

I was sexually assaulted. I turned to my university for help. Here's what happened

After struggling for months to receive the accommodations she was entitled to, one student shares her story as a lesson for university administrators, faculty members and front-line staff.

By ANONYMOUS | AUG 29 2018

I am a student at a Canadian university. Two weeks after classes started last fall, I was sexually assaulted. My story is unsettling and, sadly, all too common. Since my purpose in writing this essay is not to point fingers, but simply to share what I experienced when I asked various authorities at my university for help, I prefer to remain anonymous.

When I woke up that autumn morning, I realized that my life had changed forever, that I would never be the same person. My first thought was that I should go to my university's help centre, which has a team of counsellors and a medical clinic. I was very emotional and unable to speak, so I typed on my phone: "Last night I was sexually assaulted. I'd like to get some help" and showed it to the receptionist. A few minutes later, a counsellor invited me to follow her into her office to talk in private. Greatly relieved, I accepted. She listened very carefully to me and asked me questions about my feelings and the previous night. She reassured me and tried to lessen my feelings of guilt. This counsellor was an invaluable support at a crucial time.

Then she took me to the medical clinic located on campus. After a very brief wait, I found myself in the examination room. Even accompanied by the counsellor, I was uncomfortable with the nurse, who was very brusque and spoke loudly. A gentler tone and manner would have been appreciated. After I explained what had happened, she asked me in what I took as an accusatory tone how much alcohol I had consumed. I felt judged and even more guilty. Her behaviour made me wonder if going to the clinic was the right thing to do, and my feelings of guilt escalated.

After this conversation, I was relieved to finally speak with the doctor. Not sensing any judgment from him, I felt more comfortable telling him my story. He explained that the next step would be to take a sexual assault evidence kit in case I was planning to press charges. While I still hadn't decided about pressing charges, I thought the rape kit was a good idea. Since the clinic was unable to administer the tests required for the kit, the doctor asked me which hospital I preferred to go to. I chose the one in my neighbourhood.

I then took a taxi to the hospital. Once again, I was quickly admitted into the examination room and the doctor listened carefully to my responses to his questions. At the end of my account, he explained to me that he couldn't do the forensic exams required for the sexual assault evidence kit, as there was only one hospital in the area that was equipped to collect this evidence. I could sense his annoyance with the first doctor. It was understandable, given that he practises at a clinic accustomed to dealing with this type of situation and that this information should have been common knowledge. It had already been an extremely painful day, and I did not feel like retelling my story. I just wanted to go home and cry before I did anything else. The only thing keeping me from doing just that was my concern for my physical health. I went to the hospital where the specialized centre was located, and the reception I got from the staff there was phenomenal.

The week following the sexual assault was like a roller-coaster ride. I couldn't stay in my neighbourhood due to the proximity to my attacker (my fingers still shake when I write that word), or even remain in the same city. I got away as soon as I could. I tried to forget the previous few days. I didn't want the incident to define me or to give the perpetrator any power over my life. I worked hard on it. But I had to come back to reality: the term was under way and I already had a number of assignments to hand in.

Between my job, my appointments with various counsellors and my concerns about my physical and mental health, I couldn't concentrate on my coursework or meet my deadlines. I reviewed the resources available to students (course outlines, the university guide regarding sexual violence, etc.), but didn't find any guidelines for victims seeking help in the form of accommodation.

I needed answers, so I gathered up my courage and went to my program director's office. I requested an urgent, five-minute appointment, mentioning that I preferred to speak with her because she was a woman. Unfortunately, the director could only meet with me in five days' time. The assistant director, a man, could meet with me immediately, however. Tearing up, I thought about letting it go and just leaving.

A year earlier, this same assistant director had made some comments that I had found hurtful. During his welcome address to all first-year students, his presentation broached the topic of sexual violence. In a flippant tone, he referred to it as a "university requirement," implying that the topic was somehow immaterial, but that his superiors required that he address the issue. He began by stating that we were all responsible adults and that, obviously, it was not OK to commit such acts. Then he quickly moved on to the next topic. Despite, at the time, never having been the victim of sexual assault, his tone and remarks upset me. I would have preferred to hear that help was available for victims and that staff members, especially senior administrators, were there to support, protect and assist them.

