



creating safer class- rooms

a tool kit for teaching
staff on addressing
sexual violence

a publication by the
sexual assault centre
of the mcgill student's
society, fall 2019

What's this?

This tool kit is a student-initiated attempt to engage critically and thoughtfully with teaching staff on issues of sexual violence. Over the past two academic years, we've witnessed conversations and organizing related to gendered and sexual violence on campus proliferate, and with good reason-- we should be addressing these things! However, there is a visible disconnect between the conversations happening between students and those occurring at the faculty level. Many students feel as though there are no easily identifiable allies within the teaching staff body. Additionally, there is a dearth of resources directed at teaching staff who want to create inclusive, safer classrooms. Many staff may find that they don't know what students want, or that they lack familiarity with support resources on-campus.

As such, this SACOMSS-funded project offers a concise introduction to addressing, preventing, and responding to sexual violence in the classroom. This publication emphatically does not demand that teaching staff act as long-term therapists, or that they actively intervene in the private lives of their students. Most professors and lecturers aren't mental health professionals, and we firmly believe that both teaching staff and students are entitled to boundaries within their academic relationships. Rather, it implores that teaching staff commit to creating inclusive and healthy classrooms. We know that sexual violence disproportionately impacts women and racialized and queer students. As such, teaching staff cannot claim to foster equitable academic environments without adequately addressing sexual violence.

Maybe some things in this tool kit aren't pertinent to you or your academic unit. Maybe they're things that you already do and they feel self-evident. Maybe they just don't feel particularly valuable in the grand scheme of things. That's okay. We hope that you can glean something useful from the consultations that we've done this summer and from the expertise that we offer as peer support workers.

The tool kit is broken up into a number of sections. Section one concerns course content-- developing syllabi, handling sensitive topics, and the importance of inclusive course curricula. Section two focuses on classroom dynamics between students, and the role of teaching staff in mediating and handling these interactions. Section three is about graduate students-- it touches on their experiences as students, and on their roles of authority as Teaching Assistants. Section four deals with incidents of sexual violence between professors and students. Finally, section five outlines basic processes of reporting and support. Relevant campus resources and contact information can be found in the appendices.

This project was funded by the Sexual Assault Centre of the McGill Student's Society.

course content

Syllabi

In consultations, we found that some teaching staff now include information on support resources in their syllabi. In our opinion, this is a really valuable gesture. Some students, particularly first- and second- year undergraduates as well as non-residence students, are not necessarily tuned into the resources that they can access on-campus.

If you choose to do this, your syllabus should include the contact information for a handful of on-campus resources: McGill Counselling Services, Psychiatric Services, The Office for Sexual Violence Support, Response and Education, and the Office for Students with Disabilities. It is also useful to mention peer-support resources, as some students may be intimidated by the prospect of seeking professional help. SACOMSS, the Peer Support Centre, McGill Student's Nightline, and the Montreal Sexual Assault Centre are good options. For further resources, see Appendix A.

You should ideally make your willingness to respect students' needs for accommodations as explicit as possible. The Office for Students with Disabilities offers support resources for students, and many students notify their professors of their conditions through their accommodation system. Take these requests seriously. If a student is OSD-registered, it means that they have already received some kind of documentation of their condition. Approximately 50% of OSD-registered students are receiving accommodations because of mental illness or psychosocial disability, which includes conditions such as post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, and depression-- all of which can result from experiences of sexual violence. Please be mindful that not all students are capable of accessing medical or psychiatric documentation for their experiences of sexual violence. There are many reasons why survivors may avoid or be barred from accessing professional support. Be flexible; your students still need support, even if they can't offer a doctor's note to explain an absence or a late submission. The notion that people lie about experiences of mental illness or sexual violence is deeply damaging. Put faith in your students' intentions, and believe them.

It's also good to make your extension policy clear. Obviously, different departments and faculties have different constraints, but you should let students know that if they're experiencing personal difficulties, they have a right to request extensions. Similarly, outline relevant contact information for students who may potentially require deferrals at the end of the term; most academic units require the submission of a request via Minerva, followed by supporting documents in-person or online.

Student academic rights are already outlined in syllabi-- such as the right to accommodations for disability, the right to submit in French or English, et cetera. However, very few teaching staff make note of their students' right to comfort and security. One (male) professor shared an example syllabus in which he notes that students "have the right to leave the door open", and that if students feel uncomfortable meeting in a certain building, an alternative location or phone call can be arranged instead. For students, gestures like this one may indicate a degree of concern for student welfare which might not be otherwise assumed to exist. This is also valuable where students with disabilities are concerned-- many McGill buildings are inaccessible, so it is always useful to have other options!

