

An open letter to Carleton University’s School of Public Policy and Administration

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OPEN LETTER

Dear School of Public Policy and Administration (SPPA) faculty:

We the undersigned call upon the SPPA to address ongoing issues of sexual violence, harassment, misogyny, and bullying that have become alarmingly prevalent across the School's graduate programs.

Several incidents have been brought to the attention of the SPPA director and faculty, as well as Carleton University's department for Equity and Inclusive Communities (EIC) in recent years. The School's responses to these incidents, however, have often resulted in little to no enforced protections for victims.

Disclosures of sexual violence-related incidents on campus have increased since 2020, according to statistics published by the EIC. Its [2022–2023 Annual Report on Sexual Violence](#) states the EIC received 150 disclosures of sexual violence, with nearly 49 percent related to sexual assault, 43 percent related to sexual harassment, and about 8 percent filed as a formal report. These numbers represent the highest reporting year since 2019.

These statistics, however, do not capture the full spectrum of incidents that occur on campus. Recall that in 2019, an [Ontario government-commissioned postsecondary student survey](#) revealed **more than 3,300 Carleton University students** experienced some form of sexual harassment and that rates of reported sexual assault among Carleton students were **higher than the provincial average**. The Canadian Centre for Justice and Community Safety Statistics [reports](#) 71 percent of students at Canadian universities witness or experience sexual violence. This would suggest thousands of the 30,678 students enrolled at Carleton University in 2022–2023 likely witnessed or experienced an incident that violates the university's [sexual violence policy](#).

A concerning number of SPPA students, particularly those in the Master of Public Policy and Administration (MPPA) program, claim having experienced sexual assault, sexual harassment, stalking, targeted threats, and/or intimidation from classmates and other members of the SPPA. Some of these victims have reported feeling unsupported by faculty, thereby reluctant to come forward with a complaint. In some cases where formal reports were pursued, campus-effective restraining orders filed against aggressors were not enforced and repeatedly violated due to the SPPA's oversight.

Further, concerns have been raised about a lack of clarity on the SPPA's capacity to respond to reports of sexual violence and misconduct. Under current university policy,

an SPPA student seeking recourse for violations of Carleton University's sexual violence policy will be referred by the SPPA to the EIC office. An EIC representative would then work with the victim to explore solutions jointly with other university departments, including the Office of Student Affairs and Campus Security. In summer 2023, the EIC proposed working with the SPPA to help initiate a culture change within the School, such as by delivering consent education and information sessions on the sexual violence policy to all students. An EIC representative shared in 2024 that the SPPA did not follow up on this offer.

The SPPA must act now to rebuild its reputation and culture, ensuring its efforts are centred in sexual violence prevention and trauma-informed survivor support. The School must create an environment in which students and faculty alike feel safe, secure, and empowered in their choice to report misconduct. **Continuing to delay this work is a dangerous and growing liability for Carleton University.**

This letter presents the SPPA with calls to action and recommendations that were informed by statements from victims and witnesses of sexual violence-related incidents, some of which are shared below.

STATEMENTS FROM STUDENTS

"I am saddened and appalled at Carleton University's lack of effort to protect students. I am a MAPA graduate. I stood by a friend who suffered the aftermath of a sexual assault in silence. I stand with the students who had the courage to share their stories. Take your students' concerns seriously! How on earth is this up for debate in 2024? Educate yourselves on warning signs. Educate yourselves on the long term impacts to survivors' mental health. Rape culture prevails when the ones in power turn a blind eye. Let this be a lesson to the school that problems will persist until a stance is taken. The university has a handful of worst case scenarios on its hands.

"It is too late to take action against predators who walked away with a diploma and fast-tracked their way into their secure public service careers. It is not too late to end the cycle. I want different for my children. The survivors have my utmost support."

