

# Supporting Student Survivors in the Classroom

A faculty resource guide for supporting student survivors of sexual violence. Created by the Macalester College Office of Title IX & Equity and student survivors.

This guide provides information about some of the challenges student survivors face in the classroom, describes faculty members' reporting responsibilities, and offers ideas for how to support both self-identified survivors and students who may not disclose their experiences to you.

Faculty can best support student survivors by educating themselves on the impacts of sexual trauma, addressing violence-related topics in an intentional manner, and offering students affirming choices in how they can engage as part of the Macalester College learning community.



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**Macalester College  
Office of Title IX & Equity**

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[macalester.edu/violenceprevention](https://macalester.edu/violenceprevention)*

## Facilitating Difficult Conversations in Class

One in ten Macalester students report experiencing sexual violence during college,<sup>1</sup> but the reality is that this rate is likely much higher, as more than 90% of sexual assault victims on college campuses choose not to report their experience to anyone, for a variety of reasons.<sup>2</sup>

Other students experience trauma or abuse before ever arriving on campus, and more are impacted by sexual violence through the lived experiences of family members and friends.

Knowing these realities, it is important to learn and talk about sexual violence in the college classroom. It is also imperative that faculty be intentional and well informed in discussing these difficult issues with students. Understanding more about trauma and survivors' needs can help faculty better support students' safety, wellbeing, and ability to participate as active members of the Macalester College learning community.

<sup>1</sup> 2015 Macalester College Campus Climate Survey on Sexual Violence.

<sup>2</sup> Fisher, B., Cullen, F., & Turner, M. (2000). *The sexual victimization of college women: A Report of the U.S. Department of Justice* (NCJ Publication No. 182369). Retrieved from the National Criminal Justice Reference Service: <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/182369.pdf>

## Practical Suggestions from Student Survivors

Student survivors at Macalester compiled a few suggestions for how to be trauma-informed in discussing sensitive topics in the classroom.

- ◆ Clearly label in the syllabus which (if any) readings, assignments, projects, or discussions will touch on the subject of sexual violence or related sensitive topics (this can be hard to anticipate; see page 4 for more). *Help students understand what to expect from your course.*
- ◆ Provide a written overview in the syllabus of your responsibilities as a *non-confidential resource on campus*, along with an explanation of what that means for students. You can share confidential and other resources, as well.
- ◆ Offer a straightforward disclaimer around your expectations for the course. For example:

*Aspects of this course may be emotionally difficult, and learning about violence is always challenging. You may personally connect with or be affected by some of the material covered in this course, so I urge you to identify a support system outside of this class. I am happy to meet with you to discuss any concerns or accommodation needs, but I also encourage you to seek out confidential or other resources.*

- ◆ Make it clear that you strive to create a safe space in the classroom—and that this is an ongoing project that is up to everyone in class to uphold. Tell students that the learning or insights they gain in class should leave the classroom, but the shared expectation is that any personal details that are shared *should not*.

- ◆ *Give advance verbal notice* (both at the start of the semester and the week or class period before) for upcoming readings or discussions that involve sensitive topics. This practice allows students to prepare and to make necessary accommodations.
- ◆ Present material in a way that encourages *all students* to understand how deeply personal and sensitive issues of sexual violence are for many people. Foster engaged pedagogy by helping students to grasp the importance of their own continued learning around these difficult topics.
- ◆ Guide or redirect class discussions before they inflict harm or make a student feel unsafe. If a victim-blaming statement or false generalization about sexual violence is made, *address it directly*. By taking the time to reflect and regroup, you affirm the gravity of the topic, and your actions (or silence) will speak volumes to student survivors.
- ◆ *Never explicitly ask* students to discuss or publicly reflect on their personal connections to sexual violence. Everyone should have the power to decide whether to disclose their experiences.
- ◆ If your course content involves continuous or deep engagement with sensitive topics, create ways for students to engage in private or opt-in ways.

*E.g., instead of an in-class group discussion of an article on sexual violence, a private writing reflection better allows students to apply class concepts without needing to disclose their own experiences or disengage from the discussion.*

## Recommended Supportive Practices in the Classroom

Student survivors at Macalester compiled examples of supportive practices that they have seen used in the classroom, along with some sample language:

Provide an anonymous Google form or another way for students to alert you ahead of time about topics that may be sensitive or difficult for them, as well as what they need from you to be able to participate.

If a student tells you they are struggling with a topic or discussion, don't probe; simply ask what they need from you or how you can best support them.

Give verbal and written notice (at the start of the term as well as the week or class period before) for any violence-related content or discussions.