Handling sensitive topics

“Sensitive topics” is vague, perhaps frustratingly so. Use your judgement. If you’re teaching an entire seminar on genocide, the “sensitive topics” that you encounter are likely different from those found in a 200-level political theory survey or in a molecular biology research course. Context is key!

We can’t claim to have an exhaustive list of subjects which might be difficult to discuss in the classroom. Everyone is different, and students have diverse needs and prior experiences. However, a good rule of thumb is to assume that there is always a survivor in the room. Are you discussing eating disorders and psychiatric hospitalization? Are you discussing domestic violence and marital rape? Ethnic cleansing and forced displacement? Queer-bashing? Hate crimes? Police brutality? It’s entirely possible that your students have dealt with the negative effects of these things, either personally or via their loved ones. The assumption that all students have led cushy, safe lives is implicitly exclusive. For women, for racialized, migrant, and refugee students, for queer students, for mentally ill students, for students with disabilities, these realities are likely more commonplace than some professors may assume.

Use content warnings. This shouldn’t be negotiable. Mention in your first lecture that you’ll be dealing with difficult course content. Use specific language. For example: if a specific course reading mentions a violent, racially-motivated assault in detail, state it explicitly! Don’t just say “this mentions racism”. Put a note or asterisk next to the text citation in your syllabi, and then mention the content warning again in lecture prior to discussing it.

If you’re engaging in class discussion on one of these topics, make it clear that you know it might be difficult. Repeat any aforementioned content warnings. If possible, take breaks so that students can step out-- especially in smaller two- or three-hour long classes where they can’t do so discreetly.

Sometimes it's necessary to discuss sensitive content. Sometimes it's actually not pedagogically valuable! Often, we default to materials that can shock our students when we want to make an important point. This can often ultimately cause a lot of harm. In consultations, one student mentioned a situation where a professor included an excerpt from a required reading in their lecture powerpoint and proceeded to read it out loud. It was a graphic description of a gang-rape, which hadn't been flagged in the syllabus. Many students were rightfully very upset about this decision. If students have done the reading, they'll know what you're referring to by vague allusion or page number. Similarly, if you're discussing something violent or potentially traumatizing, you might not actually need to include graphic images of the subject at hand-- you can probably make your point without excessively and gratuitously describing acts of violence.

Student Dynamics

Undergrads

Unsurprisingly, the dynamics between students in classrooms are contextual. In consultations, all parties mentioned that the relationships between undergraduate students are often invisible to teaching staff. This is particularly true in big classes, which are generally difficult to moderate. However, micro-aggressions and casual harassment in the classroom seem overwhelmingly prevalent. Most of the participants in our student consultation were not men. Every single one of these participants complained of the misogyny that they faced in the classroom.

Teaching staff aren't trained to moderate or intervene in these situations. Students know this, and are often frustrated by it. Make your willingness to work on inclusivity in the classroom clear! Mention in your syllabi that you seek to foster inclusive classrooms. Establish an explicit open door policy on discussing incidents in class. In conferences and seminars, make an attempt to discourage inappropriate behaviours-- you can call your students out when they're not being respectful! If you feel willing to do so, encourage students to come to you for support if classroom occurrences make them uncomfortable. Professors should also encourage their TAs to apply these principles to any conferences that they facilitate, and make themselves available for feedback from students vis-a-vis TA performance.

Grad students

(and teaching assistants!)

The stakes are higher for graduates, who often occupy a very in-between position as both students and teaching staff. Graduate students can experience and perpetuate violence in unique ways.

Unless your department is particularly forward-thinking, TAs will have minimal training on sexual violence through mandatory online training modules (Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies currently only pays for one day of training for TAs). As such, you should set expectations for your TAs individually, especially if they need to address sexual violence and related topics in class or conference. Furthermore, you should make your behavioural expectations as clear as possible. TAs might think that their proximity to undergrads (both age- and status-wise) is a justification for romantic and sexual advances. Make it clear that this isn't appropriate, as they occupy positions of relative power. Be prepared to negotiate classroom dynamics where TAs are harassed and victimized as well-- it happens. Ensure that they are connected with campus support resources.

Some TAs (and more specifically, TAs who aren't men) may disproportionately bear the burden of receiving disclosures of gendered and sexual violence. This is in part because they may be less intimidating to undergraduate students. It's important to keep in mind that TAs already often go over their allotted hours, and that taking on the task of supporting students is a lot of work and emotional energy. Be prepared to discuss this with them-- if they are supporting students, ensure that you are accommodating their needs in other ways. Better yet, ensure that students know that they can come to their professors as well.

