

How 'Carry That Weight' Is Changing the Conversation on Campus Sexual Assault: Columbia student Emma Sulkowicz's protest inspires nationwide actions

By [Rebecca Nathanson](#) | December 1, 2014



Students stand in front of the Library of Columbia University with a mattress in support of Emma Sulkowicz's project against sexual assault in New York City on October 29th, 2014. Selcuk Acar/Anadolu Agency/Getty

On October 29th, a group of Columbia University students left 28 mattresses on the steps of university president Lee Bollinger's house. Within an hour, the mattresses were in a dumpster, and the students responsible were hit with a \$471 fine to cover the clean-up cost. But while Columbia's administration was quick to dismiss the incident, students around the country have done the opposite.

The mattresses were part of Columbia undergrad Emma Sulkowicz's senior art thesis, a protest project called Carry That Weight. Sulkowicz has pledged to carry a mattress with her everywhere she goes on campus until the man who she says sexually assaulted her is no longer at Columbia, whether he is expelled, chooses to leave, or graduates in May 2015. Her protest has received a degree of national attention that would be unlikely if it happened anywhere other than an Ivy League university based in Manhattan – but Sulkowicz and her fellow campus activists have acknowledged their privileged position and are focused on directing that attention to other schools. On the day that students carried those 28 mattresses, representing the 28 students who have filed Title IX complaints against Columbia, organizers at over 130 schools participated in a [national day of action](#) in solidarity with survivors of sexual and domestic violence on campuses.



Emma Sulkowicz Andrew Burton/Getty

The protests are part of a larger nationwide movement to reform campus sexual assault policies –one whose necessity is exemplified by [Sabrina Rubin Erdely's recent Rolling Stone feature](#) on a harrowing sexual assault at a University of Virginia fraternity. And that movement was already in motion before Sulkowicz picked up her mattress. Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex at educational institutions that receive federal funding, and a [2011 letter](#) from the Department of Education requires institutions to take "immediate and effective steps to end sexual violence and sexual harassment." Thanks to organizations such as [Know Your IX](#), which educates survivors about their Title IX rights, and [End Rape on Campus](#), which helps survivors file federal Title IX complaints with the Department of Education, [85 American universities](#) are currently under investigation for the way they handle gender-based violence cases. Those actions, however, take place on paper. Carry That Weight brings them outside into the public eye.

"[Sulkowicz's] project is powerfully transgressing public/private boundaries and bringing into the public sphere trauma and violence that survivors so often suffer with by themselves in isolation," says Allie Rickard, a Barnard student who organized the national day of action in October. "Across the country, these issues are being addressed and grappled with by students. It's really gained a higher level of salience and engagement. We're hoping that our activism here can help support other students."

For students who were already organizing around sexual violence on campuses, Carry That Weight adds another layer to their movement, one that provides a powerful visual symbol and threatens institutions' public images. "It's a really good way to show visually just how damaging institutional betrayal can be for students who are victims," says Jasmine Lester, a Know Your IX organizer who

created Sun Devils Against Sexual Assault at Arizona State University. "We have to focus on going to school, but also we're carrying this weight around with us that makes everything we're trying to do that much harder. Students should not be carrying this weight. It should be administrators."



Image from Arizona State University. via carryingtheweighttogether.tumblr.com

According to Sofie Karasek, a University of California Berkeley alumna and cofounder of End Rape on Campus, the protest also helps hold universities accountable. "It shows solidarity between survivors, and oftentimes survivors feel alone and neglected," Karasek says. "That works to the benefit of universities because survivors don't know that they have their legal right to be treated better – to go through an impartial, fair, timely investigation – if they choose to report, and if they choose not to report, to be respected in that decision."

Carry That Weight is not without its critics. On October 26th, Sulkowicz published an [op-ed](#) dissuading people from carrying pillows on the national day of action, preferring they carry mattresses, help others do so, or tape a red X on their bodies. Some saw this as excluding those with different abilities. "That is an absolutely, 100 percent valid criticism, and it's really important to address that because people who are differently abled or disabled experience sexual violence at much

higher rates than people who are fully abled," responds Zoe Ridolfi-Starr, a Columbia student who organized the event. "We want to have meaningfully safer campuses. They have to be safer for all students and especially the students who are most vulnerable."

Some say that the mattress campaign is overshadowing pre-existing efforts. "I think it would be incorrect to characterize Carry That Weight as the catalyst for a national movement, because we already have hundreds of people across the country who are working on this issue," explains Karasek. "But I do think that Carry That Weight is a really great symbol of organizing and shows that people are willing to turn out for this issue and leave their homes and do more than what's online that isn't visible to the public."

That visibility is the campaign's crucial contribution to the movement, helping to connect organizers across school lines. For those not involved with national groups, it provides an entry into the dialogue. "It's really up to students and faculty and staff to continue the conversation so that the action is not just something that happened one day and then that's it," says Kaila Boulware, a Rutgers student organizer. "It's a conversation that needs to be had all the time."

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