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Beyond Bystander Intervention: Therapeutic Communalism as a Feminist Framework for Addressing the Structural Roots of Campus Sexual Harassment

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ABSTRACT

. This theoretical paper argues that this stagnation stems from the fundamentally individualistic and depoliticized nature of current approaches, which frame harassment as discrete acts by problematic individuals rather than as symptoms of deeper structural and cultural pathologies within academic institutions. This paper advances Therapeutic Communalism as a comprehensive feminist framework that shifts the locus of intervention from atomized individuals to community responsibility and institutional transformation. Building upon feminist critiques of neoliberal university governance, carceral feminism, and restorative justice principles, we deconstruct how bystander intervention models maintain a liberal feminist orientation that fails to challenge underlying power hierarchies. Therapeutic Communalism reconceptualizes prevention through three core feminist principles: the collectivization of responsibility, moving beyond heroic individual bystanders to cultivate shared ethical accountability; the decentering of formal punitive power, creating alternative communicative spaces that challenge institutional reporting mechanisms rooted in carceral logics; and the integration of restorative praxis, addressing harm through processes emphasizing community healing rather than administrative punishment. Through analysis of institutional case studies and existing communal practice models, we demonstrate how this framework addresses four critical limitations of current approaches: the pervasive reporting gap, institutional betrayal dynamics, normalization of low level harassment, and the reinforcement of carceral systems that disproportionately harm marginalized communities. The paper concludes that sustainable harassment prevention requires moving beyond training individuals toward fundamentally restructuring how academic communities communicate about power, boundaries, and collective care, positioning Therapeutic Communalism as both practical framework and radical political project..

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INTRODUCTION: THE LIMITS OF LIBERAL FEMINISM IN CAMPUS HARASSMENT PREVENTION

The contemporary landscape of campus sexual harassment prevention is dominated by a paradox. There is unprecedented institutional attention and resource allocation, yet it coincides with persistently high prevalence rates and profound survivor dissatisfaction with institutional responses. According to the Association of American Universities' 2019 campus climate survey, approximately 25 percent of undergraduate women experience non consensual sexual contact by force or inability to consent during their college years. Rates are significantly higher for transgender, genderqueer, and nonbinary students (Cantor et al., 2020). Despite this ongoing crisis, the primary prevention strategy adopted by thousands of institutions across the United States, Canada, Australia, and the United Kingdom remains some variation of bystander intervention training.

Programs like Green Dot and Bringing in the Bystander have become higher education staples, often mandated for incoming students and sometimes for staff and faculty. Their premise is psychologically intuitive and politically palatable. If we train individuals to recognize risky situations and intervene safely, we can create protective social norms that prevent harassment and assault before they occur. Yet, rigorous evaluation studies reveal modest outcomes at best. A systematic review found that while bystander programs show small to moderate effects on attitudes and self reported bystander efficacy, evidence for actual behavioral change or reduction in sexual violence perpetration remains limited and methodologically weak (Senn, 2018).

This paper argues that the limited effectiveness of bystander intervention stems not from implementation failures but from fundamental theoretical flaws rooted in its alignment with liberal feminist and neoliberal paradigms. Liberal feminism, as articulated by scholars like Catherine MacKinnon in her early work, emphasizes gender equality through legal and policy reform within existing institutional structures (MacKinnon, 1979). While groundbreaking in establishing sexual harassment as a form of sex discrimination under Title IX in the United States, this approach has evolved into what feminist legal scholar Janet Halley terms "governance feminism." This refers to the incorporation of feminist perspectives into state and institutional power in ways that may reinforce carceral systems and bureaucratic control (Halley, 2006). Neoliberalism, with its emphasis on individual responsibility, market logic, and audit culture, further shapes how universities operationalize prevention. As education scholars document, the corporatization of higher education has transformed universities into entities that manage risk and reputation above all else (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004; Tuchman, 2009). In this context, bystander training becomes what critical psychologist Michelle Fine calls a "technological fix." It is an individually focused, measurable intervention that allows institutions to demonstrate compliance and manage liability without addressing underlying structural conditions (Fine, 2018).

The limitations of this paradigm manifest in several persistent problems. First, the reporting gap remains staggering. Estimates suggest only 5 to 28 percent of campus sexual assaults are reported to any formal authority (Sinozich & Langton, 2014). Second, survivors who do report frequently experience what psychologist Jennifer Freyd terms institutional betrayal. This is the trauma compounded when institutions they depend upon for protection respond with indifference, obstruction, or retaliation (Freyd, 1997). High profile cases like those at Michigan State University and Baylor University reveal patterns where institutions systematically protected perpetrators, particularly those with athletic, fundraising, or research prestige. Third, bystander models focus predominantly on acute, potentially criminal incidents. This neglects the continuum of harm that includes everyday gender based

harassment, microaggressions, and boundary testing behaviors that create hostile climates but rarely trigger formal response. Fourth, as abolitionist feminists argue, reliance on punitive campus judiciary systems and partnership with law enforcement replicates carceral systems that disproportionately criminalize vulnerable groups, often for the same behaviors overlooked when perpetrated by privileged students (Davis, 2003; Richie, 2012).

