

S.120 Testimony Before the Senate Education Committee
Riley O’Hagan, UVM Student and Sexual Assault Prevention Advocate
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Hi all, thank you so much for agreeing to hear my testimony. I am Riley O’Hagan, a junior at UVM and sexual harm prevention advocate. While I am on spring break right now, so excuse that I am in my car, I am excited to jump at the chance to testify and continue to advocate for this bill. Last semester, I interned at the Vermont Network Against Domestic and Sexual Violence. I was granted the opportunity to sit in on the Intercollegiate Sexual Harm Prevention Council and be a part of the conversations regarding the formation of S.120. I am aware that a new draft of the bill has been put forth, but I am basing my testimony on the original bill which I support. I am a strong supporter of all 6 sections proposed in the original bill, and feel the newly proposed legislation with many sections taken out is very telling of the lack of care and support of the issue of sexual assault.

As I am sure you’ve heard throughout research and testimony for this bill, before college students graduate, 25% of these students will experience sexual violence on UVM’s campus. It should be noted that approximately 90% of campus sexual assaults go unreported. Therefore, it is believed that the estimate of students who experience sexual violence on college campuses far exceeds 25%. The first few weeks of each academic year, from move-in to Thanksgiving Break, is referred to as ‘the Red Zone.’ This is the period in which nearly 50% of reported sexual assault incidents occur on campus. These incoming freshmen, most of whom are living alone for the first time in their life, are particularly susceptible to sexual violence during the Red Zone due to lack of sexual education, life experience, and their search to find their friends and place in the college environment. This time is crucial for college administration to take initiative in protecting and educating their students to provide a safe living and learning experience.

Issues of sexual harm on campus have been the primary focus of my work for the past year. Working alongside House Representative Barbara Rachelson, I have dedicated myself to passing [S.120](#). I was understandably ecstatic when the bill was finally added to the agenda for February 23rd’s Senate Education testimony, as the bill is a much needed checklist of different programs and interventions directly combating sexual harm on our campus. However, during that [Friday testimony](#), **UVM expressed their disagreement with passing S.120.**

Emily McCarthy and Jennifer Papillo spoke on behalf of all students during the testimony, claiming that the majority are “uncomfortable with this bill” and that student survivors would feel retraumatized when provided an optional campus climate survey that included sexual harm questions. I was incredibly frustrated by McCarthy and Papillo’s claims. Any opportunity to decrease sexual harm on our campus is an opportunity worth taking. The traumatization of sexual harm and violence outweighs any potential risk of harm posed by an optional climate survey. It is evident that UVM does not want the data exposing the full scope of sexual harm and danger on campus published to preserve their reputation. UVM relies on the

lack of data to uphold their claims denying this epidemic on campus. McCarthy went on to critique the need for an advocacy coordinator position, claiming UVM already employs Elliot Ruggles, a Sexual Violence Prevention and Education Coordinator. A singular employee cannot adequately address sexual harm prevention on a campus of over 11,000 students, and that's only counting undergraduates. Hiring additional employees with the specific task of addressing campus sexual harm ensures that all students are given equal opportunity, time, and space to connect with confidential campus resources, something that S.120 would require UVM to provide.

Section 3 of S.120, requiring Vermont universities to enter a MOU with a community-based sexual assault advocacy program, is essential for all college students to access. HopeWorks, a locally based community organization designed to combat sexual violence and harm in Chittenden County, is critically understaffed and does not possess the resources needed to adequately address all instances of sexual harm and violence even on UVM's campus. UVM Counseling and Psychiatric Service (CAPS) is not properly trained and equipped to single-handedly support students through sexual trauma. I, personally, have been ignored and disregarded by every single counselor I have tried to see, and I have heard similar experiences from nearly every student I have discussed this issue with. Section 5 of the bill, detailing the creation of a statewide prevention training program, was also cited as "too restrictive" and "confusing." As a student at UVM, I have not once been required to attend a single sexual harm prevention training. After meeting with many UVM employees claiming to do this work on campus, I have found we do not provide training for all students, only certain groups of students, so I am unaware of the plethora of training requirements UVM referred to in their testimony.

