



Social entrepreneurs solving problems around the world

How technology is combating sexual assault on US campuses

Skoll Awards for Social Entrepreneurship winner: Jess Ladd, founder and CEO of Callisto

by [Sue George](#)

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After experiencing sexual assault at university, Jess Ladd wanted to empower other survivors, and founded [Callisto](#) to take action through an online platform.

More than [20% of female students in the US experience sexual assault](#) or during the course of their college careers, along with 7% of men, and 24% of trans and non-binary gender students. Jess Ladd, founder and CEO of Callisto, had experienced sexual assault herself while she was at graduate school, and wanted to come up with something that would have helped her at the time.

“A big part of my experience was how bad the reporting of it had been,” she says. And there are many reasons why colleges fail, leaving students vulnerable during the process - this includes a lack of basic knowledge of sexual offences law, guidelines on collecting evidence, reporting procedures or counselling options. “The first stop [if you are reporting sexual assault] should be someone who believes you and can help you figure out what your choices are.”

Skoll awardee

Jess Ladd
Founder and CEO of Callisto





Fact file

Find out more about Callisto and Jess Ladd, founder and CEO

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[Less than 10% of sexual assaults that occur during college are reported](#) to the police or the college authorities - despite the majority of survivors (85%) knowing their assailant - but Ladd devised a reporting system that would offer victims options, information and support through the process.



Banners from a #MeToo protest (above); Kamilah Willingham, a sexual assault survivor from Harvard Law School, who now advocates for gender equality and civil rights (lead image). (Image of Jess Ladd: Jason Henry for the Guardian, all other images courtesy of Callisto)

Ladd had originally founded an organisation called Sexual Health Innovations, developing technology to advance sexual health and wellbeing in the US. She then developed the **Callisto Campus online system** a few years later - a project using technology to combat sexual assault and harassment. Students whose institutions have signed up are able to report sexual assault confidentially via an online platform. Just two colleges enrolled in 2015. Now, it covers 149,000 students at 12 campuses throughout the US, plus the Upright Citizens Brigade Theatre in New York.

There are three route options when reporting incidents via the Callisto Campus site. The first allows people to record their experience immediately and accurately, at a time that suits them, and have it preserved as a time-stamped, encrypted report.





“
**Students
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(From left to right) Former Pomona student Erika Nassirinia, writer and activist Kamilah Willingham, former Pomona Title IX coordinator Daren Mooko, Callisto founder and CEO Jessica Ladd (top); Callisto badges (right)

Alternatively, survivors can choose to store information about their assault under the precondition of it being released to the college authorities should another student also name the same perpetrator. About 15% of survivors who enter Callisto’s matching system are matched with another victim of the same assailant. This is particularly significant, given that an estimated [90% of college sexual assaults are committed by repeat offenders](#).

The third option allows students to send the report they have created electronically to the college authorities, which would trigger an investigation or consultation. The options offer survivors a choice to pursue the course of action they consider best both for themselves and for society.

Colleges that have not partnered with Callisto still have ways for students to report sexual assault, and all US colleges must ensure they are compliant with [Title IX](#). This is a federal civil rights law stipulating that no one should be discriminated against on the basis of gender within an education programme or activity receiving federal financial assistance. This discrimination includes sexual violence and sexual harassment - colleges must proactively prevent and respond to claims and ensure that victims are able to report perpetrators to the police. Although institutions are obliged to have a Title IX co-ordinator, Ladd says their overriding concern is often not taking care of victims, but ensuring compliance with Title IX.

