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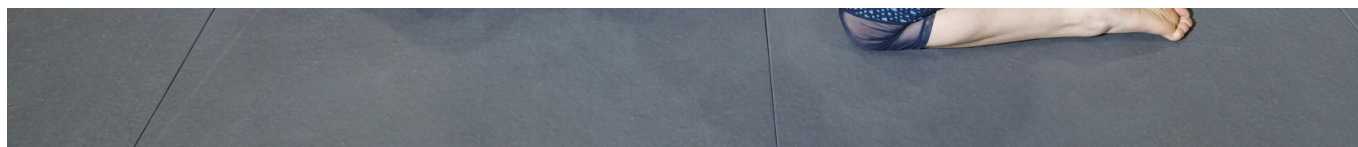
'Empowerment Self-Defense' Programs Make Women Safer. Why Don't More Colleges Use Them?

By *Sarah Brown*

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Ryan Kelly (on the floor) teaches a women's self-defense course at the U. of Oregon. Here he demonstrates a maneuver designed to keep an attacker away. Most female college students are victimized by someone they know, so the objective is to stop the assault, not necessarily to hurt the perpetrator.

She's on her back, and he's on his feet. He's ready to jump on top of her. He's bigger than she is. But as he lunges forward, she sets her feet against his hips and braces her legs. He weaves back and forth, trying to get closer. He can't.

"Guard position" is one of the moves students learn in an "empowerment self-defense" course at the University of Oregon. Beyond physical tactics, the class teaches women how to speak up, say "no," and act assertively to reduce their risk of experiencing violence, including sexual assault. Rose O'Reilly-Hoisington, a teaching assistant, and Ryan Kelly, a self-defense instructor, are demonstrating.

If someone starts to make a woman feel uncomfortable in an intimate situation, she might need a way to stop what's happening, create some space, and take a few moments to figure out what to do or say next, Kelly says. That's what guard position is for. Several survivors of sexual assault have told him: I wish I'd known how strong my legs were.

Each week, in addition to two 50-minute self-defense sessions, students spend an hour and 20 minutes learning to define what they are comfortable with, sexually and otherwise. They talk about how they've been socialized — how they've been encouraged to be the nice girl, to be polite, to be compliant. They practice speaking up when their boundaries are crossed.

This kind of training works. At least, that's what the early research suggests. A study of one of the programs, Enhanced Assess, Acknowledge, Act — known as EAAA or Flip the Script — found that women who completed it were half as likely to be raped as women who didn't. Data for Oregon's current "Women's Self-Defense" course are still being collected, but an earlier version of the class cut the women's rate of sexual victimization by 37 percent.

Bystander- and consent-education efforts are promising, but meanwhile, women need the tools to stay safe.

The evidence supporting empowerment self-defense programs is hard to dispute. But few colleges offer them.

The core argument against promoting self-defense as an anti-sexual-assault strategy is a predictable one: The courses put the burden on women to protect themselves, instead of teaching men not to rape. For years, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention didn't recommend resistance education as a deterrent to campus rape. Neither did the American College Health Association. That changed only in 2016.

On college campuses, the trend in recent years has been to emphasize ["It's On Us,"](#) and not on women. The [bystander-intervention and consent trainings](#) that [students go through](#) at most institutions reinforce the idea that stopping sexual assault should be everybody's responsibility.

Supporters of empowerment self-defense say they agree: Sexual assault is never the victim's fault. The onus shouldn't be on women to protect themselves. But while bystander- and consent-education is promising, cultural change is a long process. In the meantime, they say, women should have the tools to stay safe.

A small but passionate cadre of researchers, administrators, and students is trying to spread that message across higher education. Slowly but surely, they are changing some minds.

Holding Men Accountable

Part of the opposition to self-defense courses is that they often focus on attacks from strangers, and encourage women to abide by a long list of no-nos, like not wearing revealing clothing or walking alone at night. Over time, women have pushed back and called for a shift in focus, to hold men accountable for sexual assault instead of teaching women to be responsible for resisting it.

Many campus police departments continue to offer Rape, Aggression, Defense, or RAD, workshops. In them, women learn to fight a mock aggressor leering over them in a thick black padded suit. Think punching and kicking.