"[An MPPA alumnus] told us one of the girls in his cohort cheated on him and he showed us pictures he had of her saved on his phone. He organized a social event and invited first years and this girl, and he begged us not to talk to her or bring up their relationship. It turns out they never dated and this poor woman had no idea he was talking about her like that let alone to current students. [The same MPPA alumnus] spread rumours that another girl [enrolled in the MPPA] was posting on a 'secret OnlyFans account' to pay for school, which was also a lie."

“Upon joining the program, myself and many of my friends experienced incidents of harassment. The fact that I was in first year and was looking to more experienced students for advice put me in a vulnerable position, especially since I was unaware of the behaviour of multiple male students in the second year cohort. Knowing who to avoid was a very common topic of conversation between myself and other women in the program. The fact that male students with track records of sexual harassment were still actively participating in the academic and social life of the SPPA made me feel unsafe. I felt that I had to rely on my friends in the program to stay safe, since it seemed like no action was being taken by the school.”

“I was sexually harassed throughout my first year in the MPPA by a male student (X) in my cohort. I didn’t feel safe confronting him because I was warned by other students about comments X made when I wasn’t in the room, such as that he ‘can do whatever’ he wants to me and that he will ‘hit on’ women in relationships because ‘girls hate [him] anyway.’ I had also witnessed him publicly harassing other women without hesitation, including a time he interrupted a conversation I was having with another woman on campus just to berate her and tell her she looked ‘bad.’ I resorted to avoiding him as much as possible and hoped he would eventually get bored and leave me alone, since we didn’t have any classes together in the first semester.

“I started feeling scared about going to school after an incident in the winter semester. X followed me out of Richcraft Hall while I was headed home one night. He asked me many inappropriate questions, mostly concerning my relationship with my partner (whom X does not know personally) as he walked closer and closer into my body.

“I asked the school for help after the harassment didn’t stop and I reached a breaking point. I was encouraged by SPPA faculty to file a formal report with the help of the Equity office. I learned I wasn’t the only student to have recurrent negative interactions with X. I was told that if I took the initiative of filing a formal report, it would make the process easier for the others who were hesitant about coming forward and seeking help. This was the reason I pursued the formal reporting route, despite my fear that X would become angry and retaliate.

“Equity confirmed X’s behaviour, as described in my report, demonstrated repeated violations of Carleton’s sexual violence policy. Two campus-effective restraining orders were put in place: a cease-and-desist and a no-contact order. Part of the agreement was that neither he nor I could talk about the case for the remainder of our studies.

“SPPA said they couldn’t speak to X directly about his behaviour. Student Affairs was mostly responsible for communicating with him. My report was forwarded to an external review body that decided my case didn’t warrant further investigation, but some protections were still put in place (which included barring X from talking to me or about me, both on campus and online). Equity told me X subsequently blew off the consent education he was offered and that he initially agreed to take. While the campus restraining orders were still in effect, they didn’t stop X from continuing to harass and slander me the next year.

“SPPA also told me X wouldn’t be registered in the same second-year courses as me, but he was. I

received an email from a faculty member apologizing for not realizing it happened until I contacted them about it. SPPA also confirmed the summer before my second year that my professors would be informed about the no-contact order and cease-and-desist, to make sure the right protections were in place. When I talked to one professor, he said he was never informed.

“SPPA told me that as a solution, I could stop attending class, without penalty, if I was uncomfortable being around X. But why should I have to forgo my education just to feel safe? I continued going to class until a classmate eventually approached me during a lecture break to say X was whispering to her about me. I felt humiliated. I finished my final semester by receiving emails on the day of class confirming whether or not X would be there, and if he was, I stayed home.

“It’s my understanding that Equity was willing to work with SPPA to provide training to my cohort and create an opportunity for the SPPA director to emphasize to my classmates the school’s no-tolerance policy for harassment, sexual or otherwise. Equity said SPPA didn’t follow up on the offer. I have to wonder if it would have made a difference if an authority figure from our program actually told X directly that his actions were unacceptable—because that’s what the school told me, in emails he’ll never read.”

