

Building a Comprehensive Prevention Experience on Campus: Sexual Violence Programming and Training Initiatives

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Abstract

Institutions of higher education in the U.S. face increased legislative action, intense media scrutiny, and mounting public pressure to prevent and respond to sexual violence. This case study explores three promising practices that can help campus leaders think beyond new student orientation and other one-time campus events to build a comprehensive prevention experience for students. Discussion questions provide institutions with guidance on how to move toward a culture of prevention that extends beyond orientation to reach students throughout their entire time on campus.

Author Note

Established in 2007, EAB is a trusted advisor and performance improvement partner to 1,000+ colleges and universities across North America and Europe. Through its innovative membership model, it currently partners with student affairs leaders at more than 175 institutions, helping them solve their most pressing problems. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Liz Brown at ebrown@eab.com.

Introduction

Following the 2011 release of the “Dear Colleague Letter” from the Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights, institutions of higher education in the United States have been besieged with federal and state legislation, intense media scrutiny, and mounting pressure to prevent and respond to sexual violence on their campuses. Colleges and universities have responded by bolstering sexual violence prevention programming primarily for incoming, first-year students. Institutions are flocking to online education modules, orientation programming, peer-led workshops, and theater presentations.

Current research on sexual violence prevention education demonstrates the potential benefits of certain program formats and topics. Summarizing findings from a meta-analysis of sexual violence prevention programs, Gibbons (2013) found that: 1) professional presenters are more effective at meeting stated program goals than peers; 2) single-gender programs are more effective at meeting stated program goals than mixed-gender programs; and 3) discussions about gender roles and rape myths are more effective at changing student attitudes than attempting to increase empathy for victims of sexual violence. Several studies also show that engaging students as active bystanders in their communities and empowering men to step up may be helpful in reducing instances of sexual violence against women (Berkowitz, 2002; The White House, 2014). Despite finding that some violence prevention programs were “somewhat effective” in changing students’ perceptions about rape and increasing knowledge about the crime, Gibbons (2013) concluded that no program resulted in long-term changes to increased knowledge and decreased rape-supportive attitudes. Because the positive effects of prevention education diminish over time, institutions should increase the duration and frequency of interventions (Gibbons, 2013).

More rigorous research about the long-term effectiveness of prevention programming is needed to identify best-practice interventions that lower rates of sexual violence on campus. After analyzing 140 separate prevention studies, DeGue et al. (2014) concluded that there is a significant dearth of robust assessment and evaluation data about prevention programming and that the field’s ability to identify programs that have a lasting impact on students is significantly hindered by the quality of readily available research.

Despite the lack of research about what really works to prevent sexual violence, researchers and practitioners agree that meaningful prevention should be comprehensive, intentional, and integrated throughout the student experience (Catalupo, 2015). Berkowitz (n.d.) argues that programming should be contextualized to the specific needs of a campus community and driven by both student and scholarly data. Institutions should use media campaigns with positive messaging and link prevention activities that are normally

disconnected (Berkowitz, n.d.). Thinking about prevention practices that extend beyond new student orientation and other one-time events can help institutions build a comprehensive prevention experience for students.

Purpose of the Case Study

The researchers examined the current prevention landscape at the postsecondary education level to identify innovative programs that showed promise in preventing sexual violence. Successful programs were defined as those that used highly-trained staff or peers to deeply educate students about the causes and effects of sexual violence, sought to build students’ prevention knowledge and skills over time, reached a significant portion of the student population beyond their first year, and had some demonstrable impact.

Case Study Methods

The researchers conducted more than 60 interviews with higher education professionals. Interviewees included independent consultants, prevention educators, Title IX coordinators, vice presidents for student affairs, and women’s center directors at 50 different colleges, universities, nonprofits, and other organizations throughout the U.S. and Canada. Interviews were conducted over a nine-month period from January to September 2014. Each interview was audio recorded and summarized in a research memo. The researchers iteratively reviewed the recordings and memos to identify promising approaches.

