**UPUA Elections Questionnaire about Gender Equity**

Administrators invite student government leadership to consequential meetings and to participate in institutional-decision making. With the right leadership, student government can help student activists demand accountability and institutional change.

Sexual violence remains a pervasive cultural issue on Penn State’s University Park campus. One in five students responding to the 2018 Sexual Misconduct Survey reported experiencing some form of sexual violence. But Penn State’s leadership has failed to deliver on various commitments — like the timely release of the 2018 survey — and listen to student activists and University experts who want policy changes that would reduce the incidence of sexual violence.

We need student government leaders who will work with student activists and University experts to question administrative inaction and advocate for increased student, staff, and faculty participation in University decision-making (and by students, we don’t mean just student government members). We need student government leaders who understand the reality of sexual violence. We do not need student government leaders who buy into the self-protective form of anti-sexual-violence work that maintains the University’s image.

We encourage student participation in UPUA’s elections because your vote — or lack thereof — indicates to student government leaders and administrators what students believe. Your vote or lack thereof holds student government members accountable to the people they’re supposed to represent and advocate for: students.

To help students make an informed decision as they vote, we’re asking all candidates for the UPUA to complete the following questionnaire to inform our endorsements by **March 14th**. All questionnaires received may be published online, including candidates who were not endorsed. We will not publicize why we did not endorse any individual candidates but we may publicize why we did endorse candidates.

Responses and/or questions can be emailed to Sonika Kohli (sonika@psu.edu) as a word document. We are happy to answer candidate questions and provide feedback prior to your submission.

*Our questions are in bold. Please delete the unbolded material before submitting, including this note. And, in acknowledgment that gender inequity manifests in ways other than sexual violence, please feel free to elaborate on issues related to sexual and relationship violence.*

1. **How do you define sexual violence? How do you think sexual violence is defined by Penn State administrators and/or in institutional discourse? Is this definition inadequate and, if so, how would you leverage your role to change it?**

Recognizing the wide variety of forms in which sexual violence takes place or the contexts it may take place in, I will attempt to produce a general definition in my own words. Sexual violence is any use of intimidation, threats, or acts of physical harm of a sexual nature against a person. It may also involve the leveraging of significant emotional, psychological, or financial harm or threats of harm for non-consensual sexual ends. Unfortunately, nowhere in the Title IX terms and definitions section of University Policy AD85 is sexual violence explicitly defined, in contrast with dating and domestic violence, but I believe that the university generally considers it to be any legal form of violence of a sexual nature. I think it would be beneficial for the university to define sexual violence more explicitly, at least in relation to related terms such as sexual harassment, dating violence, and stalking. In contrast, dating violence is defined as following VAWA‌ ‌-‌ ‌34‌ ‌U.S.C.‌ ‌§ 12291(a)(10)‌, which is a publicly available code. At minimum, the university should have some form of definition or reference to an existing legal definition of sexual violence, as sexual violence as a term is mentioned in AD85 and is also a prevailing matter of concern on campus. As an At-Large Representative, I will push for a meeting or presentation with the university administration to explain the context of AD85 and ascertain the reasons, or lack thereof, regarding the absence of a clear definition. Following that, if it appears to be in the interest of student safety that the term be specifically enumerated, then I will benchmark what other universities have done and co-sponsor legislation appealing to the administration for the creation of a new, comprehensive definition. Depending upon circumstances, it may also be appropriate to initiate a referendum to gauge the experiences and sentiments of the student body, although I do not know exactly what capacity I have as an at-large representative in that regard.

1. **What do you think Penn State (specifically administrators or governing bodies) or our local/state/federal government can do to decrease the incidence of sexual and relationship violence?**

I think one way that Penn State can significantly reduce sexual and relationship violence is through effective messaging aimed specifically at two groups which are often neglected on the topic: the LGBT+ community and men. For the former, it is known that a disproportionately high number of rape victims identify as LGBT+; part of this might be due to the fact that most messaging tends to be aimed at traditional couples rather than relationships within the LGBT+ umbrella. Having educational materials designed specifically for this community can help reduce victimization. Regarding men, which might be a surprising addition to the list, I argue that there is a severe lack of reporting due to the fact that society dismisses men as either automatically consenting to any advances or physically immune to violence, which as mentioned above, can take many more forms than just bruises. This can help reduce the remarkably frequent and unreported frequency of violence against men, which should also help ensure that these same men can help overcome the pain in a healthy, uplifting manner.