“A male classmate told me I made his life at home difficult because I reported his roommate, who was also in our program, for sexual harassment. I left that conversation feeling guilty that my decision to report affected him as deeply as he claimed. I talked to a professor I trusted and a counselor who were able to reassure me I did the right thing by coming forward.

“I’m glad I went through the reporting process because it led to revealing that this male classmate was using my situation as a talking point with other students. I was beyond shocked when a female student confided in me that he had portrayed himself to her as a victim in my situation, apparently as a way to gain her sympathy and get physically close to her. She told me he had, on at least four occasions, followed her to her car, asked to sit inside, then grabbed her with his hand on the back of her bra and sobbed on her shoulder, which made her stressed and uncomfortable.

“He admitted to me in a phone call, ‘I know what I did to [the female student] is no better than what my roommate did to you.’ For him to be able to admit that so confidently without any repercussions was disturbing and no doubt a difficult experience for the other female student, who received little support from the SPPA.”

“I had a former male friend and classmate who over a period of 7 months engaged in insidious behaviour which evolved into stalking. From what I was aware of at the time, the behaviour started in the fall of first year, with him leaving school and walking with me to my car every time we were at school together. In addition to this, he started showing up to places I was at on and off campus. For instance, when he learned I went to a farmer’s market on Sundays, I would see him there regardless of the time in the morning I went. On Sundays when I didn’t go to the market, he would comment on my absence the next time I saw him.

“Around spring, it became difficult to have conversations with others when he was in the room, since he would interject and try to start a conversation with just the two of us. If I was unable to attend a social gathering, he repeatedly asked me where I had been and who I had been with. Once when I didn’t tell him specific details, he eavesdropped on my conversations with others and then he approached me and said, ‘I heard you say you went to [a certain] bar, did you go there with a friend?’

“At this point, I felt that I needed to implement some boundaries, so one day when I was leaving school and he got up to leave with me, I told him I had to go to the bathroom and that I would see him the next day. One of my friends informed me that he had texted her that evening, saying he needed to call her to discuss what had happened between me and him that day (he was upset with me for not walking with him to my car).

“I learned he told other people in my program that he had feelings for me and that he had been discussing this with a number of male students in the program throughout the first year. I learned that he had made comments to people in the program, such as:

- ‘How do I get out of the friend zone and into the girlfriend zone’
- ‘I love her but she has personal problems’ (his reason for why we were not yet dating)
- ‘We held hands, I’m making progress’ (which was untrue)

“Although these comments were largely rumours, I still didn’t appreciate being spoken about in this manner by him to my classmates.

“I took a more direct approach with him and messaged him requesting space and physical distance. In response, he told classmates that I had said extremely hurtful things to him in my message. At this point, I was ok with being in the same room with him, but then he proceeded to complain to classmates about my request for space and made comments about how I had hurt him and that it wasn’t fair that he had to bury his feelings for me for a long time. He asked classmates to speak to me for him. He texted at least three students, including my friend, if he should join me for lunch while we were at our summer co-op placement. He did not respect my boundaries and showed up at the cafeteria where he knew I took my lunch at work.

“By then, I no longer felt comfortable being in the same room as him and was advised by Equity to get a cease-and-desist. Two weeks following the cease-and-desist, he still showed up at the cafeteria at my co-op. A large number of classmates approached my close friends when I was not around, saying that they heard from my former male friend that I got a cease-and-desist against him. The majority of these people wanted to know why I did and tried getting information from my close friends. After a few months of hearing from other classmates that they knew about the cease-and-desist, because my former male friend told them, and that he was upset and angry about it, I called Campus Security and they met with him to explain that his behaviour was inappropriate. Campus Security said he denied any wrongdoing at first.

“Throughout my second year and up until a month ago, classmates have continued to approach

my close friends to ask about what happened between the two of us.

