

Consensual Higher Education: An Issue Much Bigger than Sex

BY EMILY A. JOHNSON

Theresa A. Kulbaga and Leland G. Spencer, *Campuses of Consent: Sexual and Social Justice in Higher Education*. University of Massachusetts Press, 2019. 187 pp. notes. bibl. index. pap., \$24.95, ISBN 978-1625344595.

An online meme claims that “consent is as simple as tea.” In an effort to clarify consent, this and many other consent-centered memes, programs, and initiatives simplify the concept to a point that ignores its complex and multifaceted nature. Kulbaga and Spencer propose examining three types of consent — physical, emotional, and intellectual — when thinking about the role that institutions of higher education play in cultivating or stifling consent culture.

The authors define physical consent as what most people think of: it concerns consent about sexual contact as well as broader notions of bodily autonomy, freedom from physical violence, and survivor-centered support. Emotional consent has to do with interpersonal relationships among campus constituents, campus culture and climate, and practices and pedagogies that recognize and respect the role of mental health in well-being. Intellectual consent involves cultivating campus cultures that value civil discourse, space for exploration and making mistakes, the myriad lived experiences and ways of knowing, and academic freedom, in ways that reflect how power and privilege influence all of these.

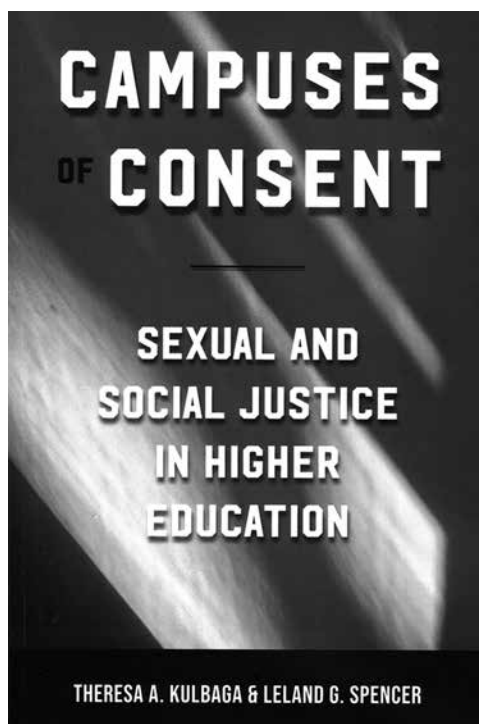
Kulbaga and Spencer use these three frames to analyze five key components of cultivating consent on campus, each in a separate chapter: campus crime alerts, consent initiatives, online memes, trigger warnings, and pedagogy. They describe each component and give examples of strengths and pitfalls in existing practices, doing a commendable job of teasing apart ini-

tiatives, programs, and practices and walking the reader through the reasons why certain elements are beneficial and others are problematic. In addition to critique, the authors offer research- and theory-backed recommendations for improving practices to cultivate consent. For example, they present a real-life, de-identified crime alert alongside a reimagined version that incorporates their

recommendations for cultivating “consent-mindedness.”

Throughout the book, Kulbaga and Spencer offer recommendations for individual and department/institution-level changes to practice that can enable campuses to cultivate consent from orientation to graduation, from classroom to boardroom. They stress that transforming a campus into a place that truly values, teaches, and prioritizes consent takes more than purchasing a one-time training for new students and adhering to Title IX guidelines. They frame consent as a matter not just of sexual justice but of social justice. The book illuminates connections between seemingly disparate functions and phenomena in higher education, illustrating how deeply entrenched misogyny, patriarchy, individualism, and white supremacy work together to undermine any stated values of consent. Recommen-

dations throughout the text combat this by naming the problems and modeling intersectional thinking. Though they reiterate that there is no panacea or simple checklist for cultivating consent, they do offer specific recommendations for addressing missteps and moving forward.



BOOKS

Campuses of Consent manages to be both thought-provoking and easily digestible. It is willing to name ways in which campuses undermine and violate consent, and it uses accessible language and a practice-minded format. The only way I think the text could be improved would be to include a workbook section that translates the recommendations for practice into an activity that higher education faculty and administrators can use to evaluate their own programs, policies, and pedagogies. The recommendations are all in the text, but I think such an addition could help engaged but overwhelmed readers figure out what to do next.

Of course, this book is useful for anyone involved with the typical areas of consent programming, such as Title IX, orientation, residence life, student activities, judi-

cial services, and law enforcement. What might be less obvious from the title is how much this book touches on the work of faculty and campus administrators. *Campuses of Consent* includes recommendations for implementing survivor-centered and consent-conscious pedagogy and policy that anyone working in higher education would find thought-provoking. Anyone with an interest in trigger warnings or safe spaces will especially find the content of Chapters 4 and 5 valuable. Likewise, those who study discourse analysis or equity in higher education will appreciate the work the authors have done to explain why consent can be such a tricky concept to understand and to teach. Whatever your thoughts on or experience with the topic of consent, this text will be a valuable addition to your toolbox.

[Emily A. Johnson is an assistant professor of higher education and student affairs administration at The University of Southern Mississippi. Johnson's primary research interests are institutional research, assessment, mixed methods design, gender and sexuality, equitable data use, and student success.]



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