

Rape on campus

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Sign from a protest outside the Phi Kappa Psi house at the University of Virginia.

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Among advocates for victims of sexual assault, it has become a truism that victims' stories should be believed. Sexual assault is habitually underreported, and victims' accounts are often dismissed because they are inconvenient. The National Victimization Survey found that 80 percent of college women who say they were raped did not report the rape to the police.

This approach seems to have shaped the November *Rolling Stone* article about rape at the University of Virginia, which opens with a vivid account of a gang rape at a fraternity party in 2012 that was not reported at the time. The alleged victim, a woman named Jackie, had been reluctant to tell her story—to friends, police, college administrators, or the reporter from *Rolling Stone*. She told journalist Sabrina Rubin Erdely that she would tell her story only if the alleged perpetrators were not contacted.

It is difficult to know why a reporter would consent to a request not to investigate the facts. As it turns out, nearly every detail of Jackie's story crumbled under scrutiny. *Rolling Stone* was finally forced to declare: "We should have not made this agreement with Jackie and we should have worked harder to convince her that the truth would have been better served by getting the other side of the story. These mistakes are on *Rolling Stone*, not on Jackie."

In the aftermath of *Rolling Stone's* apology, many commenters insisted on the importance of believing Jackie. The Twitter hashtag #ibelievejackie gained a following. People feared, perhaps rightly, that the *Rolling Stone* case would generate more disbelief of those claiming to be victims of a sexual assault.

But as *Slate* writer Amanda Hess points out, a crime like sexual assault is not a question of belief, it's a question of facts.

The term *belief*, she wrote, "suggests faith in something that lies outside the bounds of human knowledge. To put claims of rape in this category is to buy the idea that rape reports are by nature ambiguous, and that feelings override facts."

Erdely's article, much like those who dismiss victims' claims, is interested only in the facts and feelings that supported its version of truth. But attaining justice for victims of sexual assault cannot be a matter of belief or disbelief. Victims of assault are individuals, not symbols of a cause, and each case must be heard and weighed.

To that end, under pressure from the White House, student groups, and sexual assault victims' advocates, universities are beginning to change the way that sexual assaults are handled on campuses. They are creating support services for victims, aligning college policies with state and federal laws that define sexual assault, adopting clear reporting procedures, and developing models for investigation. Such efforts are needed to serve both justice and truth.