

# Sexual Assault within University Communities: Working with Media

## A FACTSHEET FOR STUDENT REPRESENTATIVES

### Student representatives are important stakeholders in public debates about sexual assault within university communities

We know that student representatives are often called on to give comment to media or to facilitate connection with other students, including victim-survivors. At times this can be challenging and knowing your rights is important.

Learning to work with media also has its benefits. Media can be powerful allies in promoting student led initiatives and drawing public attention to issues within your community, including sexual assault. This factsheet is designed to provide tips and insights into working safely and constructively with media.

### Fielding media requests about sexual assault

Sexual assault can be a very difficult topic for many people to speak about, and not all student representatives feel comfortable or willing to speak about this subject. Do not feel obliged to respond

to media requests if you do not wish to. Letting a journalist know if you are unable to comment helps the journalist plan, and means they will be less likely to persist in contacting you for the story.

### What do I say if a journalist asks to speak to survivors?

Student representatives – particularly Women's Officers – are regularly contacted by members of the media wishing to speak to victim-survivors of sexual assault. Depending on how the request is made, this can be experienced as intrusive or insensitive for some student representatives. Here are some tips for dealing with this scenario:

**Assess the situation.** Did the journalist directly ask for a survivor's contact details or offer to leave their own to be handed along? The nature of sexual assault is that it robs a person of power and control, and confidentiality is often a key concern. Therefore, never hand out the private information of a victim-survivor.

Instead, if appropriate, offer to take the journalist's details to pass along to any victim-survivors who have expressed an interest in doing media.

Ask the journalist for as much information as possible about the story upfront, so that you can provide as much detail to survivors as possible. This includes the angle, when the story will run, where it will run, whether victim-survivors can remain anonymous, who else the journalist is speaking to, whether the survivor will be able to review their quotes prior to publication, and so on.

You may also ask the journalist to write an introductory email which you can forward along, or post on social media.

**Trust your gut.** If a journalist is being overly pushy or demanding, or if they make inappropriate or insensitive remarks, be prepared to decline to participate. You may also wish to Google a journalist's body of work to assess whether they have experience in reporting on sensitive subjects.

Speaking about sexual assault to the media can be very empowering for some victim-survivors, but there are also many reasons why a survivor may not wish to. It is important that the decision remains entirely their own, so be careful not to place any direct or indirect pressure on the survivor.

When forwarding journalist's details to survivors, consider including details of the available support options, such as the National Uni Support Line [1800 572 224](tel:1800572224), as some survivors may find it helpful to talk the decision over with a counsellor first.

Finally, supporting survivors, hearing their stories and liaising between them and the media can take a toll and it is important to look after yourself. You may also wish to debrief or seek advice from a confidential counsellor at [1800 572 224](tel:1800572224).

## Handling media requests

**“It’s perfectly reasonable to tell a journalist you’ll call them back in twenty minutes so you can gather your thoughts and work out what you want to say.”**

Current Women’s Officer

If you are contacted as a student representative to speak to the media about sexual assault at your university, here are some questions to consider in your response:

**Who is the journalist?** Most journalists will contact student representatives via phone, email or potentially social media. If you are not familiar with their work, you may wish to research other examples of their work to assess their style and experience with the subject matter in order to get a sense of their approach.

**What is their angle?** Before agreeing to give comment it's good practice to ask the journalist for some information about what the story is about and what angle they are pursuing. You may also wish to ask who else they might be speaking to for the story, although they may not always be able to disclose this.

**What if I'm in busy when they contact?** Ask the journalist what their deadline is and when is the latest you could get comment to them by.

**What if I can't or don't want to speak?** Do not feel obliged to give comment if you have concerns about a particular story, but it is helpful if you can let the journalist know. Journalists spend much of their day waiting for people to call them back and so are appreciative when people get back to them quickly, even to decline. In some cases, you may also wish to recommend or provide contact details of another student representative.

### What does “off record” mean?

Going off record means that whatever the journalist is told can be reported so long as it is not attributed to the person who said it. You need to explicitly tell a journalist you are speaking off record before divulging information. At times going off record can be a useful means by which you can background a journalist and provide additional context.

### How can I give powerful quotes?

Quotes are more likely to be used if they are short, sharp and in active voice, and if they avoid overly complicated jargon.

### Where can I get support?

For information on how to respond with compassion to a disclosure, Rape & Domestic Violence Services Australia has a factsheet here:

[Click here](#)

If you have been contacted by media surrounding sexual assault and would like to debrief about the experience, support is available at [1800 572 224](tel:1800572224).

## TALKING ABOUT SEXUAL ASSAULT:

Have some statistics or facts about sexual assault at your own university at the ready.

Challenge victim-blaming attitudes and maintain that sexual assault is always a crime.

Read up on the causes and consequences of sexual assault:

[Click here](#)

Understand how rape myths work to silence victims and deter reporting:

[Click here](#)

## Tips

- If you are supplying your own photographs ask to be credited.
- Be aware your quotes will be edited down. A half an hour interview may be edited to a single soundbite.
- You can ask to have quotes read back to you.
- Journalists are often on very tight deadlines. If you develop a reputation for getting back to journalists quickly – even to politely decline – they are more likely to come back to you in future.

- Be aware journalists rarely pick their own headlines or images.
- On articles about sexual assault, editors will often turn comments off but if you have concerns ask ahead of participating.
- Live TV or live radio can be nerve racking, but live media gives you more control as you cannot be edited.
- Prepare some brief talking points before doing live interviews. You might also want to rehearse with a friend.
- When posting articles or stories about sexual assault on student social media pages, please include information on where individuals can get support, such as the National Uni Support Line [1800 572 224](tel:1800572224).

## Recruiting media support

Developing strong relationships with media makes it easier to attract media interest to your own campaigns and it is worth establishing a database of contacts for journalists. You might also:

**Write press releases** – If you are holding a protest or launching an event or initiative, let the media know about it by writing a press release. This should be short and succinct, and include the ‘who, what, when, where’ of your event, a quote from the organisers, and your email and mobile number. You may also embargo the press release, meaning that journalists cannot publish on the story until the date and time the embargo is lifted.

**Consider an exclusive** – Some stories may have more chance of getting a run if you offer it exclusively to one journalist. If you

are organising an exclusive it’s important that everyone on your team understands confidentiality and is comfortable not speaking to other media until the story breaks.

**Opinion pieces** are a powerful way to get your story into the media. They are typically 700-800 words long, and often combine personal anecdotes, research and argument. After you’ve written your piece, pitch it to a news outlet by emailing it to their opinion editor. Only ever pitch to one editor at a time and wait for an answer before offering it to another. Student newspapers are also an excellent place to publish opinion pieces, and often have a wide reach within university communities.

**Choose your media outlet** – Does the story have a strong visual element or is it better suited to text? Are you comfortable speaking on live radio or TV? Different types of media have different pros and cons, and picking the right media for the right story is important. If unsure, speak to other student representatives who have had success in the past with media.

For more information for Student Representatives see End Rape On Campus Australia’s Key Skills For Advocates Factsheet here:

[Click here](#)

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This factsheet was prepared by Full Stop Foundation Ambassador and journalist Nina Funnell with support from The Hunting Ground Australia Project and the Full Stop Foundation.



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