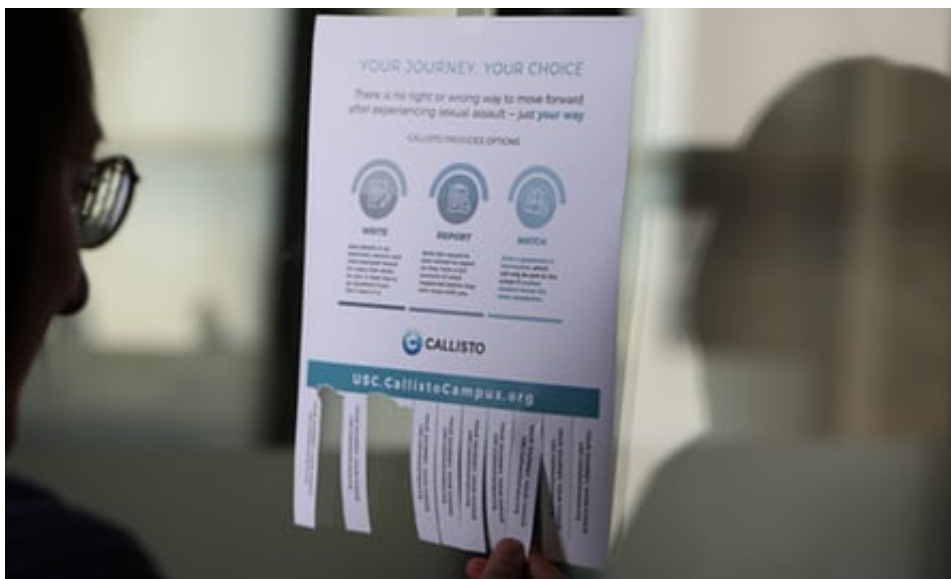




Ladd (right) meets with Callisto staff in a team meeting reviewing their platform - (from left) community engagement manager Eliza Milliken (on screen), operations and development associate Mara Curtis, and director of campus partner success Sara Dam. (Photo: Jason Henry)

Police and lawyers may also have priorities and perspectives that differ from victims' - meaning, for instance, that incidences of rape are not prosecuted due to a lack of evidence. But Callisto is on the side of the victims. "We want to make this inclusive to survivors of every gender," says Ladd, pointing out that the stigma for men and trans people who have been assaulted is particularly high.

The data gathered by Callisto can help colleges make changes in order to better serve the student body, such as hiring counsellors and concentrating prevention activities at the times of year when most assaults are reported.



A Callisto awareness flyer that is posted around universities. (Photo: Jason Henry)

Callisto says that students whose colleges have signed up are **five times more likely to report sexual crime** than those without access to the platform. The average delay between an incident occurring and it being reported is 11 months in the US - but reports on Callisto are logged, on average, four months after the incident.

Callisto bases its work on extensive research. This applies to data security - making sure sensitive data can never be hacked or even accessed by its own staff without explicit permission from the person reporting the assault. It has also ensured that the wording on its online forms will not increase trauma in victims.





Jess Ladd presenting a Ted talk

Being a Skoll awardee will help Callisto in a variety of ways, Ladd believes. “Compared to many organisations that have received this award, we are young and small. But we have huge ambitions!” She considers this year to be particularly significant for Callisto, following on from the [#MeToo](#) and [Time’s Up](#) campaigns. “Lots of industries and institutions want to do something [about sexual assault] and that might not be true a year from now,” she says.

Ladd also stresses the importance of grounding any project like this in the needs of the population you are trying to serve. “I couldn’t do this without my team - the designers, scientists and sales people. Over half of us have experienced these issues ourselves, and we are building the thing we wish we had had,” she says.

projectcallisto.org

On gender equality, Callisto is creating the potential for real and lasting change. It’s about getting to the root of the problem, giving survivors of sexual violence confidence, and setting standards so that the way of thinking about sexual violence will be changed forever.
Jude O’Reilly, Skoll Foundation

What are the Skoll Awards for Social Entrepreneurship?

The **Skoll Foundation** was set up in 1999 with the aim of driving large-scale change through investing in, connecting and celebrating social entrepreneurs, with the awards taking place annually since 2005. The awards are about “shining a light on what is working in the world” according to president and CEO Sally Osberg. “We wanted to invest in solutions to the world’s most pressing problems. The Skoll Awards are a way for us to do that,” she says. “We see entrepreneurs as agents of opportunity, of creative disruption.”

Organisations are nominated by Skoll’s network of partners, for qualities such as impact potential, collaboration and innovation, and must be led by visionary social entrepreneurs. Each winner gets a \$1.25m three-year core support investment to scale work and increase impact. This year, five of the six awards have been presented to women, something Osberg thinks is significant. “There is a perception that women entrepreneurs either don’t exist or don’t prevail,” she says. “We wanted to see if we could prove that wrong, and I believe we’ve done that.”

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