This paper proposes Therapeutic Communalism as an alternative feminist framework that addresses these structural roots. Developed from the integration of therapeutic jurisprudence, restorative justice, feminist care ethics, and community psychology principles, Therapeutic Communalism shifts the primary unit of analysis and intervention from the individual to the community (Tronto, 1993; Wexler & Winick, 1996; Zehr, 2015). It posits that sexual harassment is not merely an aggregation of individual misconduct but a communicative and relational pathology that thrives in specific institutional climates characterized by silence, power asymmetry, and competitive individualism. Prevention, therefore, requires transforming those climates through intentional cultivation of communal norms and practices that prioritize dignity, accountability, and collective care. This represents a significant departure from bystander intervention's implicit theory of change. That model assumes that changing individual attitudes and behaviors will aggregate to cultural change. Instead, Therapeutic Communalism posits that cultural change must precede and enable sustainable individual behavioral change.

The argument proceeds through several sections. First, we provide a feminist critique of bystander intervention, tracing its theoretical lineage to liberal feminism and neoliberal governance. Second, we articulate the core principles of Therapeutic Communalism as a feminist framework. Third, we demonstrate how this framework addresses the four key limitations outlined above through specific mechanisms and practices. Fourth, we examine existing models and case studies that exemplify Therapeutic Communalist principles in practice. Finally, we discuss implications for policy, practice, and feminist politics. We argue that Therapeutic Communalism offers a pathway beyond the current impasse in campus harassment prevention by recentring collective responsibility, restorative praxis, and institutional transformation.

A FEMINIST CRITIQUE OF BYSTANDER INTERVENTION: LIBERAL INDIVIDUALISM IN STRUCTURAL CLOTHING

Bystander intervention training represents the culmination of liberal feminist advocacy within neoliberal universities. It embodies what sociologist Elizabeth Bernstein terms "carceral feminism." This is a politics that seeks redress for gender violence through intensified state punishment and institutional discipline (Bernstein, 2010). While early feminist organizers like those in the anti rape movement of the 1970s emphasized community accountability and survivor centered responses, the professionalization of sexual assault prevention has increasingly embraced individualistic, psychological approaches amenable to institutional management. Bystander intervention's theoretical foundations lie in social psychology research on the bystander effect, particularly Latane and Darley's five step model (Latané & Darley, 1970). Feminist adaptations, such as Victoria Banyard's Bringing in the Bystander program, added gender consciousness and violence prevention framing, yet maintained the core individualistic focus (Banyard et al., 2007). This individualization is not incidental but structural. It reflects what political theorist Wendy Brown identifies as neoliberalism's distinctive mode of governance, "responsibilization" (Brown, 2015). Under this logic, social problems like sexual harassment are reframed as matters of individual risk management. Solutions focus on modifying personal behavior rather than transforming social conditions.

The operation of this logic within university settings is multifaceted. First, bystander training transforms a structural issue of patriarchal power into a skills deficit among community members. As feminist philosopher Kate Manne argues in her analysis of misogyny, harassment functions as a policing mechanism that reinforces gender hierarchy and male entitlement (Manne, 2017). By focusing on teaching individuals to intervene in discrete situations, bystander programs implicitly individualize both perpetration, as acts of particular bad actors, and prevention, as responsibility of particular good actors. This obscures how harassment is enabled by institutional structures. These include academic hierarchies that concentrate power in predominantly male full professors, athletic departments with insulated cultures, Greek life systems built on gendered power dynamics, and funding models that make universities dependent on donor reputations. Second, as education scholar Sara Ahmed demonstrates in her study of university diversity work, such training programs often become "non performatives." These are speech acts that name a problem but fail to produce material change, instead serving as evidence of institutional action (Ahmed, 2021). Universities can point to high training completion rates while maintaining structures that enable harassment, a dynamic Ahmed calls "institutional passing."

Furthermore, bystander intervention reinforces carceral logics by preparing community members to participate in surveillance and reporting systems that may harm marginalized students. Critical legal scholar Aya Gruber argues that mainstream anti violence advocacy has embraced "punitive precision." This is the belief that better targeting of punishment can solve gender violence without addressing systemic racism and class bias in carceral systems (Gruber, 2020). On campus, this manifests in training that encourages reporting to Title IX offices or campus police without critical analysis of how these systems may revictimize survivors or disproportionately discipline students of color. Data indicates that students from vulnerable groups are disproportionately accused of sexual misconduct and face more severe sanctions, mirroring broader disparities in criminal justice (Lombardi, 2010). Bystander training rarely addresses these inequities, instead presenting reporting as an uncomplicated good.

