during their first year did not actually leave, but all three of them did consider doing so following the incident of sexual violence. For the two participants who were sexually assaulted in the first semester of their first year of college, their decision to stay at their universities was related to the academic opportunities available to them. Both participants cited the social aspects of their college experience as what made them want to leave their schools.

### **Seeking Help**

In a large-scale study Krebs et al. (2016) conducted regarding college student survivors of sexual violence, only 12.5% of rapes were reported to school officials, a crisis center, health care center, campus security, or local police. Reasons students gave for not reporting the incident included not needing assistance, not thinking the incident was serious enough to report, not wanting any action taken, feeling self-blame, experiencing fear of getting into trouble, and having concerns about retaliation from others (Krebs et al., 2016). Consistent with the findings of Krebs et al. (2016), for participants in the current study *finding ways to cope* began with trying to manage the aftereffects of the incident of sexual violence on their own. They did not contact



any type of emergency medical or counseling services in the immediate hours following the incident of sexual violence.

DeLoveh and Cattaneo (2017) used a grounded-theory approach to examine the ways in which college student survivors of sexual assault make decisions about seeking help. Their research produced a model of decision making that involved four options: (a) cope on my own, (b) seek support from friends/family, (c) seek support from formal resources, or (d) seek help covertly, whereby needs are met without disclosure of the assault (DeLoveh & Cattaneo, 2017). The model described an iterative process wherein survivors may try one approach, such as coping on their own, find that insufficient, and then decide to seek one of the other types of help (DeLoveh & Cattaneo, 2017). The current study offers support for this model. Although initially after the incident of sexual violence participants attempted to cope on their own, they eventually sought help in the form of talking with friends and family, or with a formal support resource such as a counselor. Two participants offered examples of covert help-seeking. One person described receiving support from friends over her breakup without ever sharing with the friends that the reason she and her partner broke up was that he had sexually assaulted her. Another person described asking professors for assistance through a “hard time” rather than disclosing the sexual assault.

The research literature provides some basis for understanding why participants eventually needed to talk with someone about what happened to them, rather than cope on their own, to experience *healing and reconnection*. For example, Allen (2005) describes how coping with trauma requires that a survivor think about and process the traumatic event while gaining control over both the painful emotions associated with the event and the self-protective defenses, such as avoidance, they may use to protect against the painful emotions. And as Joseph and Linley

(2008) stated, individuals who have experienced a traumatic event often need the support of others to allow themselves to remember and talk about the trauma.

### **Support Resources**

In their examination of the reasons sexual assault survivors do not use campus supports, Holland and Cortina (2017) found that alternatives to using formal support resources included using informal sources of support (friends, family), and ignoring or denying the assault (Holland & Cortina, 2017). Participants in the current study described the support they received from friends as a critical aspect of their healing process. These participants also provided examples of ignoring or denying the sexual assault. As Allen (2005) described, survivors of a traumatic event commonly used avoidance as a self-protective defense: When the emotions were too painful, participants found ways to avoid feeling them. For example, one participant began using drugs to “escape” feelings and another would sleep to avoid negative emotions.

Eisenberg et al. (2016) examined associations between sexual-violence prevention resources and the emotional well-being of female students who experienced sexual assault, and the researchers found that institutional resources dedicated to survivors of sexual violence are positively associated with mental health for female college student survivors of sexual violence. Students at institutions with fewer resources reported a greater number of days when their health interfered with their daily activities (Eisenberg et al., 2016). The current study may offer some support for the findings of Eisenberg et al. (2016) in that the one participant whose university had the most robust set of support services (academic, advocacy, counseling) found the support resources to be the most helpful.

## **Changed Academic Self**

Research has shown that traumatic incidents, such as sexual assault, are events that are understood as “happening to” a person and thus are conceptualized and interpreted in a manner that suggests the person, or self, was affected or changed in some way by the incident (Lilgendahl, McLean, & Mansfield, 2013). In a study using a grounded-theory approach to examine relational experiences of trauma survivors, Tummala-Narra, Kallivayalil, Singer, and Andreini (2012) found that experiencing a changing sense of self was one of the three broad domains that emerge for participants. The other domains that emerged were revisiting issues of safety and forming new ways of relating (Tummala-Narra et al., 2012).

