Bipartisan Support Builds For Fighting Sexual Assault On College Campuses

By Jim Howard

A bipartisan group of senators -- including Sen. Claire McCaskill, D-Mo. -- and several victims of sexual violence presented at a press conference on Wednesday their arguments for legislation they say is long overdue and necessary to push colleges and universities into doing more to protect students and rid their campuses of sexual predators.

“This bill represents a rare thing in Washington — a truly collaborative, bipartisan effort—and that bodes well for our shared fight to turn the tide against sexual violence on our campuses,” McCaskill said.

For McCaskill, the 2011 suicide of Sasha Menu Courey, a 20-year-old University of Missouri student, nearly a year and a half after the young woman alleged that she had been sexually assaulted, is just one of the far too many stories she encountered during her months-long examination of sexual violence at colleges and universities across the country.

One in five female college students in the United States has been assaulted, according to a release issued by the senator. It is the stories of the survivors that put the emotion and sense of urgency behind those numbers of an estimated one in five students sexually assaulted.

Among those stories is the one from Andrea Pino, a co-founder of the group End Rape on Campus. She spoke of how she woke up one morning in a pool of blood with her body covered in bruises from an attack. She says officials at her university told her that she “just couldn’t handle college.”

Susan, a mother from New York who didn't reveal her last name, explained how her daughter Anna, called home just 16 days into her freshman year to say that she had been sexually assaulted by a group of students.

“There are really no words to explain what a parent goes through when they get a phone call like that. The pain is unimaginable,” she said.

Susan said that in her daughter’s case, a college judicial board determined that the students allegedly involved were not responsible. This happened, she said, despite an eyewitness
statement and a report of corroborating physical evidence documented by a nurse who concluded Anna’s injuries were the result of sexual assault.

McCaskill applauded efforts by the University of Missouri to address the issue in the wake of Courey’s death. “The University of Missouri has really tried to break out of the pack here,” she said.

What the bill does

The bill’s sponsors say the legislation contains several components aimed at curbing sexual assault on campus by protecting and empowering students, and strengthening accountability and transparency for institutions. The proposal would:

- Require schools to designate confidential advisors to coordinate support services, provide information about options for reporting the crime to campus authorities or law enforcement.
- Prevent schools from punishing students who reveal such things as underage drinking when reporting a claim of sexual violence.
- Require specialized training for school officials who deal with sexual violence.
- Require schools to use one uniform process for campus disciplinary proceedings. Athletic departments and other groups that may have a conflict of interest in investigating such matters would be barred from handling complaints of sexual violence. (A survey conducted by McCaskill’s office earlier this year found that athletic departments were responsible for handling complaints of sexual violence at 20 percent of colleges and universities across the country.)
- Require schools to enter into agreements with relevant local law enforcement agencies to establish clear responsibilities for handling claims of sexual violence and for sharing information about such crimes.

To establish a baseline of consistent information from colleges and universities across the U.S., all schools would be required to survey students about their experience with sexual violence. The surveys will not collect identifying information about the students, but the results will be made public. McCaskill, says the results of the surveys will help parents and prospective students know what schools are doing about sexual violence and whether they’re making progress or not.

Some in higher education have raised questions about whether schools have the legal authority necessary to fully investigate such crimes. Currently, the Department of Education is investigating 55 colleges and universities for possible violations of federal law in how they handled claims of sexual assaults.

The big financial incentive for schools to comply with the law comes in what McCaskill describes as a realistic financial penalty of up to 1 percent of a school’s annual operating budget. She says the current potential penalty of a school losing all of its federal funding in the case of a violation is just not realistic and has never been imposed. That unrealistic threat contributes to lax enforcement on the part of schools, she added. Under the bill, the penalty for violations of a separate federal law governing the reporting of such crimes increases from $35,000 to $150,000.
Keeping it bipartisan

Both McCaskill and Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand, D-N.Y., the two lead co-sponsors of the bill, said that they are united in their effort to keep the bill's sponsorship strongly bipartisan. If lawmakers from one party want to join the list of co-sponsors, they must bring a colleague from the other party with them. Other senators supporting the bill include Chuck Grassley, R-Iowa, Kelly Ayotte, R-N.H., Mark Warner, D-Va., and Marco Rubio, R-Fla.

McCaskill and Gillibrand said they hope to advance the bill to the Senate floor this September and pass the measure before the end of the current legislative session.

Senators seek to curb campus sexual assault

UM System president says he welcomes focus on problem.

WASHINGTON (AP) — Colleges and universities could be more accountable to rape victims under legislation introduced Wednesday by a bipartisan group of senators.

Sens. Claire McCaskill, D-Mo., and Kirsten Gillibrand, D-N.Y., led the effort, with lawmakers from both parties saying they have heard too many stories of campus assault and bungled cases. More than a half dozen senators stood with campus sexual assault victims on Capitol Hill as they announced the legislation.

At least two senators — Dean Heller, R-Nev., and Mark Warner, D-Va. — said that as fathers of college-age daughters, they want campuses to track the problem more effectively.