Summary of Case Study Conclusions

The researchers found that sexual violence prevention programming at most institutions is a compilation of one-time events that primarily target students during pre-arrival and the beginning of their first year. Specifically, institutions are relying on online education modules, orientation programming, peer-led workshops, and other one-time programs to “check the box” of prevention.

In interviews, student affairs administrators and prevention educators emphasized that the content and experiences gleaned from one-time events like a Take Back the Night march and performance of *The Vagina Monologues* are valuable to students. However, at most institutions, there is a real gap in how these events are incorporated into a larger strategy to reach students with consistent prevention messaging and programming.

This is not because practitioners and experts fail to recognize the importance of long-term programming structured around concrete learning outcomes. In fact, many college and university leaders outline a strong vision of a prevention strategy that engages students throughout their time on campus. However, administrators and educators highlighted key barriers to implementing ongoing, sustainable,

and institutionwide programming, including limited resources, time constraints, and a lack of assessment data identifying evidence-based prevention interventions.

After a thorough review of the sexual violence prevention literature and after conducting interviews with higher education administrators and practitioners, the researchers found that many institutions are working to implement comprehensive prevention programs that aim to have a long-term, significant impact on campus sexual violence rates. This case study uncovered several promising practices that may make a difference, although currently no research is available that demonstrates impact. The three practices that are described in this article can help campus leaders think beyond orientation and other one-time campus events to build a comprehensive prevention experience for students.

Provide a Certificate Program

While a prevention workshop builds students' basic knowledge and skills, some higher education administrators expressed a strong interest in offering (or even requiring) a wellness-focused course that spans an entire semester or academic year. Some institutions are moving in this direction by including information about sexual violence and campus resources in class syllabi and student-delivered class announcements. A handful of institutions, including Yale University, now require all second year students to attend a mandatory workshop on bystander intervention skills. While many campus leaders are interested in formally including information about sexual violence in the academic curriculum, that can be difficult to achieve because of the significant institutional commitment required.

Certificate programs may be a more viable and scalable approach to ongoing student education. A large public university in the northeast recently piloted an optional certificate program in bystander education. Students in the program complete interactive, discussion-based workshops and are immersed in skill-building exercises on how to identify and intervene in potentially harmful situations. A form of this program is currently being evaluated by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Between 40 and 50 students completed the certificate program pilot during the 2013–14 academic year. Students who are part of leadership groups, like fraternities and sororities, received a donation for their organization's philanthropic efforts by participating in the certificate program. Students who completed the program were rewarded with a certificate of completion and a notation on their transcripts.

The program also reaches graduate students on campus — an often-overlooked population in conversations about prevention. Graduate students in the Master of Education in College Student

Affairs program complete the bystander intervention program as part of a credit-bearing class. Participants noted that this was an important professional competency for their post-graduate goals and have praised the high quality of the program.

Empower Students with Choice

Many prevention educators assume that students come to college with very limited knowledge about sexual violence and healthy relationships. As a result, the content in mandatory trainings is usually focused on the basics. While this might be the case for some students, it overlooks that other students may already be well informed on these topics, and thus unengaged with such trainings.

A small public university in the western United States has taken a unique approach to mandatory prevention education, allowing students to select a prevention workshop to attend from a list of topics. Students can choose from about a dozen individual workshops offered across 30 sessions. At the beginning of each workshop, facilitators share the same 10-minute core message about sexual violence and available resources on campus. This unified core messaging ensures that all students receive critical content, in addition to the specialized material. The choice structure empowers students to select the workshop that best suits their interests, knowledge, and skill level.

Key to the success of this prevention program is that the responsibility of implementing the workshops is distributed across campus, relieving the burden typically placed on overloaded prevention educators. Offices like the counseling center and the health promotion office apply to host a workshop on a topic related to sexual violence prevention education. A committee of campus constituents, coordinated by the Violence Prevention Program Office, evaluates the applications to determine if the workshop meets the four learning outcomes set for all prevention education work at the institution: 1) recognizing sexual assault, 2) responding safely, 3) referring to appropriate resources, and 4) changing rape culture.

