

EDITORIAL: Teach kids ‘yes means yes’ well before college

Spring break is around the corner — the one with the kegs and beach towels — and as dorms empty from San Diego to Humboldt, students will be greeting it, and each other, with a new motto: “Yes means yes.”

For more than a year, campus sexual assault has been at the core of a national conversation. Advocates argue that “no means no” isn’t enough in drawing the line between rape and consensual sexual relations.

Students nationally, including at UC Berkeley and Stanford, have filed federal complaints alleging that campuses have downplayed sexual assaults, creating a hostile environment for female students.

Last year, the University of California revamped its sexual violence and harassment policy, and a new federal law took effect mandating that reporting of sexual assaults at universities be more transparent.

In January, a new state law took effect, requiring campuses to radically alter their handling of sexual assault accusations. Now California universities that take public funds must let couples know that they need “affirmative consent” from each other before having a sexual encounter, and that consent must be “conscious” and “voluntary.”

That means only “yes” can mean yes. If a student has sex with someone who is drugged, drunk or unconscious, he or she could be vulnerable to a sexual assault accusation on the morning after.

If the 50% spike in such claims at UC is an indication, that new bar has been news to more than a few freshmen. So we welcome this year’s legislative push to teach students the new rules while they’re in high school.

It just would have been nice if Senate Bill 695, authored by Senate President Pro Tem Kevin de León and Sen. Hannah-Beth Jackson, had preceded California’s affirmative consent law. Because if ever a change cried out for more discussion and education, this is it.

The bill would require school districts that have made health education a graduation requirement to add affirmative consent and sexual violence to the curriculum. This isn’t a stretch; state content standards for health education already include information on rape trauma, sexual harassment, setting boundaries and bullying.

But talk about tardy.

Rape is awful and traumatic, and it has historically been dismissed and under-reported, but the movement to make it a priority and address sexual bullying in all its incarnations has stranded legions of kids in a shifting landscape.

Overzealous advocates have lumped everything from physical violence to socially awkward obnoxiousness into the “sexual violence” rubric. Legal scholars still aren’t entirely sure what will stand up in court under the affirmative consent standard.

Culture warriors are exploiting the situation: Gun rights advocates in at least 10 states are promoting “campus carry” bills that they now claim will deter rapes by arming female students.

Meanwhile, the filmmakers who did the rape-in-the-military exposé “Invisible War,” released a new documentary last week on rape on campus. “The Hunting Ground” has already divided critics, with some saying it finally reveals the misogyny that underpins fraternity life and college athletics, and others accusing the filmmakers of verging on a one-sided anti-male polemic.

It’s a lot to process, even for adults. So how can we imagine that a day or two of college orientation will be enough for students to figure it out?

So yes, let's discuss it in high school. And while we're at it, let's discuss it as families, too.

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