This description held true for participants as they described their “old self” before the incident as a different person than who they were after the incident. One participant stated directly, “I really have never gotten back to that freshman-year self who just wanted to be on top of everything and wanted to care about everything and wanted to give my best. That person just never really returned.”

As reviewed in Chapter 2, several research studies have demonstrated that experiencing an act of sexual violence is associated with lower college GPA and increased likelihood of withdrawal from the university (Baker et al., 2016; Jordan et al., 2014; Mengo & Black, 2015). Baker et al. (2016) conducted two studies to examine the relationship between sexual violence and academic performance and found that sexual violence predicted GPA at graduation, even when other established predictors of academic performance were taken into account. Additionally, exposure to more types of sexual violence predicted poorer college academic performance. The researchers also found that sexual violence was the only factor related to why those students in the study who left college did so (Baker et al., 2016). Jordan et al. (2014)

found that female students who were sexually assaulted before college, and those assaulted during their first semester, had a lower GPA after their first semester in college than other female students. Studies by Patterson Silver Wolf et al. (2016) and Banyard et al. (2017) produced similar findings.

The current study supports the findings of these studies, while also providing a richer framework from which to understand *academic identity as more than GPA* for college student survivors of sexual violence. A detailed description of participants' thoughts about their GPA revealed that most of them were quite aware that a drop in their GPA could mean a loss of funding (scholarships and financial aid). The results of this study also reveal the emotional impact of having a lower GPA following an incident of sexual violence. For these participants, their academic identity was misrepresented by a GPA that did not accurately reflect their true academic abilities. They were left with a permanent reminder of the negative impact of the incident of sexual violence on their academic experience. One participant spoke about feeling "overwhelmed" when she thought about the fact that her GPA was low for her as a result of the incident of sexual violence. She knew the context for her lower GPA and knew she had tried; but of others, she said, "I know the world won't see that in a way; and I can't explain to everybody, and I wouldn't want to really explain to everybody, why I didn't do so well."

In summary, the academic experience of participants in the current study, as revealed through the eight essential constituents presented in Chapter 4, is consistent with and supported by the research literature regarding the consequences of sexual violence. Participants experienced negative psychological and social impacts that impaired their academic abilities and were changed as students as a result of experiencing the incident of sexual violence. Discussion of support resources and the process of healing and reconnection for participants revealed unique

aspects of the process of recovery for these college students as they pursued their undergraduate education following an incident of sexual violence.

### **Delimitations and Limitations**

The delimitations of the current study were established by the process of defining who was eligible to participate. This study included currently enrolled, undergraduate college students, age 18 and older, who were survivors of sexual violence while enrolled in college. The participants had to be currently enrolled in college so they could speak about their academic experience following the incident of sexual violence. Students who had decided to quit school following an incident of sexual violence may have had a different academic experience than those who remained in school.

The current study also had several limitations worth noting. First, the nature of the research methodology I used required an in-depth examination of the experiences of a small number of participants. Thus, it is likely that there are other student survivors who will have had a different academic experience than those who participated in this study. And the impact of the researcher's perspective on the analysis of the data should be considered when contextualizing the results. Although I have provided extensive quotes from participants as evidence for why the eight specified constituents were determined to be essential, it is possible that a different researcher may have identified slightly different constituents than those I as the researcher in this study determined as essential.

### **Implications**

The current study provides important information for those interested in understanding the academic experience of college student survivors of sexual violence. The eight essential constituents revealed in the current study can be used as the basis for educating university

faculty, staff, and students about the impact of sexual violence on a student's academic experience. This study also has implications for ways in which universities may be able to improve support resources for college student survivors of sexual violence.

