I spoke last week at the University of Chicago about a short law review essay I wrote recently, called “Is there really a sex bureaucracy?” The essay responds to an article by two Harvard Law School professors who argue that colleges and universities overstep—at the behest of the federal government—by talking with students about “good” sex rather than just the rules against sexual assault and harassment.

I disagree. Workshops and training are not about a preferred type of sex, or even about encouragement of sexual contact at all (though I’m told that many workshops do provide fun and useful information). Instead, they help underscore how important it is in our community that students treat each other with respect in this realm.

But what is sexual respect, anyway? And why should you care?

Sexual respect at Columbia is a commitment to acting with integrity and respect for others, and it is a responsibility to do what we can, individually and collectively, to reinforce the ethics of care and mutual respect in our community even amid our differences. It is also the unequivocal refusal to tolerate sexual harassment, sexual assault, and other forms of gender-based misconduct.
Here’s why you should care: We are in this community together, and the way we treat each other matters. Also, data coming directly from Columbia students via a major survey released last year show that many students report being sexually harassed by classmates. Some have also reported nonconsensual sexual contact from another Columbia student, often (though not always) after drinking together.

This misconduct interferes profoundly with personal health and wellness, academic success, student organizations and teams, and everyone’s well-being. But, so too does the silence and apathy surrounding it.

How many of us can say we don’t know anyone who has been harassed or subjected to dating violence or assault, or anyone who may have crossed the line and harmed someone else in this way? And, importantly, how many of us feel equipped enough to step in or get help for a friend, even in our own community?

The good news is that we can work to shape our community and the ways we treat each other. The Sexual Respect and Community Citizenship Initiative provides one ready path to gain skills and knowledge—and to contribute to making a difference.

Simply put, the Sexual Respect Initiative is about understanding and responding to the links connecting us, sparking conversations, and doing what we can to create change, not just in this moment, but throughout the year and in our lives beyond campus.

As a reminder, here’s how to get started: Select from multiple options on the Sexual Respect website. All students are encouraged to take part; new students must participate by Sunday, Oct. 30.

When I first started working with students, faculty, and administrators to create the initiative in 2014, we sat around a table together over several months to think about what would be the best ways to engage our community. Students took the lead on developing the format—workshops, films, online options, and resources for healing and resilience, and an arts option that evolved into the opportunity for independent projects—which many student organizations and individuals since have seized upon to create conversations.

Columbia is the only institution with an initiative of this kind, and the Sexual Respect Initiative’s recreation each year, as well as students’ continued participation in it, will help make even more powerful this link between sexual respect and our University community.