“There is no reason or excuse to demean, dismiss or deny the problem, and accountability has come,” said Sen. Richard Blumenthal, D-Conn.

Added Sen. Chuck Grassley, R-Iowa: “Sometimes a victim is treated worse than the person who committed the crime.”

The action on Capitol Hill further escalates the dialogue in Washington on an issue long handled locally. Earlier this year, a White House task force on campus sexual assault recommended a series of actions schools should take, and the Education Department took the unprecedented step
of releasing the names of schools facing federal investigation under Title IX for the way they handle sexual abuse allegations.

**University of Missouri System President Tim Wolfe was one of the several campus administrators across the country invited to take part in the White House discussion.**

Campus sexual assault has been a major topic of discussion among University of Missouri officials over the past several months. In February, Wolfe announced an executive order that made everyone a mandated reporter under Title IX. This summer, MU Chancellor R. Bowen Loftin announced plans to hire a full-time Title IX coordinator and investigator, as well as training for mandated reporters, which is most of his employees.

"We welcome the focus of Senator McCaskill on the problem of campus sexual assault, and will continue to work with her in addressing this challenging, societal issue," Wolfe said in a statement. "Together with the work of our sexual assault/mental health services task force, the executive order I signed and new amended language to our collected rules that strengthen our Title IX policies, we intend to establish the University of Missouri as the national model in terms of providing effective and compassionate sexual assault and mental health services to our students."

The legislation introduced Wednesday would require campuses to designate advocates who would confidentially discuss available options with victims and to develop an agreement with local law enforcement over how such cases are handled. It would also increase penalties for universities that did not comply.

To encourage victims to come forward, the bill stipulates that schools no longer will be allowed to sanction a student who reveals a violation, such as underage drinking, in “good faith.” It also would require schools to survey their students to learn more about the scope of the problem and to use one uniform process for campus disciplinary proceedings, not singling out groups such as athletic departments to independently handle such cases.

“We’re not going to legislate away sexual assault, but we can make it better for the survivors coming forward, and this bill is an incredible first step,” said Annie Clark, from the advocacy group End Rape on Campus.

Terry Hartle, senior vice president at the American Council on Education, said the bill has some good ideas, such as defining a confidential victim’s advocate. But he said it takes a pretty heavy-handed approach and potentially adds more intervention to already confusing and overlapping federal laws that govern the way colleges and universities should handle such cases.

“We desperately want to do the right thing, but we need to know what that is, and we need enough flexibility to meet the needs of each individual, unique case,” Hartle said.

The joint work on the bill by McCaskill and Gillibrand represents a departure from a legislative battle earlier this year when the two senators took differing views on how best to deal with military sexual assault. They were also joined at Wednesday’s event by Sens. Kelly Ayotte, R-
N.H.; and Marco Rubio, R-Fla. Rubio said he doesn’t believe the bill would completely solve the problem, but it would advance the issue.

Reps. Carolyn Maloney, D-N.Y., and Patrick Meehan, R-Pa., were expected to file a similar bill in the House. In a gridlocked Congress with limited working days left on the calendar, the legislation faces many hurdles to be passed.

UMSL sets new record for fundraising

Thursday, July 31, 2014 | 7:45 a.m. CDT

BY THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

ST. LOUIS — The University of Missouri-St. Louis has set a new fundraising record.

Chancellor Thomas George said $31.2 million was raised during the 2013-14 fiscal year — $10 million better than the previous year's fundraising total. The donations helped create 70 new scholarships, contributed nearly $6 million for a new building for the business college and $2 million for the St. Louis Mercantile Library.

**MU also set a fundraising record, bringing in $164.5 million for the fiscal year, topping the previous record of $160.5 million set in 2008.**

Seeing past the stardust

By CADE CLEAVELIN MU Undergraduate Research Office

**Wednesday, July 30, 2014 at 1:00 pm**

Have you ever heard space described as a vacuum? By and large, that statement is true — except for the occasional hydrogen atom floating here and there. Space is enormous. Astronomers peer
into distances so vast that even the occasional wisp of dust wafting through space can interfere with their instruments.

**Juan Remolina, a University of Missouri physics researcher, is working to understand the problem of space dust.** To gain insight into Remolina’s research, think of cosmic dust as fog. On a foggy morning, you are able to see things that are very close to you clearly enough, but farther away there is greater space and the potential for your vision to be clouded by additional fog. “If you make a radius from the sun all the way out to the edge of the galaxy, it’s a very big area. The universe is mostly a vacuum, but over these kinds of distances, it’s a very large volume of dust that’s out there,” Remolina notes.

“It is important to note that every material absorbs and emits light, just at different wavelengths,” Remolina explains. Models of the universe based on Remolina’s research seek to account for how cosmic dust, depending on size and composition, might be absorbing the wavelengths of light astronomers use to observe the universe.

“Scientists theorize that the universe is expanding faster and faster, but one of the things they didn’t account for was dust. So maybe the universe is expanding, but maybe not — maybe the dust got in the way and messed up the readings.”

