

# DATE RAPE: HOW STUDENTS CAN PROTECT THEMSELVES

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One of my favorite books is *I am Charlotte Simmons*, by Tom Wolfe. I often tell my students

to read it, because through Charlotte's story, they can learn about situations that could arise in college. Charlotte is a first-year student who is assaulted by a fraternity brother after he gets her drunk. She turns the situation around by adhering to her home values, and in the end, her attacker gets his comeuppance.

It's easy to see why Charlotte got involved in this situation. When students arrive on campus, they are excited about starting this new phase of life so they are less inclined to notice any warning signs. They want to meet new people and be popular. Like in the musical *Wicked*, "popular" is the drumbeat at Charlotte's college, and she is surrounded by girls who, like in the musical, are as cool and pretty as Glinda. Charlotte is more like Elphaba, who does not fit in because she comes from a poor family and wears plain dresses. She's an excellent student though, and the first in her family to go to college, so she has no frame of reference to help her prepare for college's potential pitfalls.

Discussing Charlotte's story with my students gives me the opportunity to open the door to the word "R."

I tread carefully because I don't want to make them feel embarrassed, which is something they do only too easily. Although my students think that something like this will never happen to them, I know I have the advantage of not being their parent, so I plod along with my line of questions. "Have you ever heard of date rape? It's usually at a social setting when your guard is down. You need to be super-vigilant because your food or drink may be tampered with by people who would stoop to do that and take advantage of you."

Students are usually surprised to hear that women are raped at the staggering rate of one in four; and one in six for men, before they become 18 years of age (Finkelhor, 1990). During their lifetime, the adult rate is one in six women and one in 33 men; and 73% of offenders are someone the victim knows (US Department of Justice 2005 National Crime Victimization Study).

Generally, college students are four times as likely to be assaulted as the general population, and this is for the cases that are reported. Men are even less likely than women to report sexual assault. College orientation sessions are starting to include discussions about date rape with incoming first-year students. There are a slew of issues that arise between boy-girl or students of the same sex

following excessive drinking, date-rape, drugs, and going along with the crowd.

Students pay a hefty price as a result of date rape. The consequences range from STD, pregnancy, and its complications of abortion, adoption, or parenting. It can lead women to damaged relationships with men and PTSD.

I don't want to scare my students, but I don't want them to feel uninformed. So I remind them to use the "buddy system." They should feel free to press the blue-light emergency buttons and call campus security. They should seek a ride from one building to the next when it's dark and they feel unsafe. They should not be embarrassed to yell and flag down a car if they are attacked on the street.

I am particularly concerned about young women and men who may think themselves wise and sophisticated, when in fact they are quite naïve. I wonder: during a date, will they know the warning signs? It's scary to think that someone who appears to be a friend may in fact cross the line and become an assailant. This is what happened to Charlotte Simmons, the strong survivor of Wolfe's novel. And with our willingness to discuss such topics, it won't happen to our students.