A public health faculty member and a team of undergraduate students used pre- and post-workshop survey data to evaluate the institution's approach to prevention programming and found that most students reported learning about available resources, how to recognize signs of violence, how to respond to instances of violence, and how to positively influence the culture on campus.

While students are required to attend the workshops during their first semester, institutions could consider implementing the program in the second semester or even beyond the first year. Institutions with robust programming efforts in the first semester could use the choice program to extend the educational experience for students. In the first semester, it is most critical that students gain fundamental

knowledge about sexual violence, such as an understanding of the school's definition of consent and sexual misconduct policies and procedures. After building a strong foundation of knowledge, the choice model allows students to identify what they are most interested in learning about in their second semester or beyond.

Sustain Support for Special Populations

A large public university in the western United States has developed an innovative program that aims to promote sustained prevention of sexual assault, dating and domestic violence, and stalking in the Greek community. The program trains one point-person in each fraternity and sorority to serve in a support role for their respective groups and to provide chapter members with education and resources.

Greek chapters are each responsible for electing a representative. These students receive training about sexual violence intervention and prevention strategies from trained campus and community educators on a monthly basis and report what they learn to their peers at weekly chapter meetings. Chapter representatives also have the opportunity to earn four academic credits for their work. At the annual Greek Awards Ceremony, a fraternity and sorority are each recognized for excellence in prevention education.

The program is particularly unique because it provides an at-risk community with highly trained student-advocates who are elected by their peers, ensuring that the advocates are trusted individuals in their own communities. This program has contributed to a record number of referrals of survivors seeking support. While the program is exclusive to Greek students at this institution, the program could be adapted to other hot spots on campus, like athletics and prominent student organizations.

Conclusion

The certificate program, student choice workshops, and Greek chapter representatives represent some of the promising sexual violence prevention work that is happening on campuses across the country. As national attention and public scrutiny continue in this area, the body of research on the impact of prevention practices will likely grow. Institutions can contribute to the field by ensuring that learning outcomes and assessment metrics are embedded within all prevention programming. Moreover, institutions can move toward creating a culture of prevention that extends beyond orientation to reach students throughout their time on campus.

Key Takeaways

- Craft and implement a prevention-focused strategy that spans the student experience and progressively builds students' sexual violence prevention knowledge and skills.

- Develop learning outcomes and rigorous assessment efforts that measure immediate and long-term changes in students' attitudes and behaviors.
- Consider exploring the curricular terrain with a certificate program or wellness seminar.
- Empower student learning in mandatory prevention workshops by allowing students to choose a workshop that is best suited to their individual interests and skill level.
- Provide specific and sustained support for special populations on campus, such as Greek organizations and athletic groups.

Case Study Discussion Points

Is a certificate program right for your campus?

- What content would be the focus of the program? What academic units could provide program content?
- What would the requirements of the program be?
- Who would manage the program?
- To whom would the program be available?
- What incentives would be used to encourage student participation?
- Is there support from academic affairs for a certificate program?

Will a choice program complement your current efforts on campus?

- What prevention programs currently exist for students? Consider conducting an audit of existing speakers, workshops, and educational events.
- What other partners might present program options?
- What office or staff person could coordinate and manage a choice program?
- When would a choice program have the largest impact on your campus? During students' first year or sometime later during the student life cycle?
- What common course content would be shared across programs?
- How would the program be marketed or incentivized?

What are the potential benefits of programming that targets at-risk student populations on your campus?

- What student populations could benefit from specialized prevention programming?
- How do these students interact with current prevention education efforts? What prevention programming is this student population already participating in?
- What barriers exist that prevent students from engaging in prevention education efforts or seeking support on campus?
- How could these barriers be addressed in a way that encourages student involvement?

- Are there students within the special population that could be targeted to participate in a peer leadership initiative?

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