The emphasis on heroic individual intervention also reflects a gendered and racialized archetype that may discourage participation from those outside dominant identities. As research on microinterventions suggests, people from marginalized groups often weigh intervention risks differently. They consider potential retaliation, not being believed, or being perceived as aggressive (Nadal, 2011). The typical bystander scenario, a man intervening when another man harasses a woman, reinforces a white knight narrative. This centers privileged actors as protectors rather than empowering marginalized communities in their own protection. This dynamic is particularly evident in predominantly white institutions where students of color may be reluctant to involve authority figures in intraracial conflicts, given histories of discriminatory treatment.

Finally, bystander models focus overwhelmingly on acute incidents between strangers or acquaintances in social settings, typically involving alcohol. While important, this narrow focus ignores the most common contexts of campus harassment: the classroom, the academic department, the research lab, and supervisory relationships. The AAU survey indicates that approximately 40 percent of graduate student sexual harassment occurs in academic contexts, often involving faculty student power differentials (Cantor et al., 2020). Bystander programs rarely equip students or staff to address the subtle abuses of academic power. These include the advisor who makes inappropriate personal comments, the professor who favors students who tolerate flirtation, and the department chair who dismisses concerns about a colleague's behavior. These patterns create hostile educational environments and

require different intervention strategies focused on institutional power dynamics rather than party scenarios.

Therapeutic Communalism emerges from this critique. It offers a framework that addresses harassment as embedded in institutional structures and relational patterns rather than as isolated incidents requiring individual intervention. It builds upon feminist traditions that have long emphasized community accountability. These include the transformative justice movements led by women of color organizations. These movements developed community based accountability processes as alternatives to both state punishment and liberal feminist reliance on institutional systems (Kim, 2018). Similarly, Therapeutic Communalism draws on decades of feminist organizing within academia itself, from the early consciousness raising groups to contemporary survivor led movements. By synthesizing these traditions with therapeutic jurisprudence and restorative justice, it offers a coherent framework for institutional transformation that addresses the structural roots bystander intervention leaves untouched.

THERAPEUTIC COMMUNALISM: CORE PRINCIPLES OF A FEMINIST FRAMEWORK

Therapeutic Communalism represents a synthesis of several feminist and critical traditions. It reconceptualizes harassment prevention as the cultivation of ethical community rather than the training of individual interveners. Its theoretical foundations are deliberately interdisciplinary, drawing from four primary sources: feminist care ethics, restorative and transformative justice, therapeutic jurisprudence, and community psychology. From feminist care ethics, particularly Joan Tronto's framework defining care as a species activity, Therapeutic Communalism adopts the principle that preventing harm is an ongoing practice of collective maintenance rather than a series of discrete interventions (Tronto, 1993). Care ethics shifts the moral question from "What are my individual duties?" to "How do we sustain the networks of relationship that enable flourishing?" This relational orientation directly counters the individualism of bystander models.

From restorative and transformative justice, Therapeutic Communalism incorporates the understanding that harm disrupts relationships and community fabric. Meaningful accountability requires addressing needs, obligations, and causes (Zehr, 2015). Transformative justice expands this to include transforming the social conditions that enabled harm, a crucial addition for addressing structural factors in harassment. These traditions provide concrete processes, like circles and conferences, that operationalize communal accountability. From therapeutic jurisprudence comes the insight that legal and institutional rules and processes have psychological consequences that can be either therapeutic or anti therapeutic (Wexler & Winick, 1996). Applied to campus harassment, this means evaluating policies and practices not just for procedural fairness but for their impact on community well being, survivor healing, and perpetrator rehabilitation. Finally, from community psychology comes the emphasis on power analysis and collective action for well being. This moves beyond individual level interventions to community level change (Prilleltensky, 2012).

Three core principles distinguish Therapeutic Communalism as a feminist framework for harassment prevention. These are the collectivization of responsibility, the decentering of formal punitive power, and the integration of restorative praxis. Each represents a deliberate departure from bystander intervention assumptions and practices.

Principle One: Collectivization of Responsibility

Therapeutic Communalism fundamentally rejects the notion that preventing harassment is primarily the responsibility of atomized individuals who must be trained to intervene in moments of crisis. Instead, it posits that safety is a collective condition produced and maintained through everyday communal practices. This shifts the primary question from "Would you intervene if you saw something?" to "What kind of community are we building that either enables or prevents harm?"

Collectivization operates on multiple levels. At the cultural level, it involves nurturing norms where speaking up about discomfort is expected and supported. It requires norms where power differentials are routinely acknowledged and mitigated, and where well being is understood as interconnected. At the structural level, it requires redesigning institutional processes to distribute responsibility for climate across roles. Faculty have responsibility in classrooms and advising, staff in administrative spaces, students in social spaces, and everyone in communal areas. At the relational level, it cultivates practices of mutual accountability where community members feel both entitled to express boundaries and obligated to respect others.