Upon meeting with McCarthy to discuss her testimony, the primary issues she expressed towards S.120 were minor linguistic specifications that could easily be remedied if the bill were to be passed into law. I hope the updated and compromised version of S.120 is enough to show support from all institutions and parties the legislature prioritizes. As the largest university in the state, UVM seems unable to recognize the impact that their testimony has and will continue to have on the future of S.120 and university students across the state. UVM's voice is heavily considered in the passage of different state legislation, especially legislation concerning campus issues, as well as the responses of other colleges to this legislation. UVM's inability to acknowledge this fact will continue to hinder their ability to address issues of sexual violence on our campus and will have rebounding effects on other colleges in Vermont.

UVM has shown a pattern of negligence regarding sexual harm on campus. For years, throughout many eras of activism and weeks of protest, including petitions with over 10,000 signatures, UVM has pledged to protect their students. However, they have shown over and over that they prefer to treat the institution as a business and protect their reputation over the students who are supposed to be able to trust them. Students are forced to attend classes and live on the same floor as their abusers, knowing that they can not receive the justice they deserve from the university. Students cannot even feel safe in their own dorms, due to the normalized culture of sexual assault on campus. We do not feel safe walking the streets of Burlington, nor

attending sanctioned Greek life and sporting events. 7-8% of UVM students join Greek life, and an astonishing 20% of allegations involve and are directed at these organizations. Underclassmen cannot rely on their Residential Advisor's to protect them, as some of the RA's themselves take advantage of their position of power and contribute to the problem. There is a culture of sexual assault within UVM athletics, notably the highly praised UVM Men's Basketball Team. Many students, including myself, do not feel safe attending sporting events as so many of these athletes are known abusers. UVM has consistently made an effort to protect the athlete's reputations over the victims, discouraging others from reporting. Students do not feel the Title IV Office is a safe space, hence the need for expanded resources. This was proven by UVM Title IV's Office to fight the passing of this bill. Not only has UVM failed to acknowledge the instrumental need for safety on campus, they are actively taking steps backwards, such as removing the Blue Lights around campus meant for students to press when around campus to contact the police in times of crisis or emergencies. Lacking resources, such as prevention training, advocacy coordinators, and survivor support, is a factor contributing to the high drop-out rates in Vermont. The toll experiencing sexual trauma takes on the mind and body is greatly detrimental, and without support, continuing education is often an impossible task.

Many of the sections of the original bill were built off of demands for administration to implement from students. UVM students do not feel safe on their own campus, and the support and resources this bill will provide is crucial to improving campus culture and security. In April 2021, the UVM community created an Instagram account called @ShareYourStoryUVM. Over 500 submissions of stories of sexual assault were posted on the account over 2 years. UVM found the account calling for administration to take action in response to the sexual harm epidemic on campus, and merely posted a response of, "Anonymous accusations on social media are not helpful to victims or to anyone impacted by sexual violence." Since the fruition of the most recent wave of activism against this issue, UVM claims to have adhered to all demands put forth by students to create a safer campus culture. However, throughout many meetings, research, and analyses of institutional structures, it is clear that nothing of substance has changed.

S.120 is essential to protecting Vermont college students from harm. The Intercollegiate Sexual Harm Prevention Council, established through the legislature in [2021's Act 68](#) spent the past nearly 2 years meticulously editing the bill and having conversations to make it the most comprehensive and impactful. The bill specifically centers the voices of survivors and adheres to the 2021 demands listed in the Change.Org petition. Additionally, similar bills have been passed by [Every Voice Coalition](#) in seven states thus far. Any reason institutions of Higher Education have used to disagree with this bill demonstrates the lack of care about their students. **UVM's choice to disagree with the implementation of the original form of S.120 puts students at continued risk of sexual violence on and off campus.** I hope extending the Council will lead to opportunity to continue the conversation about sexual assault and in the future we can yet again discuss the parts of the bill that were redacted. Students do not feel safe. **The fight against campus sexual violence cannot end here.**

You do not have a copy of this yet, as I have been scrambling to edit and update it while on my family vacation, but I will send it over in the next few minutes. I appreciate your willingness to finally listen to a student's perspective on this issue. Thank you for your time and I am happy to answer any questions.

References

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- <https://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/news/what-red-zone-college-campuses-teaches-us-about-sexual-assault>
- <https://www.change.org/p/university-of-vermont-demands-for-uvm-in-response-to-the-systemic-mishandling-of-sexual-misconduct>
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- <https://www.everyvoicecoalition.org/states>
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- <https://vtdigger.org/2022/05/15/why-we-are-frustrated-the-strained-dialogue-surrounding-sexual-assault-on-burlingtons-college-campuses/>
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