### **Education for University Faculty, Staff, and Students**

University faculty and staff can provide better direct support for student survivors if they understand the aftereffects of an incident of sexual violence for a college student. Some faculty may be more willing and better able to provide appropriate academic accommodations if they understand the challenges the student is facing. Other university employees who directly interact with students, such as Residence Life staff and other student support employees, may be more inclined to offer alternative housing arrangements, adjust the student's course schedule, or issue directives that require no contact between the survivor and the accused individual.

The current study also revealed the need for university faculty, staff, and students to be educated about how to use supportive language when speaking to and about the issue of sexual violence. Because disclosing a sexual assault to others can influence the survivor's emotional states, coping mechanisms, and meaning they attribute to the event (Joseph & Linley, 2008), employees and students need to be educated on the effects of trauma and what to say and not say when a student discloses an incident of sexual violence. Participants shared examples of instances in which friends of participants, a counselor, and a professor impaired the healing of a participant as a result of their lack of fundamental education and training on the issue of sexual violence.

Another important area for education that emerged related to developing the skills to recognize when a student would benefit from a referral to support resources. The participants in this study described how much they were struggling, and that fellow students and professors

noticed something was wrong with them. Education for university employees and students should include tips on when and how to refer students to support resources. Students do not have to disclose a sexual assault for others to notice that something has changed in their behavior. If a student who normally writes a good essay starts to turn in a noticeably different caliber of work, for example, that should be a red flag to the professor. If classmates notice a change in their friend's behavior or increasing absences from classes, they could report their concern to appropriate resources.

### **Support Resources for College Student Survivors of Sexual Violence**

In addition to the need for focused education for university faculty, staff, and students on issues related to sexual violence, the current study also revealed several ways in which universities may be able to improve the support they offer for college student survivors of sexual violence. One implication is the need for universities to allow students to access and receive assistance from support resources without disclosing the incident of sexual violence.

Participants shared that they were hesitant to access formal support resources for reasons of shame, self-blame, and fear of a negative response. In their study of help-seeking behavior of college student survivors of sexual violence, DeLoveh and Cattaneo (2017) found that shame emerged as a barrier to students seeking help, regardless of whether or not the provider might be helpful. Thus, even if the provider is judged to be helpful, students still resist connecting with them (DeLoveh & Cattaneo, 2017).

Participants in this study shared that they did not want to talk about what happened. If students had known that they could receive assistance without having to talk about the sexual violence, they may have been more likely to get help. There are potential implications here that suggest student-support offices could emphasize in their promotional materials that students can

receive support and assistance without being questioned about why they need the resources. For example, students can share that they are having a difficult time and discuss their anxiety, depression, and insomnia rather than having to disclose that those symptoms arose following an incident of sexual violence. Over time, as trust is built, student survivors may be more likely to want to talk about what happened to them. Even if the students choose not to share what happened, the negative impact on their GPAs could be lessened, and they could be more likely to persist through graduation with the additional academic and emotional support.

The outcomes from the current study also provide guidance regarding the types of support that might benefit college student survivors of sexual violence. In particular, the development and promotion of academic support resources for college student survivors of sexual violence was revealed as a potential avenue for connecting survivors with support resources. DeLoveh and Cattaneo (2017) noted that, even when the student survivors were aware that advocacy resources existed, they were not as certain about how the resources might help them. Other than the one participant who received a robust set of support resources (advocacy, counseling, and academic support), participants in this study who received counseling were still left to manage their academic challenges on their own.

The findings from the current study indicate that communication with professors is a critical support service that universities could provide for student survivors of sexual violence. Because professors are in a position of authority over the student, initiating communication when the student survivor is already feeling vulnerable often results in the student avoiding the professor. If some type of communication were made instead by university support staff on behalf of the student, attendance may be less impacted. And support staff, on behalf of the



student who is struggling, could request academic accommodations, such as extending due dates for assignments.

As a best practice, many universities can assist students in crisis by emailing professors and advocating for academic accommodations that are warranted when a student unexpectedly encounters an emergency outside the student's control. In addition to the medical and psychological support resources, universities can better promote the academic support options available to students. A student survivor who is not interested in health-related resources may be open to academic support. The benefits of being offered academic assistance are clear to students, and the effects are immediate. Ideally, once students see the helpfulness of the academic support, they may reconsider accessing other university support resources, as well.