But college women who experience sexual assault are usually victimized by someone they know: a significant other, a friend, a sexual partner. Someone they don't necessarily want to harm.

What these women need, in addition to basic physical-resistance skills, is to understand the emotional barriers that can prevent them from being assertive and learn how to overcome them. Not fear-mongering, say Charlene Senn and Jocelyn Hollander.

Senn, a social psychologist at the University of Windsor, in Ontario, built on existing research to design the EAAA curriculum and wrote the study that said women who went through the program were [far less likely to be raped](#). Hollander, a sociology professor at Oregon, examined the university's previous empowerment self-defense course, then redesigned the curriculum and is studying the new course's effectiveness.



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FOREARM FRAME: Rose O'Reilly-Hoisington, the teaching assistant, holds her left forearm against the throat of the instructor, Ryan Kelly, which doesn't harm him, but prevents him from moving any closer while they're both standing tall.

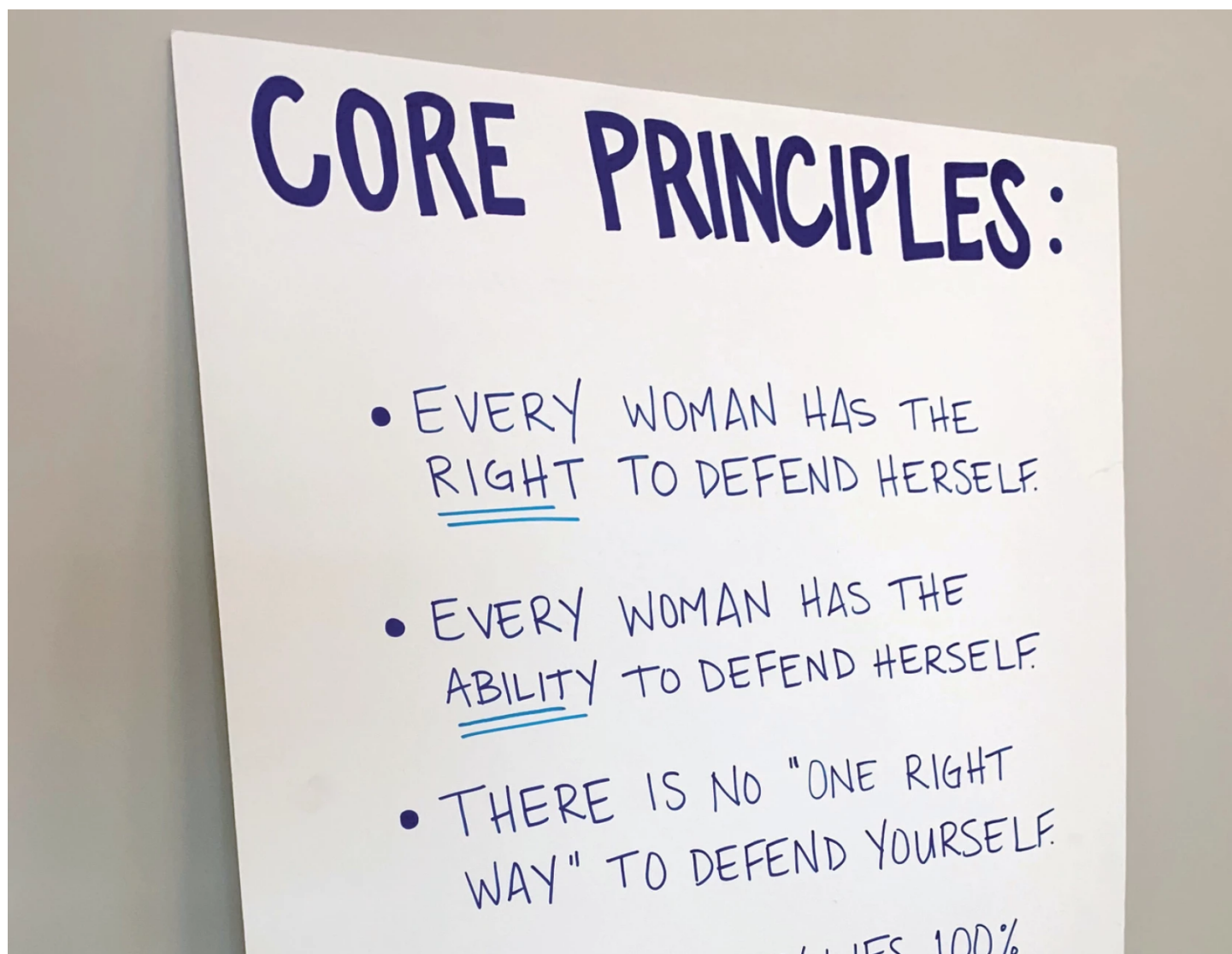
The two programs have different formats. Senn's is designed primarily for freshmen and is typically offered over four three-hour sessions, including two hours of physical self-defense training. Hollander's is a 30-hour physical-education course that has a more significant self-defense component. Their goals, though, are the same: to boost women's confidence and help them defend themselves in the rare cases when it's necessary.