“I chose not to undergo a formal investigation because it did not seem like anything would happen unless the external body reviewing the investigation determined that his behaviour met the threshold of sexual violence, which I didn't think it did. Regardless, I felt targeted and extremely uncomfortable for the remainder of my time with the cohort. I did not want to attend any social events or go to the SPPA resource room.”

“At the beginning of my first year I attended social events to meet as many classmates as I could. There was one guy (Y) who I met throughout the social events. I was always upfront with people, including Y, that I was in a relationship. At one of the first social events, I was talking to Y about sports. I mentioned to Y that my partner and I enjoy watching certain sporting events. In the middle of our conversation, he proceeded to take an unwanted flirtatious advance at me which made me feel very uncomfortable. Y grabbed my phone and put his number in it under the name ‘Sugar and Spice,’ even though I didn’t want him to, and he later laughed about it with other male classmates.

“A few months later, there was another time in the resource room where I was sitting at a table doing group work. Y came over to my table which I ignored at first. However, I could strongly sense that he was staring. I looked up from my computer screen and he was staring at me. When I caught him he was still staring and he started to laugh, making me feel uncomfortable and embarrassed. Due to incidents like the ones myself and my peers experienced, I started avoiding the resource room and SPPA social events altogether.”

“The SPPA has a prevailing culture that allows individuals to feel safe and secure in their misogyny and for perpetrators to feel enabled in their harm.

“I experienced adverse interactions at multiple times during my time with the SPPA. I felt that those who caused harm were often comfortable enough to do this with an audience, and I felt that my agency over my education had been taken away. I felt uncomfortable and unsafe in classes, events and shared spaces and in groups with my peers as it felt as though this behaviour was normalized. I have watched a culture grow, of comfortability with misogyny. Systematic changes need to be implemented so that students can feel safe and empowered in their education, and equipped with the tools to navigate Carleton’s reporting systems that are not survivor centric or built to support individuals through difficult situations that have stripped them of their voice.”

“It’s gross and disappointing that I was warned about a bunch of guys almost as soon as I got to Carleton [in fall 2023]. Those guys were mentors [in the MPPA mentorship program], too.”

“It’s disheartening that students were not able to enjoy their time in graduate school to the fullest extent because they were targeted by other classmates. Experiences like these pull the students’

focus away from their studies and limit them from reaching their potential. Unfortunately I know of stories from former students/survivors that I don't see included in this letter at the time of writing and that's likely because those graduates are unconfident in Carleton University's ability to take their stories seriously."

"University should be an exciting time where our greatest worries should be our coursework. Instead, the culture in the SPPA has resulted in people fearing for their overall safety when they step on campus. The fact that the school has not enforced measures to protect students is extremely upsetting and completely unacceptable."

"There is power and influence that comes with obtaining a masters degree, the MPPA website explains how this program was designed to create leaders and changemakers. It is uncomfortable to think of who now holds this influence, knowing their behaviour and treatment towards women. The MPPA was also developed in some ways to prepare students to become leaders in the public service. There should be some ethics or morals which students are expected to uphold, given that all public servants are required to abide by the Values and Ethics Code.

"While addressing harassment is an extremely complex policy problem and there are already university policies in place for assault and sexual violence, there should be space for some sort of middle or preventative ground, in which students' misconduct that has not yet escalated into assault can be addressed by the SPPA. Even if this middle ground can only be achieved through conversations with faculty it would relieve some of the stress off of individuals experiencing harassment, let them know that they are supported by the SPPA and make the students aware that harassment is taken seriously by the SPPA.

"There were many bystanding individuals who, whether they knew it or not, perpetuated harassment by not calling out inappropriate behaviour, spreading rumours, engaging in gossip and reaching out to individuals experiencing harassment or individuals who are close to the victims to obtain information. The lack of the SPPA's measures put in place to address harassment, as well as the role of bystanders largely contributed to the MPPA's current culture of misogyny and harassment."

"I have never felt feelings of discomfort quite like the feelings of discomfort I have felt at the SPPA."