Finally, the current study revealed the importance of quality relationships between first-year students and their faculty, and also the importance of connecting first-year students with exciting and engaging academic opportunities. The two participants in the current study who were sexually assaulted in their first semester of college considered leaving their universities. Their decision to stay at their universities was based upon the academic opportunities available to them, and their relationships with their professors. This finding should be shared with faculty and academic leaders as further evidence of the importance of academic engagement for first-year students. This outcome is also important for support staff, to recognize the need to further support and encourage opportunities for academic engagement in their work with first-year students.

### **Future Research**

The current study provides the basis for gaining a deeper understanding of the academic experience of study participants following an incident of sexual violence. All participants in this

study remained enrolled at their institutions despite the significant challenges they faced. Future research could examine the academic experience of college student survivors of sexual violence who withdrew from their universities. The academic experience of these students compared to that of students who survived sexual violence and remained enrolled may offer unique insights into the retention of college student survivors of sexual violence.

A second area worthy of future research based on the findings of the current study would be to examine what type of academic support options universities offer to student survivors. In conjunction with this examination would be to assess whether those support resources are accessed more often than other types of student support resources.

Additionally, although the focus of the current study was on the academic experience of college student survivors of sexual violence, future research should examine more closely the social consequences for first-year college student survivors of sexual violence. For participants in this study who experienced an incident of sexual violence in their first year of college, the social consequences were discussed more prominently than by participants who experienced an incident of sexual violence in other years of college. And those social consequences were the basis for the first-year students to consider leaving their universities. All participants in this study described retreating into isolation following the incident of sexual violence, but there is evidence here to suggest that the unique impacts of first-year students isolating themselves from classmates and professors are worthy of further investigation.

Finally, as a general suggestion for future research, the identification of the eight essential constituents of the academic experience of participants offers a starting point for further exploration. Looking into any one of the eight essential constituents in more depth could further

illuminate the role of that constituent in the academic experience of college student survivors of sexual violence.

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## **APPENDIX A: RECRUITMENT FLYER**

### **Seeking Volunteers**

College students ages 18 and older to talk about their college academic experience following an incident of sexual violence in a one-hour interview.

### **Research Study**

How do college student survivors of sexual violence describe their academic experience following an incident of sexual violence?

### **Benefit of Research**

This research will be used to improve academic support resources for college student survivors of sexual violence.

### **Compensation**

**\$25**

### **More Information**



**<https://tinyurl.com/1in5academicexperience>**

Lorisa Lorenzo ~ Doctoral Candidate ~ Colorado State University  
Email ~ Phone

Support Resources  
RAINN (Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network):  
<https://www.rainn.org>  
National Hotline: 800-656-HOPE



## APPENDIX B: INTERESTED-PARTICIPANTS FORM

### Interest in Research Study

One in five college students experience sexual violence, yet there are no research studies asking students to describe their academic experience following an incident of sexual violence. This study will be the first to ask college student survivors of sexual violence to describe their academic experience. This research is necessary in order for colleges and universities to better support student survivors in their academic pursuits.

Every survivor's story is important. In this research study, I will be interviewing the following group of survivors:

- \* Age 18 and older
- \* Currently enrolled as an undergraduate student in a US college or university
- \* Experienced an act of sexual violence while enrolled as an undergraduate student in college

To protect the identity of participants and any others involved in the incident of sexual violence, the names of colleges and universities and any other details regarding the specifics of the incident of sexual violence will not be collected. Information gathered will be only about the participant's academic experience. Participants are free to withdraw from the study at any time.

**About the Researcher:** Lorisa Lorenzo is a doctoral candidate in the Higher Education Leadership program at Colorado State University and is conducting this research for her doctoral dissertation. Lorisa has worked in higher education for over 15 years supporting college students through her various roles in Student Affairs. Lorisa is conducting this research under the supervision of her dissertation advisor, the principle investigator, CSU Professor Dr. Sharon Anderson.