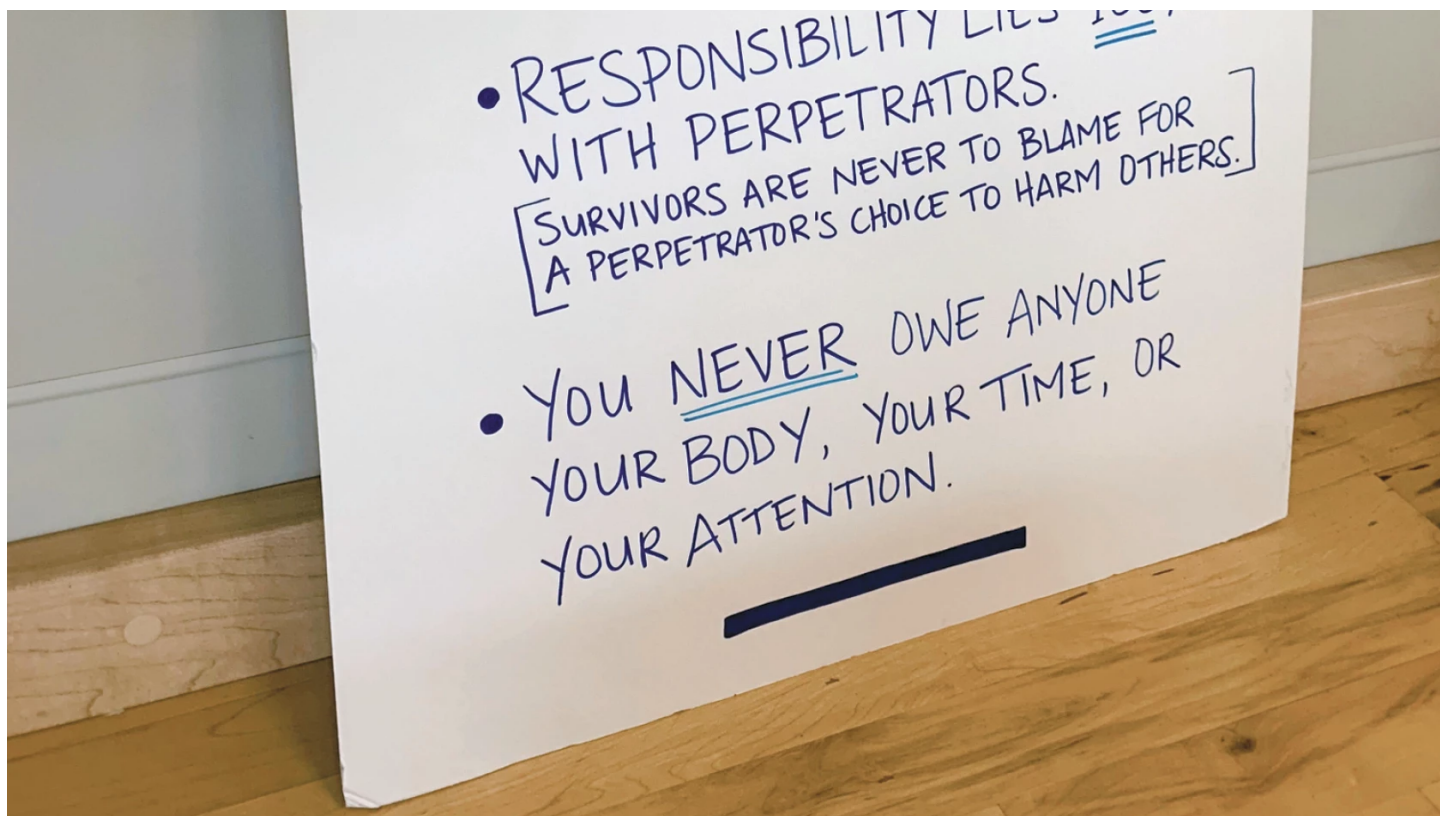
When campus administrators first heard about the study describing Enhanced Assess, Acknowledge, Act's striking success in reducing sexual assault, many didn't believe it. And they weren't so sure about its emphasis on resistance. Back in 2015, a copy of Senn's study landed on Sarah Deatherage-Rauzin's desk at Florida Atlantic