This collectivization directly addresses the "bystander effect." It does not do so by training individuals to overcome diffusion of responsibility, but by designing communities where responsibility is never diffuse to begin with. It is explicitly shared. Examples include departmental climate committees with rotating membership that regularly assess interpersonal dynamics. Classroom contracts co created by students and instructors establish norms for respectful discussion. Peer led accountability processes address low level misconduct without immediate administrative involvement. The University of Michigan's Program on Intergroup Relations models this collectivized approach by training student facilitators to cultivate inclusive community norms in residence halls and classrooms (Gurin et al., 2013).

Principle Two: Decentering Formal Punitive Power

Bystander intervention typically positions formal reporting systems as the authoritative backstop for community intervention. If direct intervention fails or is not possible, the proper response is to report to authorities. Therapeutic Communalism critically examines these systems. It recognizes that survivors from marginalized communities often have legitimate reasons to avoid them. These include fear of discriminatory treatment, distrust of institutional motives, and desire for outcomes other than punishment. Decentering punitive power does not mean eliminating formal systems. It means creating multiple pathways for addressing harm that do not automatically trigger carceral responses.

This principle involves creating parallel structures rooted in community rather than institutional authority. Examples include survivor led support networks that operate independently of Title IX offices. Restorative justice programs offer voluntary alternatives to disciplinary processes. Community accountability processes are adapted for campus settings. The CARA Project at Columbia University represents an early attempt at this decentering by providing a survivor centered, community based alternative for addressing sexual harm outside formal university channels (Kwelagobe, 2019). Decentering also involves democratizing knowledge about power and harassment. This means making explicit the often opaque workings of institutional power. It helps community members recognize abuses of academic authority. It creates spaces where people can share experiences without triggering automatic investigative responses. This addresses the reporting gap not by pressuring more survivors to come forward to systems they distrust, but by creating alternative avenues for acknowledgment, support, and accountability.

Principle Three: Integration of Restorative Praxis

While bystander intervention focuses on preventing discrete incidents, Therapeutic Communalism recognizes that harm will occur. How communities respond either repairs or further damages the social fabric. Restorative praxis, the application of restorative principles to everyday conflicts and harms, becomes central to prevention. It demonstrates that communities can address harm constructively. This involves shifting from a punitive paradigm that asks "Who broke the rule and how should they be punished?" to a restorative paradigm that asks "Who was harmed, what are their needs, whose obligations are these, and what are the causes?" (Zehr, 2015).

On campus, this means developing capacity for restorative responses at various levels. For low level boundary violations, this might involve facilitated conversations between affected parties. For patterns of concerning behavior, it might involve community circles to address climate issues without targeting specific individuals. For more serious harm, it might involve formal restorative justice conferences as alternatives or supplements to disciplinary proceedings. The key is that these processes are relational, participatory, and forward looking. They are focused on repairing relationships and preventing future harm rather than establishing guilt and administering punishment. Universities like the University of Colorado Boulder have implemented restorative approaches to sexual misconduct with promising results, including higher survivor satisfaction and reduced recidivism compared to traditional adjudication (Koss et al., 2014).

Together, these three principles reframe harassment prevention as the ongoing work of building communities resilient to harm. These are communities that communicate openly about boundaries, distribute responsibility for safety, offer multiple pathways for addressing violations, and prioritize healing over punishment. This represents a fundamentally different theory of change than bystander intervention. It requires institutional transformation rather than just individual training.

ADDRESSING THE FOUR FAILURES: HOW THERAPEUTIC COMMUNALISM TARGETS STRUCTURAL ROOTS

Therapeutic Communalism directly engages with the four persistent failures of current campus harassment prevention efforts. These are the reporting gap, institutional betrayal, normalization of low level harm, and carceral system replication. For each, the framework offers specific mechanisms that address root causes rather than symptoms.

Addressing the Reporting Gap: Creating Multiple Pathways to Acknowledgment and Accountability

The profound underreporting of campus sexual harassment stems from well documented barriers. These include fear of retaliation, distrust of institutional processes, shame, self blame, desire to avoid traumatic investigations, and concern about impacts on academic careers (Sable et al., 2006). Bystander intervention does little to address these barriers, focusing instead on increasing reports by third parties. Therapeutic Communalism approaches the reporting gap differently. It recognizes that many survivors do not want or need formal investigation and punishment. They want the harm acknowledged, their safety ensured, and to prevent recurrence. The framework therefore creates multiple, low threshold entry points for addressing harm that do not automatically trigger formal proceedings.