Provide a statement: <https://forms.gle/rPWHvkkUaLTJih8i8>

CALLS TO ACTION

We the undersigned call upon the SPPA to:

1. Commit to creating a safe environment for SPPA students and faculty members alike, with an emphasis on undertaking trauma-informed, survivor-centric actions.
2. Open the SPPA to an external investigation of its culture of misogyny, with the aim of identifying the issues that create and/or contribute to the fear of reporting sexual violence-related misconduct.
3. Implement mandatory consent education and sexual violence policy information sessions for all SPPA students and faculty members, and work with the EIC to determine the scope of the training and mode(s) of delivery.
 - a. Encourage incoming students who wish to participate in the SPPA Society Executive Committee to undergo training for building healthy, safe communities and providing support to survivors.
4. Create an Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) Officer position, as well as a departmental safety committee under which the position should be housed. The individual appointed to the EDI Officer role would be primarily responsible for working with the EIC on the development and delivery of training materials.
5. Develop an in-house policy on the SPPA's duty of care, ensuring students who report misconduct receive adequate support and follow-up from the administration and/or faculty.
6. Initiate consultations with relevant pan-university decision-making and advisory bodies to explore employing the use of external reporting tools, such as [REES](#) (see Appendix C for more information). This would allow Carleton University to more accurately measure occurrences of sexual violence-related misconduct and adjust its policies accordingly.

A **public statement** by the SPPA confirming its commitment and detailing how it intends to respond to the above recommendations is appreciated by **September 9, 2024**.

Thank you for your time and action.

SIGNATORIES

1. Parisa Vafaie, MPPA 2024
2. Holly MacDonald, MPPA student
3. Naomi Stobart, MPPA student
4. Rayne Assiniwai, MPPA 2024
5. L. D. *[name withheld]*, MPPA 2024
6. Ksenia Ekimova, MPPA student
7. Dominic Ellis-Kelly, MPPA 2024
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10. Alex Fiore da Silva, MPPA student
11. Alex Goulden, MPPA 2024
12. Bronwyn Heerspink, MPPA student
13. Maya Janzen, MPPA 2023
14. Declan Jensen-Joyce, MPPA student
15. Erica Johnson, MPPA 2024
16. Nora Jorjani, MPPA student
17. Sarah Kennedy, MPPA 2024
18. Mikayla Koronkiewicz, MPPA 2024
19. Anne-Michèle Lajoie, MPPA 2023
20. Ashly Lam, MPPA student
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28. Jaida Smith, MPPA student
29. Lilith Smith, MPPA 2024
30. Hailey Stone, MPPA 2023
31. Bridget Truchon, MPPA student
32. Hope Tuff-Burg, MPPA 2023
33. Faye Serene Urmeneta, MPPA 2023
34. Jaden Walters, MPPA student
35. Chenai Wamambo, MPPA 2024
36. Joyce Wamambo, MPPA 2022
37. Kahlea Wells, MPPA 2024
38. Morgan Faith, BA Psychology 2017, Carleton University
39. Carter Tongs, MA Sociology (former MPPA) student, Carleton University

40. Jodie Anderson
41. Lucas Burkhardt
42. Alexa Godin
43. Zoe McMillan

Sign the letter: <https://forms.gle/axBpiQPE2USsqNJF8>

RESOURCES

APPENDIX A: Carleton University policy

[EIC 2022–2023 Report on Sexual Violence](#)

[Sexual Violence Policy](#)

⇒ [Formally Reporting an Experience of Sexual Violence](#)

APPENDIX B: Relevant news articles

Capital Current

[“Critics urge effective action as Carleton University reviews sexual violence policy amid what is called an epidemic of sexual violence on campuses”](#) (2021)

“The university provided [a victim] with extensions and created schedules for her and the perpetrator of the assault so they would not cross paths in the university cafeteria.