*For example, say: "Next Tuesday, we will be digging into Toni Morrison's novel *The Bluest Eye* and the text's depictions of incest and child abuse. These topics can be challenging to discuss, and I want to make sure that you are aware of what our plans are for that class period. You can communicate with me ahead of time with any concerns or specific needs around participation."*

Take a 2-3 minute break before difficult activities or discussions, and urge students to stretch, get a drink, or use the restroom before regrouping as a class. This practice allows survivors to step out without drawing attention to themselves or feeling forced to publicly identify themselves as a potential survivor.

*For example, say: "We will all take a 2-3 minute break and when we return we will be talking about Peru's history of compulsory sterilization, including topics of power, control, and violence. In this discussion, please do what you need to do to take care of yourself. Maybe this is disengaging for a minute, doodling, or stepping out briefly."*

If you give students the option to "opt out" of a class period or discussion based on their needs...do your attendance and participation policies in fact reflect and support this option? Will students be concerned about being penalized for "opting out" in this way if they need to? Work to ensure all of your policies align with the options you provide to students.

## Topics That May Be Difficult for Survivors to Discuss

Each survivor's experience is unique, so each survivor will have different topics they find difficult to engage with or hear and talk about. You will not be able to anticipate what all of these topics are, but some basic sensitivity and awareness can help. Some (not all) common challenging topics for survivors may include:

- Discussion of stalking, rape, abuse, sexual harassment, gender-based violence, sexual violence, or other forms of violence
- Themes of power, control, manipulation
- Topics of toxic masculinity, misogyny, sexism
- Sentiments of victim-blaming in any context
- Topics around gender, sexuality, virginity
- Discussion of consent or individual agency
- Language of trauma, even when it is used around topics unrelated to sexual violence
  - E.g. "The rape of natural resources"
  - E.g. "Beats me," "take a stab at it," "tear you a new one," "hit on her"

Please also note that survivors can be affected or upset by a topic that (in your mind) is not explicitly related to sexual violence. Something about a given topic may remind a survivor of their abuser or their experience. Trauma is complex and can show up in expected ways.

## Understanding Common Reactions to Sexual Violence

Every survivor experiences trauma and healing in a unique way, but there are a number of common reactions to sexual violence that you may notice in your classroom or in interactions with your students. This list is in no way comprehensive, but presents a sampling of common physical, emotional, cognitive, and social symptoms of sexual trauma:

- Difficulty concentrating or completing tasks
- Dissociation, zoning out, sense of detachment
- Changes in eating, sleeping, and hygiene patterns
- Gastrointestinal issues, headaches, nausea
- Increased substance use/abuse, eating disorders
- Depression, numbness, fatigue, decreased affect
- Isolation, withdrawal from people and activities
- Mood swings, loss of control, unpredictability
- Marked changes in personality or energy level
- Anxiety, anger, fear, nervousness, panic attacks
- Hypersensitivity to light, noise, touch, or people
- Flashbacks, nightmares, distracting thoughts
- Shame, guilt, self-blame, sense of humiliation

Source: University of Michigan Sexual Assault Prevention & Awareness Center.

## Your Responsibilities as a Non-Confidential Resource

Faculty and staff frequently serve as the initial recipient for students' disclosures of sexual violence experiences. Many students do not choose to file reports with law enforcement, often because they do not think the incident was serious, they are afraid that parents and friends will find out, or because they fear that they will not be believed or will be treated with hostility.

If a student is sharing this information with you, they likely consider you a trusted advisor—but it is important that you let students know upfront (in person and/or in your class syllabus or course guides) that you are *not* in fact a confidential resource on campus.

Unless you are a Macalester College chaplain or counseling/medical employee, **all staff and faculty are non-confidential and mandatory reporters.** This means that **you are required to report any information you receive** about sexual misconduct to the Title IX Coordinator or Deputy Title IX Coordinators.

**Confidential Resources.** Confidential communications are those communications that legally cannot be disclosed to another person without the reporter's consent, except under very limited circumstances, such as allegations involving the physical or sexual abuse of a child or vulnerable adult or an imminent threat to the life of any person. Those who want the details of reports of sexual violence to be kept confidential should speak with a confidential resource (e.g., medical or counseling professional or chaplains). At Macalester, these include:

- Macalester College Center for Religious and Spiritual Life: Contact Kelly Stone, College Chaplain and Associate Dean for Religious & Spiritual Life, 651-696-6298.
- Macalester College Laurie Hamre Health and Wellness Center counselors, physicians, registered nurses or nurse practitioners, 651-696-6275.