University, where she had just started as a health-promotion coordinator. “I was absolutely opposed at first when I saw the title,” Deatherage-Rauzin says.

Then she read the research, and she was blown away. Not only did the course reduce the risk of sexual assault, the women who had been victims said it helped their recovery process and made them less likely to blame themselves for what had happened. “I thought, OK, I can’t ignore this,” Deatherage-Rauzin says.

After Senn published her groundbreaking study, she created a nonprofit organization — the Sexual-Assault Resistance Education Centre — to make her program widely available to campuses. Florida Atlantic was the first American institution to sign on, in 2016.





CHRONICLE PHOTO BY SARAH BROWN

Weekly empowerment sessions, part of self-defense training, take place in the recreation center's yoga room. The message that victims are never to blame for violence they encounter is an important part of the course.

The first order of business? A new name. “EAAA” wasn’t going to be the best way to market the program to students. Deatherage-Rauzin took inspiration from one of Senn’s program handouts. One side of the sheet describes a script often running through women’s minds: I should let the man take the lead. I shouldn’t speak up. If I get raped, it’s because I did something.

Flip the sheet over, and it reads: I have the right to take the lead. I didn’t do anything wrong. I didn’t deserve this. So Florida Atlantic started promoting the program as Flip the Script.

Flip the Script participants are surveyed six months and one year after completing the program. Florida Atlantic who have taken part in Flip the Script have reported a better understanding of their own risk when it comes to sexual violence. They are

also less likely to believe what survivors' advocates call rape myths, like women being responsible for a sexual assault if they are drunk.

Women's victimization rates "seem to be consistent" with the lower levels reported in Senn's initial study, according to the university. Half of the Florida Atlantic students who faced sexual violence after taking Flip the Script said they used moves from the program to stop the assault.

Not Available Online

The University of Iowa also started talking, in 2015, about bringing Senn's program to campus. Flip the Script is now offered as a one-credit physical-education class. Sara Feldmann, compliance coordinator in the university's sexual-assault-response office, says she and others worked with Senn to expand the program's standard 12-hour curriculum into a university course, adding three more hours of material about coercive situations and self-defense practices.

Not everyone was on board at first. Skeptics included people who had fought for years to move past problematic risk-reduction strategies, Feldmann says. "They've seen this shift, and they've put so much energy into taking the focus off of women, and the idea of giving an inch on that just doesn't feel good," she says.

"It's hard to talk about," she says. "You don't want to say the wrong thing and disrespect the work that people have done on this issue."

Since 2015, Senn has fielded dozens of inquiries from other American colleges about Flip the Script. But the ratio of interest to action has been low. Just six U.S. campuses now offer the program in some form. Oregon's curriculum hasn't been adopted by other institutions.

Once some administrators realized that Flip the Script required intensive small-

group discussions and couldn't be offered online, they dropped out, Senn says.

Cost is a barrier, too. Start-up costs for Flip the Script are estimated to be \$37,000, and campus officials who have put the program in place say the actual price tag is higher.

The self-defense designation is still the thorniest issue. When Flip the Script is described as a self-defense program, Senn says, critics tend to zero in on that component and forget that most of the 12 hours are spent on emotional barriers, sexuality, and verbal skills.

