

The pandemic didn't pause sexual assault in higher education.

But for the class of 2022, COVID-19 could help rethink the way students access support.

Content warning: This article mentions sexual assault, harassment and suicidal ideation.

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In spring 2020, when Rajee Ganesan could no longer stand to look at the middle school memorabilia in her childhood bedroom in Cary, North Carolina, she would get in the car and waste gas driving around Jordan Lake. She liked to go during sunset, when the colors reflected off the water.

She would also climb out her bedroom window and read on the roof of her house. These were her escapes from her thoughts during the lockdown imposed by COVID-19.

One year prior, during her first year at the University of California San Diego, Ganesan was the victim of a violent sexual assault. She immediately applied to transfer schools.

For a while she blocked out thoughts of what happened. She began her sophomore year at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and joined the opinion staff of the student newspaper *The Daily Tar Heel*. But during quarantine the thoughts were unavoidable.

The pandemic helped her decide to start therapy and medication for post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, depression and suicidal ideation.

“COVID caused this time of self-realization,” she said, “where it’s like, ‘How do I deal with this, that is now part of my identity forever?’”

COVID also made her want to speak out on the topic, which she did in [an April 2022 *Daily Tar Heel* column](#) for Sexual Assault Awareness Month. It was her senior year and the end of her stint as opinion editor.

More than one quarter of undergraduate women experienced nonconsensual sexual contact, according to the 2019 Association of American Universities’ Campus Climate Survey on Sexual Assault and Misconduct. That rate is one in three women at UNC, which has a history of neglecting sexual assault survivors.

During the class of 2022’s college career, the university was found noncompliant with a federal campus safety law, the Clery Act, and lost a legal battle in which it tried to withhold sexual assault records.

On a federal level, United States Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos changed some Title IX regulations in order to give more protection to respondents of sexual assault claims in 2020.

Sexual assault did not end when the pandemic paused fraternity parties and late nights at bars. It changed forms, often becoming less visible.

Despite the challenges of COVID, in many cases survivors could more easily access resources, causing advocates to consider how pandemic-era measures might be worth maintaining even after the public health crisis.

For some students, online accessibility meant the difference between remaining silent and reporting their assailant.

Physical distancing from the emotional process

The class of 2022 got three normal semesters of college before COVID changed everything. They were on campus during a period known as the Red Zone, the time between the start of classes and Thanksgiving break when more than 50% of college sexual assaults occur.

A. Friedman, who requested to use only her last name for privacy, was sexually assaulted at a party in September 2019, the first semester of her sophomore year.

She sought help from the university's Gender Violence Service Coordinators, a group of university employees who provide support and resources for survivors, but felt uncomfortable

doing so. Their office is in a building where Friedman took classes, and she was worried about someone seeing her and speculating.

Friedman was one of about 100 people who requested support from the Gender Violence Service Coordinators that semester, a number which steadily increased from fall 2018 to spring 2022, according to data provided by UNC.

Friedman didn't file a Title IX complaint until March 2021. The ability to engage in the process virtually was part of what helped her take that step.

“While I was reporting I had a lot of anxiety about if I was doing the right thing, or if he was telling people that I might know, and then I would see them at a party or something like that,” she said. “So it really was like a layer of bubble wrap, or a barrier, between me and the rest of the world, which was helpful for my anxiety about it.”

While the remote landscape of COVID meant Friedman was less likely to see her assailant in-person, it was still difficult to see him on Zoom, particularly during the cross-examination portion of the hearing. Her Gender Violence Service Coordinator advocate suggested putting a sticky note over his face on the screen.

Lessons learned from the pandemic

COVID changed not only the way universities dealt with Title IX cases, but also the way gender-based violence manifested.

Thalia Charles, a policy organizer with the youth-led advocacy and educational group Know Your IX and a 2022 graduate of Lafayette College, spoke about how shelter-in-place orders increased domestic and interpersonal violence. In addition, stalking and harassment continued online once people largely spent time at home.

Charles said COVID helped schools implement a virtual infrastructure for remote Title IX hearings and investigations, which could be a good way to maintain survivor safety into the future. Another COVID lesson, she said, was that schools need to expand telehealth counseling and maintain no-contact orders in the virtual environment.

“I really think that what makes the class of ‘22 unique in terms of Title IX,” Charles said, “is that the Title IX that existed prior to the pandemic is probably not the Title IX that will exist in the future.”

Resources:

Orange County Rape Crisis Center 24-hour helplines

Text: (919) 967-7273

Phone: (919) 967-7273

Website with online hotline: <https://ocrcc.org/>

Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network

National Sexual Assault Hotline: 800-656-HOPE (4673)

Website with online hotline: <https://hotline.rainn.org/online>

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 1-800-273-TALK (8255)