

We Interrupt This Tour...

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By Alfie Kohn

Edgar F. Beckham, now in his fourteenth year as Dean of the College at Wesleyan University, is having trouble keeping still. He shifts his considerable bulk on the leather chair in his office once again and shakes his head. "Nothing has happened to me since I came here that is as vexing, as frustrating, as depressing as this," he says. "If I knew you better, I'd probably scream."

The source of Dean Beckham's disquiet is the complaint on the part of several students that his administration is doing too little to address the problem of sexual assault on campus. More specifically, it is the devilishly clever way these students have made their point. For about two months last fall, they approached groups touring the school – high school students and their parents – and warned them about rape.

"I really like Wesleyan; I wouldn't want to be anywhere else," says sophomore Amy Randall, a cherubic blond who addressed the 11 a.m. tours twice a week through October and November. Her brief message – which ended with that personal endorsement of the school – was that sexual assaults, of which there may be 20 to 30 each semester, do not get enough attention at Wesleyan. The problem is universal, she would add, so next year's freshmen should inquire about the resources available at any college to which they apply.

Lauren Sobel, who is studying in Israel this semester, took turns with Amy making these statements. Few in the tour groups complained, but administrators denounced the actions, as did editors at the student newspaper and outsiders (*Hartford Courant* columnist Peter B. Pach condemned the women's "terrorist tactics"). As an act of solidarity, four other students made one tour appearance apiece. The six were brought before the Student Judicial Board in late January, charged with harassment, coercion, and interrupting institutional processes.

For these students, who gathered recently at a feminist residence known as Womanist House to talk about the controversy, the issue is clearcut. There was no disruption of tours, only a polite statement. It was a statement that served to "break the silence" on an urgent issue, and they were within their rights to make it even if it embarrassed university officials. As for interfering with the purpose of an admissions office tour, "They came here to find out about Wesleyan and we're telling them about Wesleyan," said Orna Izakson, a 21-year-old film major who is also editor-in-chief of the college yearbook.

It is not what director of admissions Karl Furstenberg planned to tell them about Wesleyan, however. Word spread to high schools across the country, he says, and traveling recruiters, primed for questions about SAT requirements and study-abroad programs, were instead facing: "What's this I hear about sexual assault at Wesleyan?" Applications held steady for 1987, but there is concern about a possible decline in the proportion of accepted high school seniors who decide to enroll.

Besides the public relations pickle in which administrators find themselves, the protest has provoked a distinct resentment, an institutional case of hurt feelings. For three years, Wesleyan has held workshops on "date rape." Officials agreed to a "speak out" on sexual abuse in the fall, which was widely attended and described by many as deeply moving. Two deans and the director of mental health are designated as confidential rape counselors. Dean Beckham met several times with a student group calling itself Women Against Rape. The school has been working on better lighting around campus.

Comes now a group of students, striking at the school's Achilles heel, accusing it (before potential customers) of grievous insensitivity, of a cover-up. "We're in a kind of helpless position here," says President Colin Campbell. "The question is: Does an institution have any defense against such conduct? Do we have to sit there and take it?" Administrators are particularly angry at the charge that 20 to 30 sexual assaults take place each semester. A report was released in response, asserting there have been only two such incidents reported in the last three years, seven in the last ten years. Small wonder, retort the students, given the school's absurd tabulation procedures. Under university policy, rapes reported to any of the confidential counselors are not counted; only the exceptional victim who takes her story to school security or the disciplinary board gets tallied.

In fact, a recent nationwide study by Kent State University psychologist Mary Koss found that one of every eight college women is the victim of rape or attempted rape during any 12-month period – and only 10 percent report the crime. (Of the women who had been raped since age 14, incidentally, 86 percent knew the offender.) That would work out to about 80 per semester at a school the size of Wesleyan, and it doesn't even count unwanted sexual contact short of rape. Despite this wrangling over how many assaults take place, both administrators and protesters insist that numbers really aren't the issue. Similarly, both sides now complain that the controversy about the tour statements is obscuring the real problem of sexual assault. And it fell to the five-member Student Judicial Board – one of whose alternate members is among the accused – to resolve the matter.

After working two nights into the wee hours, the SJB finally released its decision: the six students were innocent of harassment and coercion, but guilty of interrupting an institutional process because they "intended to cause an unwanted intrusion" into the tours. The content of their speech was protected, but their method was a violation of the school's code. Half the students received the mildest sanction, a written warning; the other three, already reproached last year for an apartheid protest, were put on disciplinary probation.

The administration, pleased, feels it has made its point. Furstenberg, who brought the complaint, had made it clear that he wasn't looking for a stiff penalty, only a "clarification of the code." But the students, far from satisfied with the ruling, now plan an appeal to President Campbell. "We don't think it's justified," says Lissa Doty, a junior from Chicago who is one of the accused. "They're trying to repress us. They found us guilty because we inconvenienced the admissions office."

At the campus center coffee shop, opinions are mixed. "I think [the protesters] scared a lot of people," said Rebecca Rossen, 19, but they also "raised awareness."

Meg Fry, 18, looked uncertain as she picked at her salad. "I really don't condone their actions, but I condone the result," she said.

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