Jess Davidson, executive director of End Rape on Campus, a national survivor-advocacy group, says some sexual-assault victims find learning self-defense to be empowering. But she doesn't believe campuses should brand women's resistance education as sexual-assault prevention. Many victims freeze in response to being attacked. How, Davidson asks, is self-defense training going to help prevent that assault from taking place?

“I loved” women’s self-defense training. “But I also want men to have to give up their weekend.”

Students have been some of the most vocal critics of empowerment self-defense programs. When researchers at Stanford University started trying to bring Flip the Script to campus in 2016, angry emails from student groups landed in their inboxes.

“The pushback, it’s tough,” says Michael Baiocchi, an assistant professor of medicine at Stanford. Given the strength of the research supporting Flip the Script, he says, “it’s hard to think about withholding it.” That argument has helped bring around some critics. So is the fact that Stanford’s Office of Sexual Assault &

Relationship Abuse has been fully supportive, which isn't the case at some institutions, he says.

An outreach council of Stanford students is working to spread a positive message about Flip the Script. Isi Loretta Umunna, a senior and council member, says the program's time commitment — 12 hours over a single weekend — is a major barrier for students. And when she interviews program participants, she often hears some version of this: "I loved it. But I also want men to have to give up their weekend."

Baiocchi and others are in the early stages of developing a similar program for college men, focused on the unique ways that men are socialized and experience violence. The course is a long way from prime time. Scholars are still figuring out what kind of education for men will be effective, Senn says: "I know that telling men not to rape doesn't do a damn thing."

The men's program is one of several ways researchers are trying to make empowerment self-defense more attractive to colleges. They're also trying to figure out the minimum level of exposure to resistance training that will make a difference for women. Could the material be condensed into nine hours? Or less?

Elise C. Lopez, director of the University of Arizona's Consortium on Gender-Based Violence, says she hopes to get funding for a study of a half-dozen American colleges, including Arizona, that will start offering Flip the Script this fall. The goal: to show that Senn's 2015 study was no fluke. That empowerment self-defense works.

Such courses aren't a replacement for other types of prevention programming that colleges do, Lopez says, but they are a critical piece of the puzzle. "We've become complacent," she says, "with the idea that if we can get bystander training to everybody on our campus, we can clap our hands and say, 'We did it.'"

Never the Victim's Fault

Just after 10 a.m. on a recent Thursday, Ryan Kelly joins his new students on the floor in the mat room at Oregon's campus recreation center. They're sitting in a circle, some crossing their legs, others hugging their knees.

The roughly 20 women are largely traditional-age students, but they represent a wide range of heights, body types, and racial and ethnic backgrounds. Kelly's message is that anyone can do self-defense. He says he has taught all types of women, including women with physical disabilities, to defend themselves.



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Two teaching assistants demonstrate a shoulder-lock-submission hold, one of the moves students learn in the course.

It's the first week of spring-term classes at Oregon, which uses a quarter system. Multiple times in the first 10 minutes of class, Kelly repeats: Sexual assault is never

the victim's fault.

A large black punching bag is hanging nearby. But students aren't using it today. Kelly spends most of the session talking about how women are affected by violence. He says physical self-defense is usually a "back-up plan." The hope, he says, is that students will never have to use the more extreme versions of the skills they'll learn in his class.

Some have questioned why a man is teaching women's self-defense. But Kelly and Hollander say their approach offers a balance. In the physical-skills sessions, students can see a female teaching assistant demonstrating how to actually fight off a man. The other sessions, focused on empowerment, make clear that women are leading the course and setting the tone.

Hollander teaches one section of the weekly empowerment sessions, which take place in the recreation center's yoga room. She has a poster propped up behind her of "core principles." One of them: "Responsibility lies 100% with perpetrators."

Within a few minutes students are up and moving around. The first exercise, Hollander tells them, is designed to explore "what violence against women is all about." She hands out laminated cards with descriptions of scenes on them. On one wall is a "continuum of danger." Students use strips of blue tape to place the scene cards where they best fit.

