

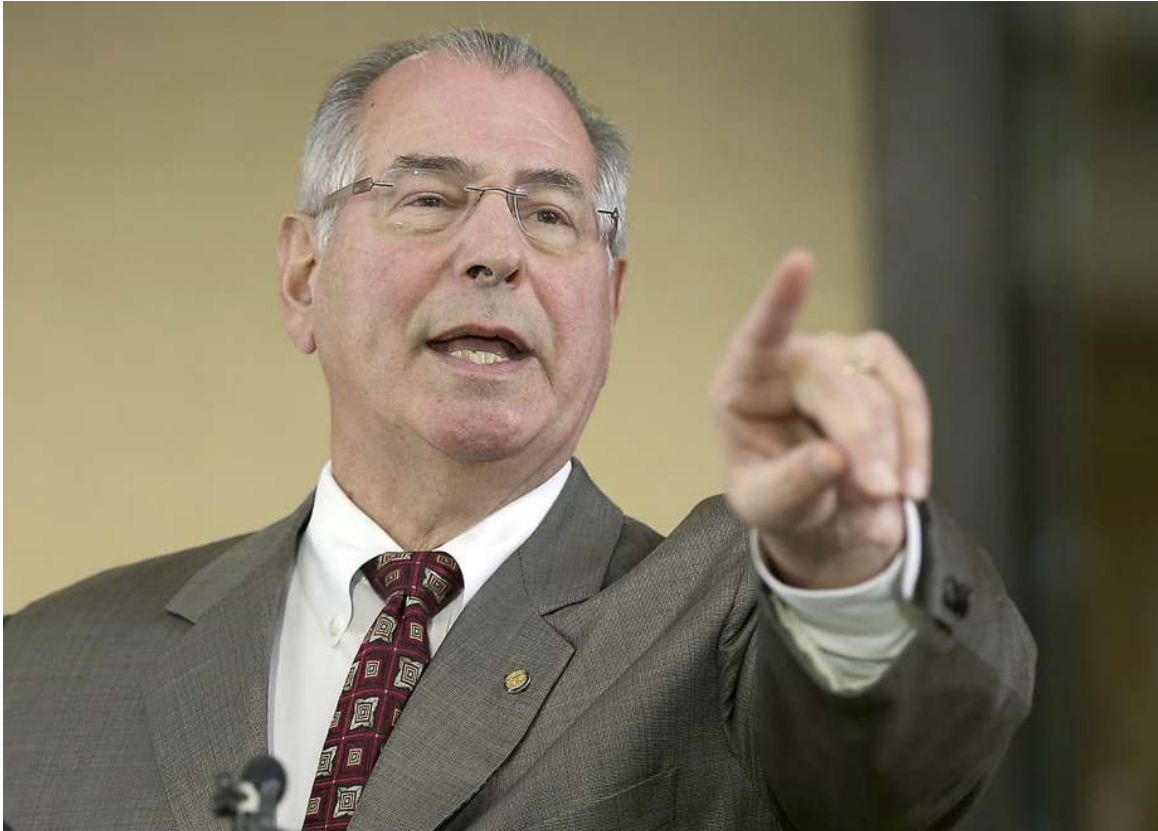
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## Minnesota football rape case reveals our own assault myths

View on Women poll shows we still think victims contribute to crime

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**IMAGE 1 OF 13**

FILE - In this Nov. 30, 2015, file photo, Hennepin County Attorney Mike Freeman speaks during a press conference at the Hennepin County Government Center in Minneapolis, Minn. Ten suspended University of ... [more](#)

Let's get the sports part out of the way: University of Minnesota football coach Tracy Claeys, whose 10 players were suspended from the team because of allegations of sexually assaulting a female student in September, should be fired. And when he said in a radio interview last week that a petition submitted to the university calling for his dismissal "hurts personally," I wanted to travel through time and not only fire him from his current job but every coaching position he'll ever hold. It would be sort of like the reoccurring flashbacks the female student who reported the assault will

suffer throughout her life, memories of football players lining up at a bedroom door, laughing, taking videos and arguing over whose "turn" it would be next while she tried to wrap herself in a blanket so they wouldn't see her naked.

Earlier this month, Minnesota football players threatened to boycott last week's Holiday Bowl because they said their teammates weren't given due process when the university suspended them following [its own investigation](#) of the alleged sexual assault. The coach backed their boycott threat like it was a noble demonstration of social justice. No criminal charges were filed against the players after a police investigation, but the university's more than 80-page report provided even more detailed testimony from the female student, accused players and related witnesses. It prompted county prosecutors to review the case once more, but they announced on Friday that, again, they wouldn't pursue charges (without explaining how the case failed to meet the necessary legal standard). Meanwhile, based on the university's investigation, five players face expulsion.

As we know, sexual assault cases happen on all college campuses, and they make news when they involve athletes. We learn a couple of important things looking at the Minnesota case. First, Claeys may seem like a jerk for his defense of the boycott, but many of us, even the most decent among us, can have a blind spot when it comes to our attitudes about rape (you'll see that in poll data we reveal later). And, colleges used to fall down on creating safe environments for assault victims to come forward. Now, as a University at Albany official and former prosecutor points out, they're leading the way. And it seems like the rest of us — from those of us who have "the talk" with our kids to police officers — should be as enlightened. But we're not.

### More Information

Special reports on the View on Women poll mentioned in this story — which will also cover attitudes about women related to work, leadership, policies and relationships — will be available throughout 2017 to members of the Times Union's Women@Work, a magazine, networking group and movement of 1,700 working women in

"The federal government is on the colleges and saying 'You need to do this right, or you're not going to get federal funding. You need to get people who understand sexual violence,'" says Chantelle Cleary, the Title IX coordinator at UAlbany who also spent about 10 years working as a special victims prosecutor, including her last five years in the Albany County District Attorney's

the Capital Region. Join at [tuwomenatwork.com](http://tuwomenatwork.com) to be sure you'll receive all the data, as well as all the benefits of Women@Work membership.

office.