**Compensation:** All participants will receive \$25 in appreciation for their time (1–2 hour conversation with researcher online via Zoom or in person).

**Note:** The researcher is the only one with access to responses on this form.

What is your age?

Are you currently enrolled as an undergraduate student in a US college or university? (Options: Yes, No)

### Definition of Sexual Violence

The term sexual violence is an all-encompassing, nonlegal term that refers to crimes such as sexual assault, rape, and sexual abuse (RAINN, 2018). Sexual violence is a sexual act that is committed or attempted by another person without freely given consent of the victim or against someone who is unable to consent or refuse. Sexual violence includes forced or alcohol/drug-facilitated penetration of a victim; forced or alcohol/drug-facilitated incidents in which the victim was made to penetrate a perpetrator or someone else; nonphysically pressured, unwanted penetration (i.e., use of verbal pressure or intimidation); intentional sexual touching; or

noncontact acts of a sexual nature (i.e., verbal sexual harassment, unwanted exposure to pornography, or unwanted filming of sex acts). Sexual violence can also occur when a perpetrator forces or coerces a victim to engage in sexual acts with a third party (Basile et al., 2014).

Did you survive an act of sexual violence while enrolled as an undergraduate student in a U.S. college or university? (Options: Yes, No)

Are you willing/able to share your academic experience following the incident of sexual violence? (**Note:** You do not have to describe the incident of sexual violence, only your academic experience following the incident.) (Options: Yes, No)

### **Contact Information**

If you meet the study criteria and are interested in participating in this study, please provide an email address and phone number below. This information will be kept private. If you prefer to call me, instead of completing this form, you can reach me at xxx-xxx-xxxx.

Within 24 hours, an email that contains more information about the study, including a consent form to participate, will be sent via email. What is the best email address to use to send this information? (Short answer text box to respond)

Within 24 hours, the researcher will call you to schedule an interview time. What is the best number to call? (Short answer text box to respond)

After the form is submitted, the following confirmation message appears on the screen:

Thank you for your interest in participating. I will contact you within 24 hours by phone to schedule an interview time. You also will receive an email with more detailed information about the study.

**Resources:** <https://www.rainn.org/national-resources-sexual-assault-survivors-and-their-loved-ones>

**National Sexual Assault Hotline:** National hotline, operated by RAINN, which serves people affected by sexual violence. It automatically routes the caller to their nearest sexual assault service provider. Hotline: 800.656.HOPE



## **APPENDIX C: INFORMED CONSENT FORM**

### **Consent to Participate in a Research Study Colorado State University**

#### **TITLE OF STUDY:**

Exploring the Academic Experience of College Student Survivors of Sexual Violence: A Phenomenological Inquiry

#### **PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR:**

Sharon Anderson, PhD, Professor, School of Education, email: sharon.anderson@colostate.edu; phone, 970-491-6861.

#### **CO-PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR:**

Lorisa Lorenzo, Doctoral Candidate, School of Education, email: lorisa.lorenzo@colostate.edu; phone, 707-797-0480.

#### **WHY AM I BEING INVITED TO TAKE PART IN THIS RESEARCH?**

This study examines the academic experience of college student survivors of sexual violence. You have identified yourself as a college student who is at least 18-years-old who has had this experience and is able to provide valuable information about your experience.

#### **WHO IS DOING THE STUDY?**

Dr. Sharon Anderson, my dissertation advisor, is the principal investigator. Dr. Anderson is a professor in the School of Education at CSU, a licensed psychologist, and teaches in the Counseling and Career Development Program. Dr. Anderson is the primary advisor to the co-principal investigator Lorisa Lorenzo. This study is being conducted for Lorisa Lorenzo's doctoral dissertation.

#### **WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY?**

The purpose of this study is to explore the academic experience of college student survivors of sexual violence following an incident of sexual violence. The results of this study will provide insights into the academic experiences of college students who experience sexual violence. The findings can be utilized to enhance training for university faculty and staff on the topic of sexual violence at institutions of higher education.