These include restorative options that allow survivors to seek acknowledgment and amends without requiring perpetrator admission to policy violation. Climate reporting mechanisms allow community members to report patterns or concerns without identifying

specific incidents or perpetrators. This triggers communal discussion rather than individual investigation. Survivor led peer support provides validation and guidance without institutional involvement. Healing circles allow survivors to share experiences and receive community support without pursuing accountability. The University of Oregon's "Campus Consent Team," a student faculty staff collective that receives confidential disclosures and helps survivors navigate options, exemplifies this multi pathway approach (McKinney, 2018). By validating various forms of seeking redress, not just formal reporting, Therapeutic Communalism respects survivor autonomy while still addressing harm.

Crucially, these alternative pathways also serve preventive functions. When survivors share experiences in community circles, patterns become visible that might otherwise remain hidden in confidential Title IX reports. When climate concerns are discussed openly, departments can address toxic dynamics before they produce severe harm. When restorative processes successfully address misconduct, they demonstrate that accountability can be transformative rather than purely punitive. This potentially encourages more survivors and accused persons to participate. This creates a virtuous cycle where addressing harm becomes more commonplace, norms shift, and prevention strengthens.

Countering Institutional Betrayal: Building Trust Through Transparent, Survivor Centered Processes

Institutional betrayal occurs when universities prioritize reputation management, donor relations, athletic success, or faculty prestige over survivor safety and justice. High profile cases reveal patterns of institutions ignoring complaints for decades. These betrayals are not anomalies but systemic outcomes of institutional structures that incentivize cover up.

Therapeutic Communalism addresses institutional betrayal through structural transparency and distributed responsibility. Rather than concentrating power in a single Title IX office that reports to upper administration, creating conflicts of interest, the framework advocates for independent oversight bodies with survivor representation. It also distributes climate responsibility across the institution. This makes harassment prevention part of every administrator's, department chair's, and faculty member's job description, not just the Title IX coordinator's. The University of California system's training represents an attempt at distributed responsibility by requiring all employees to complete training and supervisors to take additional modules on responding to disclosures (UC Office of the President, 2020).

More importantly, Therapeutic Communalism builds community based oversight through mechanisms like campus climate committees with power to review institutional responses and make recommendations. When survivors and allies have formal roles in monitoring and improving institutional responses, betrayal becomes harder to conceal. The framework also emphasizes process over outcome. It creates procedures that survivors experience as respectful, validating, and empowering regardless of case outcome. Research on the neurobiology of trauma and legal procedures demonstrates that survivors' recovery is significantly impacted by whether they feel believed, supported, and in control during disclosure processes (Campbell, 2006). Therapeutic Communalism designs processes with these trauma informed principles at their core, reducing secondary trauma.

Disrupting the Normalization of Low Level Harassment: Cultivating Communal Norms Through Everyday Practice

The continuum of sexual harm includes behaviors often dismissed as "not that bad." These include sexist jokes, objectifying comments, unwanted flirtation, and boundary

testing. These behaviors create hostile environments and signal permission for more severe violations. Bystander intervention typically addresses only the most egregious end of the continuum. Therapeutic Communalism targets the entire continuum by cultivating communal norm setting and low level accountability practices.

This involves creating regular opportunities for communities to explicitly discuss and establish norms. In academic departments, this might take the form of semester start circles where faculty, staff, and students co create guidelines for respectful interaction. In classrooms, it might involve contracts establishing communication norms. In social spaces, it might involve peer led discussions about consent and boundaries. The key is that these norms are living agreements, regularly revisited and revised, not static policies. When norms are violated, Therapeutic Communalism encourages low threshold corrective conversations rather than immediate punitive responses. A colleague making a sexist joke might be approached with a statement like, "I know you probably did not mean harm, but that kind of humor makes some of us uncomfortable. Can we find other ways to connect?" This approach addresses behavior while preserving relationship, making it more likely to change norms without creating defensiveness.

The framework also recognizes that power differentials affect who can safely initiate such conversations. Therefore, it includes designated norm keepers. These are individuals in each community unit trained to facilitate norm discussions and address violations. These roles rotate to distribute responsibility and prevent burnout. The Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Department of Physics implemented "Climate Committee Co Chairs" in each research group. These are faculty and graduate students who receive training in addressing interpersonal issues and fostering inclusive environments (MIT Committee on Campus Climate, 2021). While not explicitly Therapeutic Communalist, this model demonstrates the potential of distributed norm keeping.

Avoiding Carceral System Replication: Centering Transformative Rather than Punitive Accountability

Campus disciplinary systems often replicate the worst aspects of criminal justice. These include adversarial proceedings, disproportionate impact on marginalized students, emphasis on punishment over rehabilitation, and binary guilty or innocent determinations that rarely satisfy anyone. As abolitionist feminist organizations argue, these systems extend the carceral state into educational settings, particularly harming vulnerable students.

