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## Theorizing Best Practices for Preventing Sexual Assaults in Higher Education: Adult Educators' Perspectives

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**Abstract:** The purpose of the study was to explore and address the gap in research and practice regarding sexual assault prevention education and adult learners. This study focused on how to develop effective and efficient sexual assault prevention programs for adults. This research strived to respond to the following questions: 1) What do contemporary sexual assault prevention education models look like? and 2) What are current possible best practices for incorporating an andragogical model into existing sexual assault programs? Discussion of the findings from the study and implications will be provided.

**Keywords:** adult education, andragogy, higher education, sexual assault prevention

Traditional sexual assault prevention programming consists of education efforts, in the format of seminars or workshops that target issues such as consent, bystander intervention, and debunking rape myths (Jozkowski, 2015). Currently, many federally-funded universities require consent training before incoming undergraduate students can enter the university, and some schools also require the training for graduate students. In addition to the required consent training, institutions also offer various other sexual assault prevention programs upon request, including bystander intervention training, healthy masculinity, and rape aggression defense (RAD) training (Giffin, 2017). However, each university implements their programs differently, and the quality of the programs and the topics offered vary from school to school (Jozkowski, 2015); Some universities choose to implement full, semester-long courses dedicated to violence against women while others simply explain the notion of consent in a brief presentation during freshman orientation. Additionally, there are limited amounts of time and funding allocated to sexual assault prevention, not to mention that many prevention programs are geared to only one age group or gender, which means that many students receive limited, if any, sexual assault prevention education. While both males and females have their own set of prevention trainings, the majority of prevention programming targets the universities' young adult population, which may not be as effective when presented to adult learners. With the age of today's university students varying greatly — around 50% of learners are over the age of 25 (National Center for

Education Statistics, 2016), it is important that sexual assault prevention models connect with both traditional and adult learners. Therefore, this article seeks to address that gap by answering the following two questions: 1) What do contemporary sexual assault prevention education models look like? and 2) What are current possible best practices for incorporating an andragogical model into existing sexual assault programs? The subsequent sections will address the relevant literature on sexual assault prevention programs, the methodology of the study, and the findings of the study. Then, discussion and implications will be addressed.

### **Literature Review on Sexual Assault Prevention Programming**

For this study, a literature review was conducted to determine what contemporary sexual assault prevention programming models are being used and how adult educational theory could be incorporated into these models to improve the experience for all learners, especially the non-traditional students on university campuses. In order to create an adult student-friendly sexual assault prevention program, it is important to understand the different types of prevention education being utilized at universities. This review examines three types of prevention education: positive sexuality, bystander intervention, and resistance training.

#### **Positive Sexuality**

Positive sexuality prevention education operates under the premise that students should focus on what they want from their relationships instead of what they should avoid. These programs challenge the abstinence-only education that many students receive in high school by helping students to “learn how to discuss their sexual development and properly articulate their intentions to others in respectful relationships” (LaFrance et al., 2012, p. 446). Positive sexuality education empowers students to take control of their sexual encounters by teaching them that any level of interest in sexual experiences is not shameful and that no one is obligated to participate in a sexual activity simply because their partner wants them to. According to LaFrance et al. (2012), the focus of a positive sexuality curriculum is to help students develop “sexual agency” and learn to make healthy decisions for themselves (p. 447).

The development and implementation of positive sexuality programs or educational workshops that incorporate a positive sexuality component vary. When creating a positive sexuality seminar, such as Yes Means Yes (LaFrance et al., 2012), discussion groups and a sense of community are key to the program’s success. However, in other sexual assault prevention programs that have a wider scope and incorporate positive sexuality into their already existing repertoire, a number of teaching strategies are involved, including group activities, facilitated discussions, video clips, roleplaying, and games.