#### **WHERE IS THE STUDY GOING TO TAKE PLACE AND HOW LONG WILL IT LAST?**

The study will consist of a 1-2-hour recorded interview with the researcher that will take place in person or online via Zoom at a time that is convenient for you.

#### **WHAT WILL I BE ASKED TO DO?**

Each research participant will be asked to participate in a 1-2-hour recorded interview. During the interview, you will be asked to share your academic experience following the incident of sexual violence. You will not be asked to provide details regarding the incident of sexual

violence. You may discuss the incident of sexual violence in as much or as little detail as you wish to provide context to your description of your academic experience following the incident of sexual violence. Pseudonyms will be used in place of actual names to protect the privacy of all individuals discussed during the interview.

#### **ARE THERE REASONS WHY I SHOULD NOT TAKE PART IN THIS STUDY?**

You should only take part in the study if you are at least 18-years-old and feel emotionally prepared to share the details of your academic experience following the incident of sexual violence. If you are not comfortable discussing your academic experience as a survivor of sexual violence you should not participate in this study.

#### **WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS?**

You may experience discomfort when discussing certain experiences related to sexual violence. You do not have to answer any questions you do not wish to answer and you are free to take breaks, or end the interview, if you experience uncomfortable emotions. It is not possible to identify all potential risks in research procedures, but the researcher(s) have taken reasonable safeguards to minimize any known and potential, but unknown, risks.

#### **ARE THERE ANY BENEFITS FROM TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?**

Participation in this study will not directly benefit you; however, you may experience a sense of empowerment in speaking out about your experience and providing information that can improve support for future college students who experience an act of sexual violence.

#### **DO I HAVE TO TAKE PART IN THE STUDY?**

Your participation in this research is voluntary. If you decide to participate in the study, you may withdraw your consent and stop participating at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

#### **WHO WILL SEE THE INFORMATION THAT I GIVE?**

We will keep all research records that identify you private, to the extent allowed by law. Each research participant will choose a pseudonym that will be used to discuss and analyze information that is provided during the formal interview. We will make every effort to prevent anyone who is not on the research team from knowing that you gave us information, or what that information is. Your consent form will be stored separately from the interview data. Interview data will be stored on a password-protected computer in password-protected files on the hard drive.

You should know, however, that there are some circumstances in which we may have to show your information to other people. For example, we may be asked to share the research files with the CSU Institutional Review Board ethics committee for auditing purposes. In addition, the law may require us to show your information to a court or to tell authorities if we believe you have abused a child, or you pose a danger to yourself or someone else.

It is the intent of the researchers to publish the study in the Co-Investigator's dissertation and in a professional journal. When we write about the study to share with other researchers, you will not

be identified in the written materials. We may publish the results of this study; however, we will keep your name and other identifying information private.

**WILL I RECEIVE ANY COMPENSATION FOR TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?**

Research participants will receive \$25.00 (cash or Amazon gift card) for participating in this study. Your identity/record of receiving compensation (NOT your data) may be made available to CSU officials for financial audits.

**WHAT IF I HAVE QUESTIONS?**

Before you decide whether to accept this invitation to take part in the study, please ask any questions that might come to mind now. Later, if you have questions about the study, you can contact the co-principal investigator, Lorisa Lorenzo at [lorisa.lorenzo@colostate.edu](mailto:lorisa.lorenzo@colostate.edu). If you have any questions about your rights as a volunteer in this research, contact the CSU IRB at: [RICRO\\_IRB@mail.colostate.edu](mailto:RICRO_IRB@mail.colostate.edu); 970-491-1553. We will give you a copy of this consent form for your records.

**WHAT ELSE DO I NEED TO KNOW?**

Each interview will be recorded and transcribed. Interviews conducted online using Zoom will be recorded in Zoom and on a portable audio recording device. The video interview in Zoom will be recorded only as a backup option in case the audio recording is damaged. Interviews conducted in person will be recorded on two portable audio recording devices (one used as back-up). As soon as the audio recording of the interview is transcribed, all recordings will be destroyed.

Direct quotes from participants may be used but anonymity will be ensured by not providing identifying information.