Quickly weighing the pros and cons, I concluded that if I was going to successfully complete my university studies, I should speak with the assistant director. I was gripped by fear. After taking a seat in the meeting room, I summoned my courage and told him that I had been the victim of sexual assault a week earlier and that I wanted to discuss the possibility of extending my assignment deadlines. Unprepared, his first reaction was to ask me if I had gone to the police. A little voice inside me said: "If I don't go to the police, is what I'm going through important enough to request an accommodation? Do I even deserve help?" Despite this inner questioning, I calmly replied that it was personal and that I preferred to focus on making arrangements so that I could successfully complete my coursework.

Although clearly sympathetic, the assistant director explained that, unlike at the high school level, a university program director could not require professors to extend their students' deadlines. He advised me to explain my situation to each of my professors and make arrangements with them regarding my deadlines. I told him that I couldn't possibly repeat what I had just confided in him and that I hoped we could find another solution. The idea of opening myself up to judgment from my teachers and having to repeatedly explain the situation terrified me.

Later the same day, he informed me that he had spoken to the program director and that there was another solution. He explained that I would have to "provide proof in the form of a doctor's note confirming the need for accommodation." The note had to specify the arrangements, without necessarily giving the reason for them. It would then be sent to all my professors, who would be required to comply with the stipulations.

On the one hand, I was relieved to know that I wouldn't have to speak with all of my professors individually. On the other, I felt mounting stress and frustration at having to take more time off work to go back to the hospital that did the rape kit analysis. I didn't think that I'd have time to obtain the note

before the deadline for my first assignment. Acting on impulse, I told my counsellor about the solution proposed by senior administration. She informed me that, according to university policy, the note could be written by a counsellor at the help centre, and she wrote one for me on the spot. I took the signed document and submitted it in person to the assistant director, informing him of this policy detail that had eluded him.

The weeks passed, and the majority of my professors were understanding. Two of them, however, were less so. Despite the later date specified in my letter of accommodation, both required that I submit all of my work on the last day of the term. As the assistant director had sided with them, I was out of options, so I did my best to comply. Then I learned that this was not in line with the university's policy provisions, which stipulate that, in this situation, assignments may be submitted when the individual feels capable of completing them, regardless of the date specified in the letter of accommodation.

I was worried about failing and my stress levels shot up. I called my counsellor again. She put me in touch with the ombudsman. Once more, I had to recount everything that had happened. Once I'd answered all of her questions, the ombudsman's assistant asked me if I had contacted the university's human rights office. Indeed, I had left a message that October requesting assistance, but no one had returned my call and by this time it was December.

The ombudsman's office followed up with the human rights office. Several hours and emails later, the human rights office contacted me. They apologized for not having followed up, explaining that my file had fallen through the cracks due to a staffing change.

After some lengthy discussions, they sent a note to all the faculties regarding the sexual violence policy, and more specifically about accommodations for victims. Mandatory training was also implemented for all personnel to ensure consistent application of the policy. The human rights office adviser even offered me the training and an opportunity to make recommendations to the committee on how to improve things. I gladly accepted.

At the end of the term, I made an appointment with my program director. I told her all about my experience with the academic accommodation process. By the time I was finished, she had tears in her eyes. She apologized on behalf of the department and stated that I could rewrite any assignments that I wasn't satisfied with. Throughout this heart-to-heart, she remained compassionate, flexible and calm –the three things I needed most.

Once I had completed all my coursework and the term was over, I was finally able to spend time with my family, recharge my batteries and consult with counsellors specialized in dealing with sexual assault. They told me that not every victim in the same situation has the strength of character and resilience that I'd demonstrated.

As my story shows, getting help and taking steps to obtain special accommodation can be traumatic. I had to jump through quite a few hoops – some necessary, many not – to obtain mine. Plus, I had to retell my story a dozen times, which was always stressful and painful. My only goal was to ensure my academic success and my survival. While I'm aware that the various people I dealt with meant me no harm, their poor word choice, lack of knowledge and inappropriate actions, however well-intentioned, could be deeply hurtful and hinder the healing process. The tendency to blame oneself, which may seem incomprehensible to someone on the outside, is very real and common among victims. It can be very difficult to reach out and ask for help, especially if it is not easily accessible. Rarely in my life had I ever felt so vulnerable. Intentionally or not, I felt judged and let down by certain university staff.

The fact that I had to knock on so many doors at least paved the way for a number of changes that will ensure administrators have the proper knowledge to implement the university's policies. I can only hope that this article will inspire other universities to take similar measures to ensure their policies are followed.