Therapeutic Communalism offers transformative accountability as an alternative. Drawing from the work of Generation Five, transformative accountability seeks to address the immediate harm and prevent its recurrence. It aims to transform the conditions that allowed harm to occur. It actively resists oppressive systems and relations. It promotes healing for everyone involved (Generation Five, 2007). On campus, this might involve accountability processes that include not just the people directly involved but affected community members. The focus is on identifying systemic contributors, like departmental power imbalances or toxic social norms, and developing plans for collective change.

Therapeutic Communalism does not argue against the punishment of lecturers who engage in sexual harassment or serious misconduct. Rather, it complements disciplinary regimes by emphasising preventive and early-intervention measures. Where a faculty member is found to have slightly crossed professional boundaries, the framework supports a corrective, non-punitive response aimed at preventing escalation. This may include counseling or therapy, ethics-focused training, temporary restrictions on supervisory roles, structured community-based accountability, and appropriate reparative actions.

Alongside individual intervention, Therapeutic Communalism requires institutional self-examination. Departments are encouraged to review supervision structures, power dynamics, and reporting mechanisms that allowed minor boundary lapses to go unaddressed. This dual focus ensures that reparation operates both at the personal and communal levels redeeming minor transgressions where possible, while preserving clear punitive consequences for serious violations. This reflects the principle that except in cases of immediate danger, educational access should be preserved while accountability processes unfold. This stance is supported by disability justice advocates who note the disproportionate impact of suspensions on students with mental health conditions (Kaba & Hassan, 2019). By addressing these four failures at their roots, Therapeutic Communalism moves beyond the limitations of individual focused approaches. It creates communities capable of preventing, addressing, and healing from sexual harm in ways that are equitable, effective, and transformative.

EXISTING MODELS AND CASE STUDIES: THERAPEUTIC COMMUNALISM IN PRACTICE

While no institution has fully implemented Therapeutic Communalism as a comprehensive framework, elements exist across various campuses. These often emerge from student activism, restorative justice initiatives, or departmental climate efforts. Examining these models reveals both possibilities and challenges for broader implementation.

Student Led Restorative Justice Programs

Perhaps the closest existing models to Therapeutic Communalism are student led restorative justice programs that address sexual harm outside formal disciplinary systems. The University of Michigan's Student Led Restorative Justice Program, founded in 2017, offers an alternative process for addressing sexual misconduct that emphasizes healing, accountability, and community repair over punishment (Umbreit, 2019). While operating with some university oversight, the program is primarily facilitated by trained student peers who guide participants through restorative conferences or circles. Key features include voluntary participation by all parties, survivor centered process design, focus on understanding harm and its impacts, development of reparative agreements, and community member participation. Evaluation data shows high participant satisfaction and reduced fear of campus retaliation among survivors who choose this pathway.

Similarly, student activists at Brown University created the "Survivor Support and Community Accountability" network in 2018. This provides peer support and facilitates community accountability processes for sexual harm (Brown Daily Herald, 2019). Operating independently from university administration, this entirely student run initiative reflects the decentering principle of Therapeutic Communalism. It creates alternative structures rooted in community rather than institutional authority. Challenges include limited capacity, lack of institutional support, and difficulty ensuring consistent process quality. However, these models demonstrate student demand for and capacity to implement restorative, community based approaches.

Transformative Justice in Student Activist Communities

Beyond formal programs, transformative justice principles have been adopted by student activist groups, particularly those led by women of color and queer students. The organization FORCE: Upsetting Rape Culture created the "Culture of Consent" campaign that used art, dialogue, and community organizing to transform campus norms around consent

(FORCE, 2020). Their approach emphasized changing culture through creative engagement rather than policy change. This represents the collectivization principle in action, engaging entire communities in reimagining norms rather than training individual bystanders.

At UCLA, the student group "Care Not Cops" advocates for shifting resources from campus policing to community based support systems, including for addressing sexual violence (Care Not Cops, 2021). Their work explicitly connects campus sexual violence prevention to broader movements against carceral systems. While not a comprehensive prevention program, their advocacy pushes universities to consider non carceral responses to harm, aligning with Therapeutic Communalism's decentering of punitive power.

Departmental Climate Initiatives

Some academic departments have implemented climate initiatives that embody Therapeutic Communalist principles, often in response to harassment scandals. The University of California, Berkeley's Astronomy Department implemented a comprehensive climate transformation plan. This includes regular department wide forums for discussing climate issues, a peer mentoring program that addresses power dynamics in advising relationships, clear processes for raising concerns that do not automatically trigger formal complaints, and restorative approaches to addressing lower level misconduct (Clancy et al., 2020). While still incorporating formal reporting options, these measures create multiple pathways for addressing harm and distribute responsibility across the community.

