The W.A.R. against Rape in the 1970s at the University of Illinois

Margaret Lusher, History 498

Department of Liberal Arts and Science, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Introduction

The lingering thought of rape and sexual assault for a woman is constantly present especially on a college campus. However, it is important for there to be organizations and institutions in place that are dedicated in preventing and raising awareness on rape and sexual assault. The University of Illinois has upheld this criticality for women in recent years, however it is important to understand the origins of rape awareness and prevention on campus. The Champaign County Women Against Rape (CCWAR or WAR) was founded in 1972 as a women-led organization dedicated to eradicating the crime of rape in Champaign-Urbana and its surrounding areas. WAR provided the campus community with a set of principles and criteria for addressing the issue of rape. Its’ foundation proved to be the origins of how the University would address this growing issue. It was not until 1982 that the administration of University of Illinois began to address rape on campus with the founding of Rape and Prevention Committee (RAP Committee). This committee was dedicated to addressing rape on a campus-wide level, in order to ensure that the campus was safe for all of its students. Nonetheless, there was a general increase in the number of rapes that were reported from 1975 to 1985 and this is due to a variety of factors. The shift from locally run organizations such as WAR to a more institutionalized, administration organization is critical to address but also the increase in awareness proves to be a factor since more women would be more inclined to report a rape. The women at the University of Illinois have had access to tremendous archives that addressed the issue of females in the 1970s and 1980s. Also, newspapers such as the Daily Illini and the RAP Committee were used to develop an understanding of rape on campus during the late 1970s. This picture was found in a Daily Illini article addressing the feminist movement on campus in 1972.

Methodology

The research that I conducted was primarily archival. I concentrated on data that was collected from the Student Life and Culture Archives. This research contained a great deal of information pertaining to organizations on campus that dealt with the issue of rape. Records from the organizations such as WAR and the RAP Committee were used to develop an understanding of rape on campus during the 1970s and 1980s. Also, newspapers such as the Daily Illini were critical in gaining a student’s perspective on rape. There were several opinion based articles that addressed the issue of females and rape on campus.

Champaign County Women Against Rape (WAR) 1972-1979

- Founded in 1972 by a small group of women dedicated to eradicating rape and increasing public awareness of the crime rape
- Originally part of the YWCA until 1976 when it became its own autonomous organization
- Several programs and services
  - 24 hour rape hotline—first ever in Champaign-Urbana community
  - Women’s Wheels—provided automotive transportation for women during certain hours of the night
- In 1979 had to terminate its services to the community due to lack of funding.
- Champaign County Health Board had overseen a grant with WAR but due to differences in opinions the Board withdrew their grant

Rape and Prevention Committee (RAP) 1982

- In 1980, the student population, especially the women, demanded that the University take action in the fight against rape.
- On August 29, 1982 the Resident Advisors of Busey Evans wrote a letter to the University’s administration demanding that the University address the lack of rape awareness and prevention on campus.
- Within a few months, the University created the Rape and Prevention Committee to address the concerns of the student population
- RAP Committee concentrated its efforts in the maintenance of the University’s lighting and emergency telephones throughout campus. They conducted night walks to determine which areas of campus needed better lights and phones.
- Created the Student Patrol Program which consisted of volunteers who would walk other students during the night.
- Continued the WAR program, Women’s Wheels
- Improved the WhistleStop program which distributed whistles in hopes of eradicating rape and sexual assault

Themes

- Awareness
  - From 1972 to 1979, WAR distributed pamphlets educating the public on what constitutes rape, how to prevent it, and services offered if one has been raped
  - 24 Hour Rape Hotline
  - Women’s Wheels

- Dedication
  - In 1972, WAR started a 24-hour hotline that provided phone counseling for victims of rape or attempted rape. The organization required extensive training so that each volunteer was properly prepared for any scenario.

- Public Perception
  - “There must be some willingness on the part of the female for rape to occur.”
    - 1971, Champaign police chief, Harvey Shirley
  - “Persons harm themselves when they place themselves at risk, by walking alone at night in the very dark areas.”
    - 1982 Vice Chancellor Stanley R. Levy

Conclusion

From the research that I conducted, I was able to conclude that there was significant shift in the perception of rape on campus from the early 1970s to the 1980s. The differences in ideology and understanding of rape between the various organizations on campus demonstrates this shift. During the 1970s, WAR was concerned with the emotional impact of rape on the woman and worked towards creating an organization that was dedicated to the women of Champaign-Urbana. They also were dedicated to educating the people about rape and eliminating the idea of ‘blaming the victim.’ However, after WAR ended, there was a drastic increase by the student population for the University to address rape and to provide a preventative approach to the growing concern. The University created the RAP committee while had a different approach than WAR, still proved to be effective in addressing the rape problem on campus.