## **Bystander Intervention**

Bystander intervention training is one of the most popular sexual assault prevention programs among university campuses. In fact, 80% of the articles reviewed discussed bystander intervention. One of the reasons for this program's popularity is its effectiveness in changing pro-rape attitudes in both male and female student populations (Mabry & Turner, 2016). A large part of its success is due to the fact that bystander intervention programs teach students that sexual assault prevention is a community responsibility. The courses, by nature, do not treat male students as future perpetrators or female students as future victims. This reduces the inherent defensiveness that occurs when students are confronted with many sexual assault prevention programs (Exner & Cummings, 2011). Additionally, bystander intervention empowers students to be responsible for their own community by placing the responsibility of community safety and change within their control. Bystander intervention programs "emphasize that everyone has the potential to be an active bystander," and thus teach students to safely intervene in a number of situations, from low risk pro-rape jokes to high-risk encounters (Mabry & Turner, 2016, p. 276).

## **Resistance Training**

Resistance training programs focus on self-defense and assertiveness training, and the target audience for these courses is usually women. Resistance training can be presented as standalone material or added into a more comprehensive curriculum. Some colleges hold self-defense workshops while others develop full-semester courses that count for physical education credits. There have been several successful programs in resistance training including the Assess, Acknowledge, Act Sexual Assault Resistance Education Program and the Dating Assertiveness Training Experience are two of the better-known resistance programs. When creating a resistance program, it is important to ensure that the courses are theoretically driven and incorporate various topics related to sexual assault prevention. The topics addressed in resistance training courses range from dismantling pro-rape attitudes and discussing the different types of sexual assault to teaching students self-defense skills and encouraging them to be assertive when resisting sexual coercion (Gidycz & Dardis, 2014; Senn, 2013).

## **Method**

The comprehensive literature review that consisted of multiple searches was conducted. The databases used were EducationSource, ERIC, PsycInfo, and Web of Science, and there were four sets of search terms used: 1) *sexual assault prevention education and higher education*, 2) *sexual assault prevention programs and higher education*, 3) *sexual assault prevention and higher education*,

and 4) *sexual assault* and *higher education*. The parameters of the search were articles from peer-reviewed sources that discussed sexual assault prevention programming and were written within 25 years, between 1993 and 2018. Exclusion criteria included news articles, non-peer-reviewed articles, the psychological ramifications of sexual assault, sexual assault in secondary education, and articles about posttraumatic stress disorder. As for the search results, the third search was conducted on Web of Science and yielded the most viable results: 71. The fourth search, conducted on PsycInfo, returned 158 articles, but only 21 of them met the inclusion criteria. A total of 254 articles were found and 116 were reviewed and used in the content analysis.

## **Findings**

After conducting the literature review process, three main themes emerged: 1) program format, 2) program duration, and 3) target audiences. The following subsections will address those themes in more detail.

### **Program Format**

There are many ways to present sexual assault prevention education, and the format for the delivery is important and dependent on the topic being addressed. For example, when facilitating a course on positive sexuality, discussion groups seem to be successful, but when teaching a group of women self-defense techniques, a physical education style presentation would be more appropriate. For topics such as consent, bystander intervention, and rape culture, web-based prevention programming is a practical choice. Web-based prevention programs require less of a time commitment from the students, which could improve attendance ratings. Also, straying from the traditional online sexual assault prevention modules, and developing video games as a method to teach students about several core concepts related to sexual assault can create a much more engaging environment for students. Researchers have found that simulation gaming can reduce students' acceptance of rape myths and help them better understand complex topics, such as consent (Jozkowski & Ekbia, 2015). Therefore, an educational video game could be an effective addition to the repertoire of sexual assault prevention programs currently being utilized at universities.

### **Program Duration**

Researchers believe that sexual assault prevention programming could be more effective if it was an ongoing educational process throughout the college years instead of a one-shot, generic program that is supposed to relate to all of the members of the university community

(Moynihan, Banyard, Cares, Potter, Williams, & Stapleton, 2014). Students are more likely to understand and adopt the desired preventative behaviors when they are exposed to the complex topics of sexual assault prevention for longer amounts of time. Spending more time on sexual assault education ensures that students are given enough time to fully understand the concepts. Additionally, research has shown that the positive changes in attitudes and behaviors begin to decline between six months to one year after students have attended a prevention-programming workshop (Moynihan et al., 2014), illustrating the need for refresher courses to continue throughout students' university careers for the attitudes and skills learned to remain for an extended amount of time.