At UAlbany, 1,100 students were trained last semester to be "**empowered bystanders,**" and the university started with its student athletes and student group leaders. The 90-minute educational session is a frank

discussion of the issues (including what consent is) and lets students know there are ways to stop assaults without having to be confrontational. All it might take is a knock on a dorm door followed by shouting "police are on the way" or an anonymous call to a resident assistant to save a victim. Cleary says the goal is to train 25 percent of the student population because that's the amount of buy-in it takes to cause a culture shift. Universities that receive federal funding are required to show they're offering some form of bystander intervention training, and New York state law requires schools to do sexual violence prevention training for all student athletes and student leaders annually.

*"(The female student) became increasingly confused and repeatedly asked where all of the people were coming from. She repeatedly yelled at the crowd to stop sending people in the bedroom. She repeatedly yelled 'I can't handle this many people' and 'I don't want this to happen.' She yelled several times that she hated the onlookers, to which they laughed and someone responded, 'ha ha, why?' At one point, (the female student) asked the onlookers to 'get (one of the accused)' because she thought that he would help her. In response, someone said that 'he has had his turn and you have a lot more to go.'" — University of Minnesota's report on its investigation into the assault.*

It's not that investigators should go in determined to only believe victims. The process has to be fair. But they shouldn't go in looking for reasons not to believe the victim either. After all, national statistics show only 2 to 8 percent of reports of sexual assault are false, Cleary says. Which happens to be the same false reporting stats for any other type of crime.

"Sexual assault presents in ways that are seemingly inconsistent. (That a victim's account) doesn't make sense is not because they're lying, it's because of the trauma reaction, and it's not oftentimes a choice. And when the person is experiencing a

sexual assault, the prefrontal cortex shuts down because they're afraid they're going to die. They're literally afraid they're going to die, and it shuts down and our only goal is to survive. A victim doesn't choose whether or not they fight. ... They're in survival mode. So people on college campuses, people who are doing this work on college campuses, are getting this training. We're also getting training about rape myths or common misconceptions about sexual violence ... and that's required by law. Now, I don't believe law enforcement are required to go through that training. There's an emphasis on colleges doing it right, and I 100 percent support that."

And the most important part of the University of Minnesota's report is the section about the victim's credibility, which shows the training Cleary speaks about is making a difference and giving victims justice.

They looked at the way her memories became more detailed over time and understood that was the way trauma impacted her memory. When she "at times behaved in ways that may appear contrary to how one might expect a sexual assault victim to behave" the university investigators concluded that her conduct "during the sexual encounters likely resulted from her shock, confusion and inability to focus because of the events she was experiencing."

*"There was a pile of around 12 used condoms on top of a white plastic set of drawers next to the television stand. Semen was dripping down the drawers. (The female student) was shocked and horrified to see so many used condoms and condom wrappers. There were far more than ten condom wrappers. She could only remember bits and pieces of what had just happened. She had no sense of how long she had been in (one of the accused's) bedroom or of how many men had had sex with her. She remembers wondering, oh my god, how can I not remember what just happened."*

Before you say she should have run away, think about what you'd do in a room surrounded by at least a dozen hulking football players. And think about your own beliefs about sexual assault. We know a little more about this thanks to a ground-breaking new poll. Women@Work's View on Women (VOW) poll is an initiative of the Times Union, created through the Benjamin Center for Public Policy Initiatives at SUNY New Paltz and its director of research, Eve Waltermaurer. Results of the online poll of 1,050 New York residents will be rolled out throughout 2017 at [tuwomenatwork.com](http://tuwomenatwork.com)

What did the poll show, particularly about the 18 to 25 age group? The majority of men

in that age bracket agree or strongly agree that the following factors contribute to a woman being sexually assaulted or raped: if she dresses in sexy or provocative clothing (71.8 percent); if she is flirtatious (62.8 percent); if she agrees to sex and changes her mind (66.7 percent); if she drinks too much/does too many drugs (73.1 percent); and if others know her to "sleep around" (62.8 percent).

And before you think "what's happened to kids today?" consider that the percentage of people who fell into the "agree or strongly agree" camp was high across the age groups. For example, when it came to the idea of flirtation being a contributor to rape, 63.2 percent of men ages 46 to 55 agreed or strongly agreed, too.

It's important to note that on many of these questions these attitudes were also widely held by women. So basically, we're not going to end sexual violence until we understand how we really feel about it and then eliminate these misconceptions.

"In the last couple years, these kinds of crimes have come so much into the public consciousness, and it takes courage for victims to say, 'This is my experience.' I think we're on the beginning of a learning curve," says Maggie Fronk, executive director at [Wellspring](#), which provides domestic violence services to Saratoga County and sexual assault services to both Saratoga and Washington counties. "There are social norms around these things — how women dress, what they were drinking — we are all raised with some of those social norms, so we all have to check our attitudes now and again in what we say."

This year, Wellspring will begin offering an evidence-based program called Coaching Boys into Men, which will train high school coaches in Saratoga and Washington counties to talk to their athletes about sexual violence.

College is too late to start the conversation, Cleary and Fronk say. They're right. We need to do that now. It's also time to look inward, at the ways we might justify rape in our own minds or how we might judge situations we can't possibly understand until there's a line at the door and fighting sounds like our most dangerous choice. And we certainly never want that person, scared and wrapped in a blanket, to be someone we love.

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