A list of support resources provided by RAINN (Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network) is included at the end of this form.

A reply via email acknowledges that you have read this study information document and that you consent to participate. Please keep a copy of this document for your information.

Sincerely,

Lorisa Lorenzo  
Doctoral Candidate & CoPrincipal Investigator  
Colorado State University  
Email: [lorisa.lorenzo@colostate.edu](mailto:lorisa.lorenzo@colostate.edu)  
Cell: 707-797-0480

Sharon Anderson, PhD  
Principal Investigator & Professor  
Colorado State University School of Education  
[sharon.anderson@colostate.edu](mailto:sharon.anderson@colostate.edu)

## **APPENDIX D: INTERVIEW GUIDE**

### **Basic Information:**

Age:

Gender:

Race/ethnicity:

Current year in school:

How much time has passed since the incident?

### **Definition:**

Academic experience refers to all aspects of your academic journey from enrollment through to graduation. This can include class attendance; participation in class; studying, reading, and writing; talking with professors and classmates; performance on assignments; presentations, group projects, and exams; and selecting classes and choosing a major.

### **Context:**

Researcher will explain that there are no right or wrong answers. We are interested in hearing about your academic experience as you lived it. We are interested specifically in your story, so please be as honest as possible, and do not worry if you think your experience is different from the experiences of others.

You are free to stop at any time if you want to take a break or end the interview. You can also ask the researcher questions if you need further explanation on any of the questions.

### **Main Research Question:**

Please describe your academic experience following the incident of sexual violence.

## **Prompts**

The researcher will use the following prompts if answers are not already provided in response to the initial question. The prompts will start with: "Please talk about..."

- Your class attendance and participation following the incident of sexual violence.
- Studying, reading, and writing following the incident of sexual violence.
- Talking and interacting with professors following the incident of sexual violence.
- Talking and interacting with classmates following the incident of sexual violence.
- Performance on course requirements such as assignments, presentations, group projects, and exams following the incident of sexual violence.
- Your GPA following the incident of sexual violence.
- Selecting classes and choosing a major following the incident of sexual violence.
- Your experience with any types of academic support following the incident of sexual violence.
- Did you consider leaving your university at any point in time following the incident of sexual violence? Please tell me about those thoughts.

- Please talk about your current academic experience. In what ways is your academic experience the same or different now compared to just after the incident of sexual violence?

In closing, please share any additional thoughts you have about any of the topics discussed.

## APPENDIX E: GENERAL STRUCTURE STATEMENT

Following the incident of sexual violence, *P* experiences negative emotional and mental health consequences, including shock, denial, confusion, fear, anxiety, insomnia, and depression. Her attention is pulled away from academics toward concerns of personal safety and health. She replays the incident in her mind, wondering what she could have done differently, despite knowing intellectually it was not her fault. This sense of self-blame is the basis of the shame she feels. *P* does not want anyone to know what happened. She genuinely fears how others will respond if she discloses the incident. She knows she should get help, but she does not want to talk about it. *P* retreats into isolation. She needs to protect herself, and she cannot trust others to help her. She also knows that if she wants to remain in college, she will have to return to class and interact with her classmates and professors. *P* puts up an emotional wall and only speaks in class when doing so is essential to passing her courses. She has difficulty focusing and concentrating on her academic tasks. She feels emotionally drained if she puts her full effort and passion into her academic work, so her motivation wanes. *P* starts to question her ability to succeed at anything and worries she will fail in her chosen career path. She thinks about quitting school. *P* realizes she must find a way to cope with the aftereffects of the sexual violence if she wants to graduate from college. She finds a way to cope on her own, through friends, or through formal support resources. Over time, *P* begins to heal from the incident of sexual violence. She starts to regain trust in others and feel more in control of her life. She reconnects with friends, classmates, and professors. As *P* heals and rebuilds her support network, she may no longer be the same student she was before the incident of sexual violence; but she finds a way to reengage in academic life. *P* is aware of the potential impact of the incident of sexual violence on her GPA, and that she must accept that her GPA may no longer accurately reflect who she is as a student.