Another improvement would be the accessibility of resources. Having consistently available posters from residence life (rather than just during the first month of the year), ensuring the functionality of the Blue Light system, and more non-disciplinary response options would also be vital. By encouraging all students to actually add the key numbers to their phones, as well as by keeping the resources available on flyers year-round, students will be constantly reminded of and have access to the resources that already do exist. With respect to the Blue Light system, there are constantly dysfunctional lights; proper checking and maintenance is paramount, because if even one light is useless, it can defeat confidence in the entire system. Finally, by increasing the variety of non-disciplinary options available, I mean specifically providing and promoting resources which can improve trauma/conflict resolution without legal involvement. Very often, a victim of abuse might not want to seek legal consequences against the perpetrator, especially if the perpetrator acted more out of ignorance complete malice. Promoting confidential couple counseling can empower a victim to have a safe, productive conversation with their partner, and empower the partner to unlearn harmful tendencies. These meetings could also come into play as critical evidence if there should be a continuation or escalation in the harm dealt against the victim, who may then seek legal protection or sanctions.

Regarding how to advocate for these improvements, again I refer to benchmarking as a basis for identifying effective strategies employed by other universities or comparable institutions. From there, meetings with administrators can introduce them to ideas previously unconsidered, and resolutions can apply broader pressure to critical areas where the university is ignoring student feedback in meetings. Finally, organizing student protests or mass-email action can help further the advocacy of any improvements which are consistently neglected.

1. **Do you plan to advocate for the aforementioned changes? If so, how?**

Yes. I have already talked in the previous response about what advocacy within the UPUA generally looks like. For a bit more information on the process, after benchmarking and outreach to other interested representatives, we usually bring a drafted resolution or bill to the relevant committee, and from there it goes through Steering to be voted on by the Assembly. Often, resolutions can be effective at affirming student support for things which the university is already leaning towards, but rarely do they totally change the direction of a policy or singlehandedly budge the status quo. I argue that the overuse of resolutions can reduce their impact for two reasons: firstly, by releasing several resolutions every week, the resolutions begin to take on the air of commentary rather than serious advocacy statements. Also, by writing, researching, and then debating so many resolutions, the ability of the UPUA to actually follow through on these resolutions declines. I favor drafting fewer resolutions and instead targeting a narrower list of key focal points to be seriously targeted. By far and away the most successful advocacy efforts have been the push for alternative grading in the fall of 2020 along with the release of the student safety survey during the current Assembly. These were successful because they employed more representatives, worked in tandem with pre-existing advocacy groups, and pushed out petitions and surveys to demonstrate student convictions. The UPUA is not and should not be considered as the final voice of students, but rather the microphone of students. We represent student interests, but at the end of the day, on all issues of substance we should first seek and then amplify the true voice of students—the students themselves. Our resolutions should be the icing on the cake to highlight of all combined efforts, not the only singular action in itself. My own area of focus tends to lie in the realm of student resource accessibility and infrastructure. To this end, I sit on the Transportation Services Committee, of which I attended a meeting today, to voice student needs, learn about the university’s thought process, and help communicate things like the recent student transportation survey to my constituents in order to help guide the long-term development of campus for years after I graduate. Every resolution should ideally be built off of a history of meetings with administration and a commitment to regular check-ins by at least one member. Poor communication and inconsistency kill action.