An acquaintance making rude jokes about women at a party qualifies as "irritating." A guy pointing a gun at you and demanding your car keys is "life-threatening." A roommate's boyfriend coming into your room, drunk and upset, and plopping himself on your bed starts out as "irritating," but the class later decides to classify it as "dangerous."

One takeaway, Hollander says, is that women's views of violence tend to be skewed. They're most afraid of life-threatening scenarios. But they're much more likely to experience irritating and dangerous ones — where verbal strategies and assertiveness, rather than physical fighting, are often the best options, she says.

It's also important to note, Hollander says, that if your life is on the line, "sometimes not resisting is a form of self-defense."

Hollander acknowledges to her students that the course's use of gendered language might not be inclusive of everyone in the room. The world, especially on college campuses, is increasingly questioning the idea that gender is binary, and it can be awkward in this day and age to have women-only programs. Yet violence, she says, continues to be a deeply gendered experience.

'Forearm Frame'

Later in the course, students learn to progress from a fighting stance to actually preventing people from coming any closer. In addition to "guard position," there's "forearm frame," where a woman holds her forearm against someone's throat. "I hear from some people that this can be useful on the dance floor," Kelly likes to tell students, prompting laughter.

They learn how to properly deliver an eye gouge, but many of the techniques are more like a pause button, where the women are learning to put someone in a position where it's harder to assault them.

Students discuss how to stop a classmate from bothering them at a bus stop and how to tell someone firmly not to put a hand on their leg without consent. They practice using the "broken record" technique: repeating the same line to resist someone's advances, no matter how much the person pleads. They practice yelling.

“I feel so empowered. When I’m on the bus and someone stares at me, I stare back at them.”

During empowerment-class discussions, fidget spinners and small rubber ducks sit in a small pile in the center of the circle for students to pick up — to make it easier to speak out loud about difficult subjects. Hollander stresses that students don’t have to talk about any traumatic experiences unless they want to. She offers trigger warnings before describing particularly disturbing stories.

Students enroll in Oregon’s course for a wide range of reasons. Many of them have previously experienced trauma.

As a freshman, Kylie Davis was sexually assaulted, though she didn’t know what to call the incident until months later, when she was in therapy. Then, the summer before her sophomore year, a family member got drunk and physically assaulted her. She’s 5-feet-1, and she knows some may see her as an easy target.

Davis, now a senior, is a teaching assistant for the course this term. And she isn’t an easy target anymore. When she goes to bars, men will grab her arm or try to dance up behind her. But now that she’s learned empowerment self-defense, she says, she knows exactly what to do: “I can defend myself against anyone.”

Maddy Jones had taken two self-defense workshops before. She wondered whether Oregon’s course would be more of the same: A man telling her rules for how to avoid getting attacked. That wasn’t the case. “It really made me take a step back and have a different perspective on the way I had been taught to be a woman,” Jones says. “I had gotten used to so much discomfort.”

Now, she says, “I feel so empowered. When I’m on the bus and someone stares at me, I stare back at them. I’m like, ‘Why are you looking at me?’”

O'Reilly-Hoisington, the other teaching assistant, transferred to Oregon from the University of Montana after her freshman year. Leaving one campus community and her new friends for another, and coming out of the tumultuous presidential race that elected Donald Trump, she felt she was losing control of her life. By taking empowerment self-defense, she says, "I was hoping it would give me a little bit of control back."

Now, she says, she's much physically stronger. She carries a sense of safety wherever she goes. And she leads self-defense classes herself. Eventually, she'd love to teach empowerment self-defense at a university full time: "It just changed the way I interact with the world."

A version of this article appeared in the [April 26, 2019, issue](#).