Teaching assistants:

familiarize yourself with support resources for students, as well as for yourself! As younger members of teaching staff, you are seen as significantly more approachable by undergraduates. However, support work can be particularly draining. If you decide to take on supporting students affected by gendered and sexual violence, ensure that you have someone to talk to yourself. Your labour is often undervalued within the university to begin with, and you may find yourself at risk of burnout. It's okay to ask for help. You don't need to bear the burden of support work alone.

Graduates

For professors: obviously, your relationships with your graduate students differ from those that you have with undergrads. Tread carefully-- maybe it's appropriate to go out for drinks with all of your grad students. It's probably not a good idea to do this one-on-one. This isn't merely a matter of professional boundaries: maybe your students who aren't men feel apprehensive about this and are more likely to decline an offer. Maybe you have students who don't drink for religious or health reasons, and wouldn't feel comfortable at a bar. Many of the for-granted social codes which we follow can implicitly reproduce exclusion and preferential treatment within the academy.

Again, open-door policies are important. Maybe you're not witnessing harassment that occurs behind the scenes in a graduate-level seminar, or during a research assistant's field work. Be explicit about your capacity to offer support, if it exists. Refer graduates to resources where appropriate.

you and your peers

Professors and Students

Some professors (and other members of teaching staff) sleep with students. As an anti-oppressive organization, we believe that after a certain point, power imbalances such as the ones involved in these relationships invalidate consent. Our views on consequently quite self-evident-- we aren't interested in explicating this further. What matters is how this reality impacts students. In our consultations, one participant put forth a striking claim: "there is nothing incentivizing professors to be good people". The status that teaching staff enjoy, coupled with the realities of tenure, investigation, and discipline processes, can create environments where abuses of power are commonplace.

Keep an eye out for what students say about your colleagues. Stay in the loop vis-a-vis violence prevention initiatives within your department-- increasingly, academic units are implementing Equity Officer positions. Push for mandatory trainings and clear-cut guidelines re: staff conduct. If students come to you with concerns or disclosures, consider the ramifications of referring them to another professor in the department-- even if said professor is acting as a Program Director or occupying any other administrative role. If possible, direct them to resources such as OSVRSE, which are external to the academic unit.

“There is
nothing
incentivizing
professors to
be good people.”

recognizing your position

While we want teaching to advocate for their students and cultivate healthier learning environments, we also feel obligated to flag certain limitations that you may encounter. Contract lecturers and non-tenured teaching staff may be less capable of pushing back against sexual violence perpetrated by faculty. Additionally, some teaching staff are less equipped to deal with the consequences of disciplinary or legal action-- allegations of sexual violence have led to lawsuits in the past.

Think about where you stand within the hierarchy of the university. Do you have secure employment and a certain degree of guaranteed stability? You should be pushing for student safety and inclusivity wherever possible. It is all too common for this labour to fall onto younger members of teaching staff, primarily women. Don't let your more precariously-employed colleagues take on this risk alone-- do something! If you have the power to act up, lobby your department chair! Refuse to work with predators! Professors wield a certain degree of power which untenured teaching staff are not privy to, and they should be putting it to good use.



Support and Reporting

Everyone has different boundaries vis-a-vis offering emotional support. Many teaching staff may feel that taking on this role isn't part of their job, and balk at the idea of receiving disclosures. Furthermore, there is a clear-cut gendered divide in terms of which staff members actually receive disclosures. For some male professors, TAs, and lecturers, the notion that students will seek support from them after experiencing sexual violence is far-fetched. This is because women in the academy tend to bear the brunt of emotional support for their students. Obviously, this support is valuable, but these gendered dynamics can be quite unfair!

As previously mentioned, every door should be an open door. You don't need to offer long-term emotional support to your students (and in many cases, this may actually be inappropriate). However, you should make it clear that students are allowed to come to you if necessary. This is particularly crucial in situations where difficulties in their personal lives are impacting their capacity for academic success. Furthermore, you may be able to serve as a middleperson for accessing certain resources within the university.

Offering support

If a student comes to you with a disclosure, try to avoid being directional with them. Don't push them to report or go to the police. Many "formal" avenues for recourse are time-consuming, retraumatizing, and ultimately ineffective. Survivors should be able to make the decisions that are best for their own welfare and safety, and they will know their own situations better than anyone else. If they express an interest in pursuing these forms of recourse, you can direct them to the appropriate resources. The same is true for any decisions that they may make vis-a-vis their experiences of sexual violence-- seeking therapy, more secure housing, changing classes, et cetera. You need to let survivors come to some conclusions on their own, and the most that you can do is attempt to facilitate this process for them.