1. **What steps have you taken to bring anti-sexual-violence and/or social justice work into your education, workplace, and/or an organization that you have been involved with and/or personally become a better advocate?**

One of the most profoundly impactful influences on my thoughts and advocacy in the realm of sexual violence comes from the fact that an online friend of mine was physically assaulted by someone she had known since they were children. The fact that I was unable to be physically present for my long-distance friend, and obviously unable to prevent this abuse, made me extremely angry and reflective on the need for systems in place to help protect others who we are not always able to be there for ourselves. This has led me to emphatically hammer home to others in conversation that no matter what one wears or drinks, a sleeping or unconscious person cannot provide consent, regardless of their relation to the perpetrator. I believe in individual advocacy; that through the power of dialogue, I can learn from others and then pass on what I have learned. This is the primary way in which I strive to spread awareness of the horrible realness of situations like the one my friend experienced, and the need for a serious no-tolerance policy for non-consensual sexual contact. This energy helped add value to the Men’s Walk Against Violence last spring with one of the clubs I am in, because symbolism without education is ineffective at best. I was able to share these sentiments with my fellow representatives as well and help ensure unanimous consent on our resolution calling for administration transparency last fall. Hearing the personal experiences of others, especially during open student forum, for that night’s legislation was also especially impactful. It helped connect the words of the resolution to the realness of the experiences felt by other students on campus. As a resident assistant, I make a point to inform my residents of proper safety measures, advising my residents on situations to be wary of and how they can help protect their friends. For work confidentiality reasons, I cannot go into any detail about particular instances, but I have always made a point to persistently and forcefully press for accountability when it seemed to me that more serious action needed to be taken to rectify a situation.

1. **If elected, what organizations will you maintain relationships with? Will you start or maintain a relationship with anti-sexual violence organizations? If so, how?**

The Schreyer Gender Equity Coalition, which played a tremendously vital role in pushing for administration transparency last fall, left a very strong and positive impression on me through their work, and it is my loss that I did not think to reach out and find out what other initiatives they might be working towards afterwards. As I am sure they have more knowledge on the topic of sexual violence prevention than I do, it would be my pleasure to attend some of their meetings to get a better understanding of how I can magnify their work through the UPUA. As an at-large representative, I represent a huge array of students on a wide range of issues, and I would be delighted to play a support role to the mission of this and other groups rather than attempting to draft all legislation myself and then look for support. We all have busy schedules, but I can always catch dinner or make time to attend a regular session of this or similar orgs in order to build a relationship which will enable future efficiency in advocacy. I have also heard of the Every Voice Coalition and am acquainted with their Core Five solution to sexual violence. I do not believe I have yet had the privilege to work with them before, but I would be happy to seek out and start a relationship with them as well. Lotus I am not yet familiar with, but I would also be happy to meet with representatives of this group to learn what their policy proposals are and what support they are looking to receive in achieving them. This list of organizations is not exhaustive, as I am willing to meet with anyone and everyone at least once, although I certainly hope to meet more than that with student leaders of these groups to keep myself informed and involved on this issue. I believe in hearing out and supporting all who come forward, while also upholding the judicial rights of the accused, to ensure a system which is responsive, supportive, and just for all; preventing both sexual assault and the punishment of innocent individuals are the twin goals which I will always support, and any organization which is committed to that same end will likewise have my support.

**Sponsoring Organizations**

The **Schreyer Gender Equity Coalition** is a group committed to advocating for just policies and educating students to create a more equitable Penn State. We focus on critical issues facing women, intersex, trans, and non-binary individuals — sexual violence, reproductive justice, and the intersection of marginalized identities. Learn more at geneqcoalition.org or on Instagram at @geneqcoalition.

**Lotus'** mission is to advocate and raise awareness within communities of color against acts of sexual violence. Most integral to our organization is fostering the healing of the greater collective through that of our own respective communities. We aim to engage in our goals and create a transformative environment for BIPOC students by improving policies and resources that will better accommodate the diverse needs of these collectives. Check out their Instagram at @pennstatelotus.

The **Every Voice Coalition PA** is the Pennsylvania chapter of national grassroots organization that works with Universities to pass anti-sexual violence legislation to protect students and survivors. You can learn more about the Every Voice Coalition at everyvoicecoalition.org or on Instagram @everyvoicepa.