*“Despite these steps, [the victim] said the **procedures were not properly upheld** as she continued to see the perpetrator around campus. By the time security arrived, she was already stressed and worried.*

*“She said she believes security **did not act quickly or thoroughly enough.**”*

Ottawa Citizen

[“Carleton students react to sexual assault study”](#) (March 2019)

*In the 2017–2018 academic year, **more than 3,300 Carleton University students** reported experiencing some form of sexual harassment. Some students interviewed by the Ottawa Citizen reported not being surprised by this number.*

[“More than 4,000 university and college students in Ottawa say they were sexually assaulted last year”](#) (March 2019)

*“Among **Carleton University** students, rates of reported sex assault were **higher** than the provincial average, with 26.1 per cent of students reporting at least one non-consensual sexual experience.”*

APPENDIX C: Additional resources

[Preventing sexual and gender-based harassment](#)

*“Employers, housing providers, educators and other responsible parties can **prevent many cases of sexual harassment by having a clear, comprehensive anti-sexual harassment policy** in place. In cases of alleged sexual harassment, the policy will alert all parties to their rights, roles and responsibilities. Policies must clearly set out how the sexual harassment will be dealt with promptly and efficiently. The OHRC’s Policy on preventing sexual and gender-based harassment includes the suggested contents of an anti-sexual harassment policy.”*
(Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2013)

⇒ [5. Sexual harassment in education](#)

*“There have been **many reports of sexual harassment in post-secondary schools**. Women may experience sexual solicitation and advances from male professors, teaching assistants, university staff, students, etc. Sexual harassment, and harassment because of sexual orientation, can also occur as part of school rituals, such as initiation of new students, new players in team sports, or new members of sororities or fraternities, when students have to take part in sexually explicit rites as part of hazing activities. Other forms of violence against women, including date rape and other types of sexual assault, continue to be issues of concern on university and college campuses across the country.”*

*“There are many possible effects of sexual harassment on students. **A student experiencing sexual harassment may disengage from the curriculum and all school-related activities**. They may skip or drop classes, or they may drop out of school entirely. Psychological effects may include anxiety, depression, disrupted sleep, loss of appetite, inability to concentrate, lowered self-esteem, loss of interest in regular activities, social isolation, and feelings of sadness, fear and/or shame. Some students may abuse drugs and/or alcohol to cope. In extreme cases, students may think about or even attempt suicide.”*

[REES Campus Canada](#)

*“**REES** is a simple, secure online platform for reporting sexual violence, tailored to the unique setting of post-secondary institutions.*

*“Trauma-informed and centred on the needs of survivors, REES gather critical data for institutions while bridging **anonymous incident reporting** with access to information about reporting options, resources, and supports.*

“REES can be customized to any campus, anywhere.”

[Sexual Violence on Campuses: Fact Sheet](#)

*“One survey showed that **60 per cent of Canadian college-aged males indicated that they would commit sexual assault if they were certain that they wouldn’t get caught**.”*

“Women may be less likely to report sexual assault and other forms of violence because they may not feel safe to do so or feel that they would not be supported.”

*“It is estimated that four out of five women who are sexually assaulted **do not report due to feelings of humiliation or the fear of being re-victimized.**”*

[Student Voices on Sexual Violence: 2019 Report](#)

*“The Student Voices on Sexual Violence Survey was conducted with postsecondary education students to gather information about perceptions and experiences of sexual violence that can be used to inform and enhance the sexual violence response and prevention efforts of publicly-assisted colleges, publicly-assisted universities, and private career colleges. Specifically, this study is intended to provide **information about how students perceive, understand and respond to sexual violence, as well as how institutions address sexual violence.**”*

[Trauma and violence-informed approaches to policy and practice](#)

*“Service providers and organizations who do not understand the complex and lasting impacts of violence and trauma **may unintentionally re-traumatize.** The goal of trauma and violence-informed approaches is to minimize harm to the people you serve—whether or not you know their experiences of violence.” (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2018)*