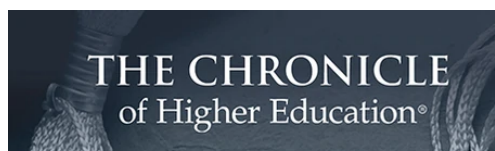
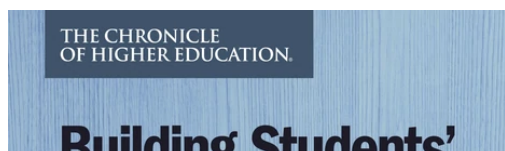
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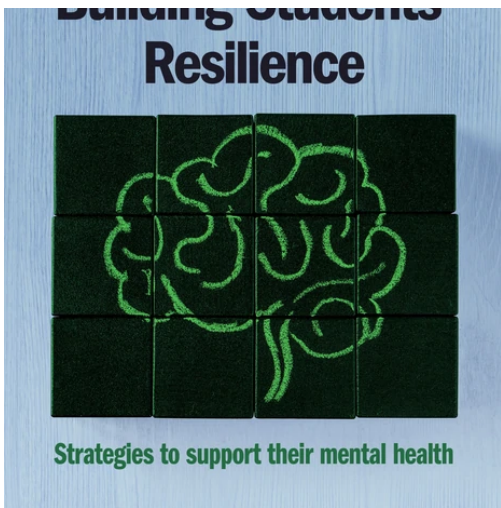
STUDENT LIFE

Sarah Brown

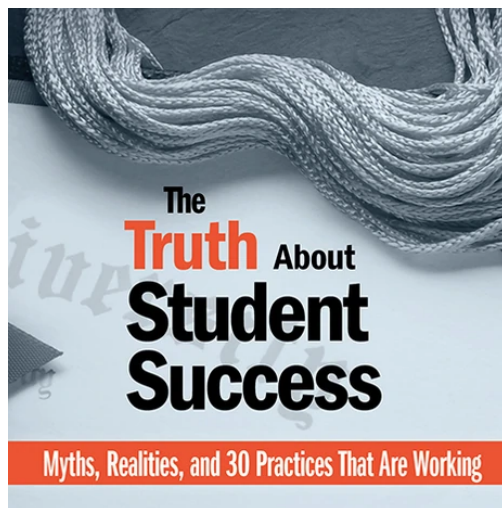
Sarah Brown covers campus culture, including Title IX, race and diversity, and student mental health. Follow her on Twitter [@Brown_e_Points](#), or email her at sarah.brown@chronicle.com.

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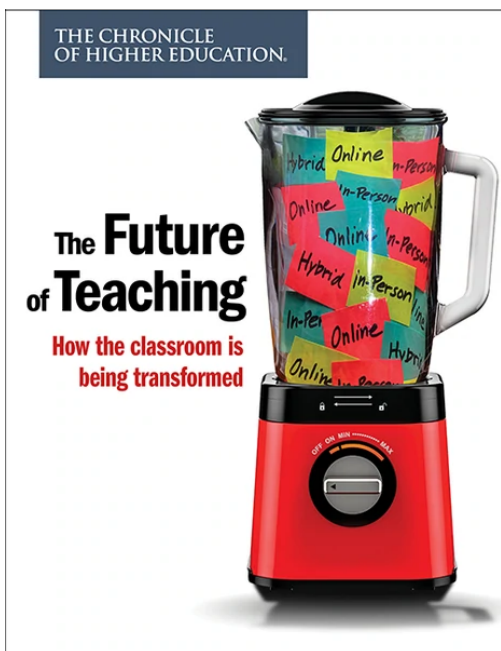




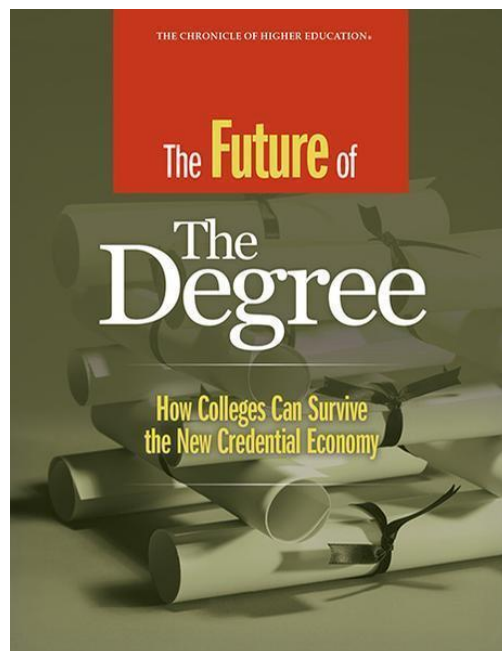
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