Similarly, MIT's Department of Electrical Engineering and Computer Science established a "Climate Committee." This conducts regular anonymous climate surveys, hosts listening sessions, and implements department specific training on power dynamics in research relationships (MIT EECS, 2021). These initiatives recognize that harassment prevention requires department specific approaches tailored to unique power structures and cultural norms. This is a key insight of Therapeutic Communalism, which emphasizes contextual application rather than one size fits all programming.

Institutional Restorative Justice Programs

A growing number of universities are implementing restorative justice programs for sexual misconduct, though typically as supplements rather than alternatives to disciplinary systems. The University of Colorado Boulder's "Restorative Justice for Sexual Harm" program offers facilitated conferences for cases involving acknowledgment of harm (University of Colorado Boulder, 2022). Research on similar programs indicates higher survivor satisfaction, greater perception of fairness by both parties, and lower recidivism compared to traditional adjudication (Koss et al., 2014). These programs demonstrate the feasibility of integrating restorative praxis into institutional responses. They often face challenges including limited eligibility, under resourcing, and skepticism from administrators accustomed to punitive models.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS: STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS

These models collectively demonstrate that elements of Therapeutic Communalism are already being implemented, often from the ground up. Student led initiatives show the hunger for alternative approaches and the capacity of communities to self organize around restorative principles. Departmental climate initiatives demonstrate that unit level transformation is possible when leadership commits to cultural change. Institutional restorative programs prove that universities can implement restorative processes with proper support.

However, significant limitations persist. Most initiatives are small scale, under resourced, and marginal to mainstream institutional responses. Few integrate all three principles of Therapeutic Communalism. They typically focus on either restorative processes or climate work, but not both in a coordinated framework. Sustainability is a major challenge, with many student led initiatives dissolving after founding graduates leave. Institutional resistance remains high, particularly from legal counsel who fear liability if alternative processes are offered.

These cases suggest that full implementation of Therapeutic Communalism would require institutional commitment to resource alternative approaches at scale. It needs integration of restorative principles into policy frameworks. It requires training for faculty, staff, and students in therapeutic communication and restorative facilitation. Structural changes are needed to distribute climate responsibility across roles. The University of Michigan's multi pronged approach comes closest to a comprehensive model, though still not fully realized.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY, PRACTICE, AND FEMINIST POLITICS

The implementation of Therapeutic Communalism as a framework for campus harassment prevention carries significant implications for institutional policy, daily practice, and feminist political strategy. These implications require careful consideration of feasibility, resistance, and unintended consequences.

Policy Implications: Beyond Compliance Toward Transformation

Current campus harassment policies are overwhelmingly shaped by compliance logic. This involves meeting Title IX requirements, minimizing liability, and managing reputation. Therapeutic Communalism suggests a different orientation: policies as tools for cultivating ethical community. This would involve several shifts.

First, redefining institutional success metrics. Rather than primarily tracking training completion rates and complaint numbers, institutions would measure climate indicators. These include perceptions of safety across different identity groups, willingness to express boundaries, trust in institutional responses, and observed norm adherence. The University of Texas System's biennial campus climate survey moves in this direction by asking about experiences and perceptions beyond formal reporting (UT System, 2021).

Second, creating policy frameworks that enable restorative options. This includes formalizing restorative justice programs with adequate funding and staffing. It involves establishing clear guidelines for when and how restorative processes can be offered. It requires training adjudicators to understand restorative outcomes as valid resolutions. The University of San Diego's "Restorative Justice for Sexual Misconduct" policy provides a template (USD, 2020).

Third, distributing responsibility through structural changes. This might involve requiring each academic department to develop and implement climate plans. It includes incorporating climate responsibilities into job descriptions and performance reviews for faculty and administrators. Creating oversight bodies with survivor and community representation is key. The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine's 2018 report on sexual harassment recommends many of these structural changes, providing evidence based support for Therapeutic Communalist approaches.

Fourth, ensuring transparency and community oversight. Policies should mandate regular public reporting on climate survey results, complaint outcomes disaggregated by identity factors, and institutional responses to climate concerns. The "Know Your IX" campaign by student activists advocates for such transparency as essential for accountability (Know Your IX, 2022).

PRACTICE IMPLICATIONS: SKILLS, SPACES, AND SUSTAINED COMMITMENT

Implementing Therapeutic Communalism requires developing new capacities across campus communities. Key practice implications include developing therapeutic and restorative facilitation skills. Faculty, staff, and student leaders need training in active listening, nonviolent communication, conflict mediation, circle facilitation, and trauma informed response. This goes far beyond the few hours of bystander training typically required.

Creating spaces for communal dialogue and norm setting is essential. Physical and temporal space must be allocated for regular community circles, climate discussions, and restorative processes. This might involve designating circle rooms in campus buildings, protecting time in department meetings for climate check ins, and creating online spaces for ongoing dialogue.