### **Audiences**

Selecting a target audience when creating a sexual assault prevention curriculum is important. Exner and Cummings (2011, p. 655) found that "there is a need for gender-targeted prevention programming" when teaching students to combat sexual assault within their campus communities. One of the most important arguments for gender-targeted programs is that males and females have very different experiences when learning about sexual assault. For instance, male program participants are often treated as potential perpetrators (Exner & Cummings, 2011), which is detrimental to their education. It is important for male students to gain an understanding that they have a pro-social role within their community to become active bystanders and combat rape culture, and that is difficult for them to learn when they are being treated as potential problems instead of potential solutions. Likewise, due to gender role expectations, traditional prevention training methods tend to frame women as potential victims, which fosters fear instead of empowerment. Therefore, a feminist approach is needed to teach women that they have a right to protect and defend themselves as well as others (Gidycz & Dardis, 2014).

### **Discussion**

With all of the research regarding sexual assault prevention education, there is a noticeable gap in literature regarding adult learners, sexual assaults, and prevention programming. This could be due to the shifting demographics—more adult students are enrolling in universities each year, but currently undergraduate students aged 25 years and older are still considered non-traditional. Thus, many policies and research studies would not encompass them. Another possible reason for the lack of attention paid to adult learners and campus sexual assault could be that adult students are often enrolled in their programs as part-time students. Usually, they live off-campus and have jobs outside of academia so they do not spend much time on campus.

Regardless, adult learners make up half of the student body (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016), are an active part of the campus community, and as such, it is important that they, too, are kept safe and receive adequate prevention training.

Adult students have different backgrounds and different life experiences than their traditional student counterparts; however designing a sexual assault prevention program that is accessible to learners of all ages is not as complicated as it may seem. Many of the current best practices and federal guidelines in sexual assault prevention programming align with adult education theories and standards. For example, researchers suggest that in order for prevention programming to be successful, the courses must be socio-culturally relevant and utilize a variety of teaching techniques (Kafonek & Richards, 2017). The andragogical approach encompasses these two best practices: courses are learner-centered and the students are collaborators in the educational process (McCauley, Hammer, & Hinojosa, 2017). In fact, many programs already employ andragogical methods through their discussion groups and peer-facilitated speeches workshops. However, most sexual assault prevention programs are still inaccessible to adult learners due to their limited amount of time on campus. Another best practice, which states that sexual assault prevention programs should be of sufficient duration (Kafonek & Richards, 2017), is a solution to this problem. As previously noted, short, one-time events do not result in lasting behavioral or attitudinal changes, but semester-long courses that concentrate on violence against women have been shown to successfully decrease “negative attitudes about rape victims and victim blaming” (Currier & Carlson, 2009, p. 1750). Offering for-credit courses that satisfy general education requirements and focus on the intricate topics surrounding violence against women makes sexual assault prevention programming much more accessible to adult learners. Additionally, spending an entire semester exploring the complex sociocultural topics involved in sexual assault prevention will create longer lasting results in behavioral and attitudinal changes.

### **Implications and Conclusion**

With half of the undergraduate population and an average of 76% of the graduate population consisting of adult students, campus sexual assault is an issue for both young adult and adult learners (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). In order to maximize the programs’ potential, educators need to be cognizant of the adult learners and their needs as well. Information from this study could be beneficial for the development of sexual assault education programs that resonate with adult learners, as well as their younger classmates. Additionally, material from this study can help adult educators and higher education administrators find ways to consistently incorporate sexual assault prevention education into more facets of

university students' lives. Finally, information from this study could be beneficial for creating higher education policies that protect both the adult and young adult populations.

While this literature review creates a discussion about sexual assault prevention programming for adult university students, it is by no means an all-encompassing review of current prevention programming or its inaccessibility to the growing number of non-traditional students on university campuses. Further research is needed to understand how many adult students are personally affected by campus sexual assault. Additionally, a deeper understanding of what barriers exist for adult students seeking sexual assault prevention education should be addressed. Finally, a study addressing why colleges are not including non-traditional students in their current programming curriculum would be beneficial.

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