**Non-Confidential Resources.** Only confidential resources can promise confidentiality.

All other College employees who become aware of sexual misconduct incidents or allegations are required to report the matter to the Title IX Coordinator or Deputy Title IX Coordinators. The information you provide must include all relevant details, including the name of the individual reporting the allegation of sexual violence, the name(s) of the person(s) accused of the misconduct, other people involved in the incident, and the date, time, and location of the incident. Allegations of policy violations will be considered private and will only be shared with other College employees on a need-to-know basis. The allegations will not be shared with law enforcement without the consent of the individual who has alleged the sexual misconduct.

If you are not a confidential resource, you are asked to make every effort to refer an individual to confidential resources as described above before the individual has disclosed an incident that requires reporting to the Title IX Coordinator. If you sense a student is about to disclose something regarding sexual misconduct to you, you may say:

"I apologize for interrupting, but I want to let you know that **I am not a confidential resource on campus**, which means that I will need to share anything you may tell me about an experience of sexual misconduct with our Title IX Coordinator. This is just our College policy, which aims to ensure you receive the resources and support you may need. I can let you know who the confidential resources on campus are, or connect you with them. I want you to be able to make a choice about who you feel comfortable sharing with."

**We strongly recommend letting students know upfront that you are not a confidential resource—in class, in conversation, and/or in your course syllabus.** However, it is not always possible to know how or when a student may disclose to you. If a student does tell you about an experience of sexual misconduct, please let them know that you will need to share this information (see page 6 for specifics) with the Title IX Coordinator. Explain why, and let them know you will not share with anyone else. You can then refer them to other resources.

# What To Do If a Student Discloses To You

## Listen without judgment.

Listening is the single most important thing you can do. No one deserves to be the victim of violence, regardless of the circumstances. Avoid blaming the student for what occurred or asking questions that could imply fault, such as “Had you been drinking?” or “Why didn’t you call the police?” Let the student know that what happened was not their fault, and thank them for sharing with you. You do not need to repeat the explicit terms of the experience (e.g. rape, sexual assault, or exploitation); just say, “I’m sorry you experienced that” or “I’m sorry that happened to you. No one deserves to be treated that way.”

## Thank them for telling someone & sharing with you.

Acknowledge the act of disclosure and affirm that even telling someone about their experience takes strength and courage. Again, you do not need to repeat their language or story details back to them, but you can simply say, “thank you for sharing that with me.”

## Tell them that you hear them & will support them.

Victims of sexual violence are often met with disbelief when they decide to tell someone. Furthermore, their trust in someone they know (the person who committed the assault) has been broken. Remember that you are not an investigator tasked with asking questions. It is not your job to determine exactly what happened or who is responsible; instead, you are their trusted advisor. Let them know that you hear them and will support them.

## Advice from Student Survivors at Mac

A number of student survivors have offered to connect individually with faculty members to discuss how to support survivors in the classroom.

If you are interested in learning more, please contact students:

Charlie Mangas '18,  
[hmangas@macalester.edu](mailto:hmangas@macalester.edu)

Charlotte Schiller '18,  
[mschill2@macalester.edu](mailto:mschill2@macalester.edu)

Madi Taylor, '19  
[mtaylor1@macalester.edu](mailto:mtaylor1@macalester.edu)

## Refer the student to designated resources.

You are not expected to be an expert on these issues; however, you can direct the person to the appropriate resources, either on campus or in the community. You can let the student know who the confidential resources are, and if appropriate, offer to walk them to the Health and Wellness Center to set up a counseling appointment. If the incident involved bodily harm, you can let them know where they can obtain medical attention.

All on-campus, community, and confidential resources are listed on page 8 of this guide.

## Support their decisions about how to proceed.

Avoid giving advice or telling the student what they should do. You can encourage the student to report the incident and seek medical attention, while respecting that the final decision is theirs to make. For some individuals, making a report is not safe or “the right thing” to do. One of the most important things you can do is let a survivor take back the power they lost in the incident(s). It is critical that a survivor feels empowered to make their own decisions about what their options are, and when and how they will choose to pursue them.

## Submit a report to the Title IX Coordinator.

All College employees who are not confidential resources must report information they have received about reported sexual violence to the Title IX Coordinator or Deputy Title IX Coordinators within 24 hours of learning about an incident. Information given to the Title IX Coordinator or Deputy Title IX Coordinators must include relevant details, including:

- The name of the individual reporting the allegation of sexual misconduct.
- The name(s) of the person(s) accused of the sexual misconduct.
- Any other people involved in the incident.
- The date, time, and location of the incident (e.g. if it occurred on- or off-campus).