Supporting survivor leadership and peer support networks is crucial. Rather than positioning survivors solely as complainants or victims, Therapeutic Communalism recognizes their expertise and leadership potential. Institutions should fund and support survivor led initiatives, incorporate survivor perspectives in policy development, and create paid positions for survivors in prevention work.

Addressing power differentials explicitly is necessary. Practice must include transparent discussion of power dynamics in classrooms, advising relationships, and social hierarchies. This might involve required conversations about power in faculty student mentoring agreements, training for faculty on managing power ethically, and creating channels for graduate students and junior faculty to raise concerns without fear of retaliation.

FEMINIST POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS: BEYOND CARCERAL REFORM

The adoption of Therapeutic Communalism represents more than a technical shift in prevention strategy. It carries significant political implications for feminist movements addressing gender violence.

First, it challenges carceral feminism by offering concrete alternatives to punitive systems. Mainstream anti violence movements have increasingly aligned with state punishment systems, with problematic consequences for marginalized communities. Therapeutic Communalism provides a roadmap for prevention and response that does not rely on carceral logic. This potentially bridges divides between anti violence and prison abolition movements.

Second, it recenters collective action in an era of neoliberal individualism. By framing safety as a collective condition rather than an individual responsibility, Therapeutic Communalism revives feminist traditions of community organizing and mutual aid. This has implications beyond campuses, suggesting models for workplace harassment prevention, neighborhood safety, and other contexts.

Third, it integrates intersectional analysis into practice. By emphasizing how power operates across multiple axes and by creating processes adaptable to different community contexts, Therapeutic Communalism offers an approach that can better serve marginalized survivors often failed by one size fits all policies.

Fourth, it reconnects prevention with institutional critique. Rather than accepting university structures as neutral backdrops, Therapeutic Communalism demands transformation of those structures. This aligns with broader critiques of neoliberal academia and movements for educational justice.

CHALLENGES AND RESISTANCE

Implementation will face significant challenges. These include institutional inertia, legal concerns about liability, resource constraints, and resistance from those benefiting from current power structures. Perhaps the greatest challenge is cultural. Shifting from individualistic to communal understandings of responsibility requires profound normative change. This change must be led from multiple positions. Survivor activists can push from below. Faculty and administrators can implement from within. External pressure can come from accreditors, funders, and governments.

The recent requirement by the U.S. Department of Education that campuses address harassment as a form of sex discrimination under Title IX creates both opportunities and constraints. While the regulations emphasize formal grievance procedures, they do not preclude supplemental restorative approaches. Advocacy will be needed to ensure policy interpretations support rather than hinder Therapeutic Communalist innovations.

CONCLUSION: TOWARD COMMUNITIES OF DIGNITY AND REPAIR

Sexual harassment on campus is not a problem of insufficient individual intervention. It is a symptom of unhealthy community ecosystems. Bystander intervention training operates within the very individualistic, neoliberal, and carceral paradigms that enable harassment to persist. Its limited effectiveness signals not a need for better training but for a fundamentally different approach.

Therapeutic Communalism offers such an approach. By collectivizing responsibility, decentering punitive power, and integrating restorative praxis, it addresses the structural roots of harassment that individual focused models ignore. It understands prevention not as the summation of discrete interventions but as the cultivation of communities where dignity is non negotiable. In these communities, power is exercised with care, and harm is met with processes that heal rather than further divide.

The framework is both pragmatic and radical. It is pragmatic in its incorporation of existing practices like restorative justice and climate initiatives. It is radical in its demand for institutional transformation beyond compliance. It bridges feminist theory and practice, offering concrete mechanisms for implementing the insights of decades of feminist critique of institutional power.

No university has fully realized Therapeutic Communalism, but elements exist across campuses. These are often born from student activism and survivor ingenuity. The task ahead is to synthesize these elements into coherent institutional frameworks, supported by policy, resources, and leadership commitment. This requires reimagining what safety means and how it is achieved. It means moving from individual protection to communal flourishing, from punishment to repair, from risk management to relationship cultivation.

As campuses continue to grapple with sexual harassment amid broader crises, Therapeutic Communalism offers more than a better prevention strategy. It offers a vision of academic community grounded in mutual responsibility, ethical communication, and collective care. This vision addresses not only sexual harassment but the deeper alienation and inequity plaguing higher education. In centering community healing and transformation, it points toward universities that do not just manage harm but cultivate the conditions where harm becomes unthinkable.

The path forward requires courage to experiment, humility to learn from failures, and commitment to center those most impacted by current systems. It requires moving beyond the comfortable familiarity of bystander training toward the more challenging but more promising work of building communities capable of preventing, addressing, and healing from

harm in ways that are just, equitable, and truly transformative. Therapeutic Communalism provides the framework for this essential work.

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