Ensure that your responses validate the experiences and emotions being discussed. A good rule of thumb is that you should spend three-quarters of your time listening, and one-quarter offering responses. Assure students that you're happy that they came to you. Tell them that they deserve safety, kindness, respect, accommodations, et cetera. Ask how they want you to help-- maybe they just want a listening ear, or maybe they want more tangible, concrete forms of support. If it seems as though they don't have adequate support elsewhere, ask if they'd like to go over resources together. Appendix A of this tool kit outlines a few on- and off-campus resources which could potentially be useful.

Do not demand additional information from students. Don't ask them for specific details of what happened, no matter how well-intentioned these questions may be. Don't ask them if this has happened to them before. Do not, under any circumstances, ask them what they were wearing, if they were drinking, or anything that could be read as shaming or blaming. Survivors have a right to set boundaries around how and when they disclose. Prying for additional information will not create the impression that you are a trustworthy or reliable confidant.

Reporting

Under the recently-revised Policy Against Sexual Violence, a disclosure is defined specifically as “the act of informing [OSVRSE] about an incident of sexual violence for the purpose of seeking support”. Though other community members are mandated to “endeavour to... communicate with OSVRSE with a view to providing the survivor with necessary support”, there are few clear-cut obligations for non-OSVRSE actors within the landscape of the university’s bureaucracy. As such, department chairs and faculty administrative staff aren’t always the best point of contact.

If a student expresses interest in seeking recourse within the university, you should direct them towards OSVRSE. This will ensure that their disclosure has the desired effect. OSVRSE can direct survivors to McGill’s Special Investigator (Sexual Violence), ensure that immediate measures for safety and necessary accommodations are implemented, and when necessary, they can work with students to file internal complaints or police reports. Furthermore, they can ensure that students are receiving adequate mental health support as they navigate these processes.

Don’t assure students that a report will have a specific outcome. None of us can guarantee whether or not a specific disciplinary outcome is on the table, or what the investigation process will look like for a particular complaint. It’s important to manage student expectations where reporting is concerned, especially as students are not always entitled to know the disciplinary outcomes of their complaints under existing policies.

appendix a: resources

- SACOMSS: The Sexual Assault Centre of the McGill Students' Society is a volunteer-run organization committed to supporting survivors of sexual assault and their allies through direct support, advocacy, and outreach. They run a phone line and drop-in hours, and can guide students through McGill's complaints processes. SACOMSS can be accessed at 514-398-8500. SACOMSS also has curated a resource manual which can be used to find a variety of other services-- feel free to call for referrals.
- McGill Peer Support Centre: The Peer Support Centre offers free, non-judgemental peer support, and can help direct you toward other available resources.
- Nightline: A peer resource offering a confidential, anonymous and non-judgemental listening, run by McGill students. Services include active listening, resource referrals and crisis management. Nightline can be accessed at 514-398-6246.
- OSVRSE: The Office for Sexual Violence Response, Support, and Education provides support for all members of the McGill community who have been impacted by sexual violence and works to foster a culture of consent on campus and beyond. They can be reached at osvrse@mcgill.ca.
- The Montreal Sexual Assault Centre: A free, bilingual service with a wide range of resources, including medical and legal aid, referrals, and a 24/7 helpline. The MSAC can be reached at 1-800-933-9007.
- Tele-Aide: A free, anonymous, bilingual listening service. Operates 24/7. Tele-Aide can be reached at 514-935-1101.
- McGill's Counselling and Psychiatric Services: can now be accessed through the Student Wellness Hub, at 514-398-6017.
- Project 10: offers active listening, accompaniment, and referrals to queer-friendly health professionals to members of the LGBTQ+ community in Montreal. They have also curated a list of racialized mental health professionals in the Montreal area, which can be found at bipocmentalhealth.tumblr.com. P10 can be reached at questions@p10.qc.ca.
- Head and Hands: NDG-based organization that offers free medical and legal services to youth in Montreal, including those without status or health insurance. Head and Hands can be reached at 514-481-0277.

appendix

B:

contact

info

The production of this zine was funded by a Sexual Assault Centre of the McGill Student's Society summer stipend. Its contents have been pre-approved by SACOMSS as an institution, though they may not reflect the values and beliefs of all SACOMSS staff and volunteers. Furthermore, the university's policies may change in future years-- any information provided may require verification. SACOMSS can be reached at main@sacomss.org

Bee Khaleeli researched, wrote, and designed this publication in summer 2019. They can be reached at bee.khaleeli@mail.mcgill.ca.