## Follow up with the student after the disclosure.

It can feel validating to the survivor when you let them know that you take their act of disclosure seriously and that you care about their wellbeing. For example, you could begin a follow-up conversation by saying, “I was thinking about the conversation we had the other day. Do you want to talk about how you are you doing? If not, that’s okay too.” Also respect their decision not to respond, and don’t press the issue.

## Obtain information & support for yourself.

Being exposed to issues related to sexual violence can be difficult and it is not unusual for first responders to experience vicarious trauma. It may help to discuss your experiences and feelings with a professional.

# Reflection and Work Space

Use this space to reflect on the components of your teaching you could revisit, revise, or reframe to be more trauma-informed and supportive of student survivors. For example: course syllabi language, class activities, policies around attendance, specific content you introduce in your courses, or the way you introduce class readings and assignments.

**Areas for Reflection & Reframing**

**Questions I Have & Information I Need**



## Review of Sexual Violence Definitions

All definitions are outlined in the Macalester College Sexual Misconduct Policy, which applies to students, staff, faculty, and all members of the Macalester College community. "Sexual misconduct" refers to all forms of sex discrimination, including sexual and gender-based harassment, sexual assault, sexual exploitation, stalking, dating/intimate-partner violence, and domestic violence. See the full policy at:

[macalester.edu/titleix/sexualmisconductpolicy](http://macalester.edu/titleix/sexualmisconductpolicy)

**Sexual Violence** is a broad term to describe hurtful acts of physical or emotional harm through the use of power, control, and/or intimidation. Sexual violence includes sexual harassment, sexual assault, sexual exploitation, dating and intimate partner violence, domestic violence, or stalking.

**Sexual Harassment** is any sexual or gender-based verbal, written, or physical conduct that has the purpose or effect of unreasonably interfering with an individual's work or academic performance or creating an intimidating, hostile, or offensive environment.

**Sexual Assault** is defined as any sexual touching (fondling) or sexual penetration (rape) made without consent. Consent needs to be affirmative and given freely, with overt words or actions communicating a person's clear sexual boundaries and desires.

**Sexual Exploitation** is nonconsensual or abusive sexual advantage of a person for the advantage or benefit of someone else.

**Dating/Intimate-Partner Violence** and **Domestic Violence** refer to an ongoing pattern of controlling and abusive behaviors that individuals use against their intimate partners. These behaviors include physical, sexual, or emotional attacks and/or economic control.

**Stalking** is repeated behaviors directed at a specific person that cause a reasonable person to fear for their safety or the safety of others, or to suffer substantial emotional distress.

## Resources and Support for Faculty and Students

### On-Campus Resources

Macalester College Title IX Coordinator,  
651-696-6258, [titleixcoordinator@macalester.edu](mailto:titleixcoordinator@macalester.edu)

Sexual Violence Prevention Program Coordinator & Deputy Title IX Coordinator, Laura Linder-Scholer,  
651-696-6807, [llinders@macalester.edu](mailto:llinders@macalester.edu)

Dean of Students, Assistant Vice President, & Deputy Title IX Coordinator, DeMethra LaSha Bradley,  
651-696-6220, [dbradley@macalester.edu](mailto:dbradley@macalester.edu)

Assoc. Dean of Students & Deputy Title IX Coordinator, Andrew Wells, 651-696-6220, [awells1@macalester.edu](mailto:awells1@macalester.edu)

Campus Security, 651-696-6555 (24-hour emergency)

Center for Religious and Spiritual Life, Chaplain Kelly Stone, 651-696-6298, [kstone1@macalester.edu](mailto:kstone1@macalester.edu)

Laurie Hamrie Health and Wellness Center, Counseling and Medical Staff, 651-696-6275

"Press 2" confidential 24-hour counseling hotline; call 651-696-6275 and press option #2 to be connected

### Off-Campus Resources

Police, 9-1-1 (24-hour emergency)

Regions Hospital Emergency Center, 651-254-3456, 640 Jackson Street, St. Paul

SOS Sexual Violence Services of Ramsey County, 651-266-1000 (24-hour emergency crisis hotline)

Minnesota Coalition Against Sexual Assault (MNCASA), 651-209-9993, [mncasa.org](http://mncasa.org)

Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network (RAINN), 800-656-4673 (24-hour emergency crisis hotline)

### Questions or Concerns

If you have any questions, comments, concerns, or ideas to share, please contact Laura Linder-Scholer at 651-696-6807 or [llinders@macalester.edu](mailto:llinders@macalester.edu).

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