Meaningful Interaction in Online Courses
Submitted by Nate Sleeter on July 30, 2014 - 9:05pm

**NO MU MENTION**

Critics of online education, especially in the humanities, often stress the importance of face-to-face interaction. It is face-to-face interaction, the reasoning goes, that makes traditional in-person courses superior to their online counterparts. Without rejecting the premise, it nevertheless seems counterproductive to think of in-person courses and online courses in strictly competitive terms. If online courses are here to stay and we in the humanities are expected to teach them, these vigorous defenses of the in-person course will not make us better online instructors. In other words if we want to make online courses better, then it seems crucial to think about how we can promote “interaction” when “face-to-face” is not an option.
The scholarship on distance learning affirms the importance of engaged and approachable instructors in online education. Joseph McClary summarizes the research and notes that interaction with instructors has been linked to increased student learning and satisfaction. Most importantly, McClary notes that high-quality online education requires instructors to engage with students on an individual level rather than merely provide oversight as students proceed through the course.

In two online asynchronous courses for K-12 teachers (Hidden in Plain Sight and Virginia Studies), we emphasize the importance of interaction and feedback between instructors and participants as well as among participants. At the beginning of the course, we email an introduction to each student personally rather than sending a group email. It’s a small gesture, and a time-consuming one, but this kind of individualization is proving to be an important way to mitigate the isolation that online course participants often feel. In addition, each participant receives personalized feedback when they complete each of the eight course modules. Since the course is asynchronous (e.g., participants can proceed through the course on their own timeline within an overall structure) knowing when a participant completes a module has been crucial to providing timely feedback. After testing, we added a feature so the course system emails the instructor immediately when a participant completes a module, allowing for a quick response and timely feedback. This also underscored the value of having a flexible and robust course site that can be modified as needed.

The written feedback provided to teachers participating in the course is detailed and individualized. It is targeted at pushing each participant to reflect on historical thinking in both structured and unstructured writing assignments. This kind of qualitative feedback on participants’ writing seems especially crucial in the humanities where multiple-choice quizzes and tests often fail to capture important nuances of student understanding. As composition instructor and digital media scholar Chris Friend notes, multiple-choice assessments elevate the importance of the “one right answer,” a notion that is not consistent with the inquiry-based approach we embrace or the courses’ emphasis on historical thinking as an iterative process.

In post-course surveys, participants are nearly unanimous in rating the feedback and interaction with instructors as excellent and as an important feature of their success. Ninety-nine percent of respondents agreed that feedback from instructors was timely and helpful and several added, in comments, that they especially appreciated the individualized feedback and additional resources suggested by instructors.
Experience in these courses over several years has demonstrated that by regularly reaching out to participants, we provide an opening for students to ask questions, seek clarification, and share their own experiences. Participants often respond to individual emails from instructors that these direct contacts have the effect of making instructors more approachable. In addition, we make it a priority to respond to questions quickly – emails typically receive a response within 24 hours. Since participants in an asynchronous course cannot raise their hands to receive an immediate answer, we have learned the importance of connecting quickly when someone seeks clarification or has a technical problem. This ensures that students do not feel lost in the online “classroom.”

Interaction between instructors and participants has been a constant positive each time these online courses are taught. Meaningful, ongoing interaction between participants has been more challenging to foster and the team has worked to improve this aspect of the course. For example, while over 90% of respondents report that they put significant effort into reading and writing for the course, under half say the same for responding to the answers of colleagues. Encouraging course interaction among participants remains an important goal, however. In the first iteration of the course, for example, participants were not able to comment on each others’ submissions. We added the ability to comment and subsequently have improved the interface to make commenting easier in an effort to foster discussions. Meaningful interaction among students remains a challenge for all courses, especially asynchronous courses where participants are not required to work on the same modules at the same time. For the upcoming year, we will be evaluating and providing direct feedback on comments to further support meaningful interaction among those participating in the course.

An online course is not an in-person course and it does not offer the same opportunities for interaction. Based on my experiences working with history teachers in online, asynchronous courses, however, online interactions are not necessarily worse — just different. Rather than attend to the ways in which interaction in online courses is deficient, I would like to suggest that we focus on the kinds of developing interactions that online learning environments can foster. Online courses, for example, seem to lower the barrier for students to ask questions of their instructors. If we in the humanities want our students to be questioners first, then online learning environments represent opportunities to teach students to ask thoughtful questions, a skill that may well transfer to in-person classrooms. Similarly, some students are more likely to engage in an online discussion with instructors or other students
absent the pressure of speaking “in public.” For those students, online courses can offer opportunities for productive class discussions with higher participation.

Thinking proactively about online education can lead to improvements in learning environments of all kinds. Online teaching involves inherent limitations, but those limitations can force educators to re-examine fundamental issues of teaching and learning. Since interaction is such a clear area of concern for online courses, it has become a priority. By prioritizing and promoting meaningful interactions, we can develop practices that improve learning anywhere, not just online.

Nate Sleeter is a PhD candidate in history at George Mason University and graduate research assistant at the Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media. He works as a teaching assistant for the online courses Virginia Studies and Hidden in Plain Sight.