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Best Practices in Consent Education: An Analysis

Fonda Marguerite Heenehan

The need for sexual assault prevention work on college campuses is largely accepted; however, higher education and student affairs professionals continue to debate the best way to do this work. In this analysis, I explore sex-neutral, sex-positive, and punitive foci for sexual assault prevention and consent education. After analyzing the effectiveness of each of these foci, I suggest that sexual assault prevention and consent education on college campuses cannot be limited to only reactive strategies. I provide examples of tactics that different functional areas can utilize as well as examples from my own work in student affairs. Expanding the focus of sexual assault prevention and consent education will require student affairs professionals across functional areas to take on more responsibility for this important work. I conclude by advocating for the creation of a specific personnel position to oversee sexual assault prevention and consent on campus.

Content Warning

This paper is centered around sexual consent and sexual assault prevention. While there are no descriptions of sexual assault, I understand that this is a difficult topic to engage with. I encourage you, the reader, to take care of yourself and engage at a level that is healthy and safe for you.

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Developing a clearer understanding of sexual assault prevention and consent education is highly relevant in a national context. Last October, Brett Kavanaugh, a man accused of sexual assault, was confirmed to the Supreme Court (Stolberg, 2018). Kavanaugh's nomination falls against a national backdrop in which sexual assault remains widespread - on college campuses, sexual assault rates have not gone down in 50 years (Fenner, 2017). Campus administrators are expected to participate in sexual assault prevention, but how this prevention is carried out varies widely across campuses (Thomas, Sorenson, & Joshi, 2016). In this article, I explore how sexual assault prevention shows up on campuses. I was inspired to pursue this subject based on my own passion for sexual violence prevention, as well as an article written by Donna Freitas (2018) titled "We're Teaching Consent All Wrong." The implications of this title intrigued me - it implies that for student affairs professionals to be teaching consent incorrectly, there has to be a right way of teaching it. In seeking to identify that method, I explored one specific question: should sexual assault prevention and consent education be reactive or proactive in nature?

In this analysis, I explore why different methods of prevention are or are not utilized. The purpose of this article is to demonstrate how campus administrators have utilized proactive and reactive measures in sexual assault prevention on campus. Two points of disagreement emerged during my research regarding approaches to conversations about sex and the application of programming models to prevent sexual assault. In short, there is disagreement amongst scholars and practitioners about the proactive and reactive measures implemented to prevent sexual assault. However, this research often leaves out a critical conversation of how gender roles and social gender scripts influence the way consent is understood. In this article, I first ground the conversation in the reality of prescribed gender roles. After, I explain the arguments for and against various methods of approaching conversations about sex with college students, and then provide context for the best practical applications of sexual assault prevention measures. Following the discussion of current literature, I suggest my own set of best practices and discuss how those practices would affect various functional areas across student affairs.

Current Practice in Sexual Assault Prevention and Consent Education

It is important to ground the conversation about sexual assault and consent in the historical gendering of sexual roles. Gendered scripts of normative sexual activity inform college students' beliefs about how they should engage and perform in sexual relationships. Gendering typically reflects heteronormative sexual relationships as well as traditional gender roles (Yadlosky, de St. Aubin, Mosack, & Devine, 2017). Yadlosky et al. (2017) further reported that these gendered sexual scripts portray men as pursuing sexual activity for bodily pleasure, while

women must maintain self-control and restraint because of the potential risks of participating in sex. Understanding gendered sexual scripts and normative sexual activity conditioning is important because these scripts inform research conducted around the topic of sexual assault.

Scholars discussing sexual assault prevention and consent education argue first about how to approach conversations about sex, and those approaches about sex could be sex-neutral, positive, or punitive. Once a foundation for having these conversations is established, scholars write about the best practical application out of those conversations which range from colorful marketing campaigns to clearer written consent policies (Yadlosky et al., 2017).

Approaches to Conversations About Sex

Approaches to instituting campaigns, policies, or education about sex may be sex-neutral, sex-positive, or punitive, and may be reactive or proactive. Yadlosky and colleagues (2017) assessed college students' sexual behavior by asking sex-neutral questions, designed to not disclose the types of situations in which sexual interactions took place (e.g. hookups, romantic relationships, friends with benefits). When students think about their sexual interactions in a neutral framework, they dissociate their behavior from the cultural attitudes surrounding specific sexual behaviors. Encouraging students to think about sex education in this manner is beneficial because it mitigates the influence of societal expectation when examining their own behavior. For example, students are asked about kissing another person. They are not told whether this interaction occurs after a dance in a nightclub or after a first date, because these contexts would prompt different assumptions based on prevailing social expectations. Instead of focusing on the societal expectations surrounding sexual behavior, the neutral approach focuses on the behavior itself (Yadlosky et al., 2017).

A positive attitude toward sex is the second approach to sex education. Showcasing positive sexual behaviors, such as utilizing contraceptives, is an affirmative sexual education tactic (Thomas et al., 2016). In contrast to the sex-neutral approach, positivity focuses on and actively encourages healthy behaviors. The approach highlights consent positively through catchphrases such as "consent is sexy," includes examples of what healthy sexual relationships can look like, and promotes awareness of sexual assault (Thomas et al., 2016). The positive approach focuses on education and behavioral awareness, regardless of the specific sexual situation. Rather than ignoring societal expectations, the positive approach encourages students to practice safe and healthy actions regardless of societal expectations, as well as works to change those expectations. Students are proactively educated about how sexual interactions would ideally occur and reactively given information about how to intervene in a potential sexual assault.

However, the most common approach to sexual assault prevention focuses on punishment. Thomas and colleagues (2016) reported that institutions tend to use punitive tactics to deter students from committing sexual assault, and to encourage them to practice consent. Punitive tactics focus on the punishment or sanctions that will occur if students commit sexual assault, and often lack a proactive component that would work to change sexual behavior before an assault occurs. The punitive approach scares students into behaving according to policy (Thomas et al., 2016). Institutions with punitive approaches may have clearer written consent policies to inform students of what a violation of policy would entail (Graham et al., 2017). However, colleges have predominantly used a negative approach over the last 50 years and sexual assault rates have not gone down (Fenner, 2017) indicating that this approach is not an effective means of preventing sexual assault and raising awareness about consent.

Implementing Sexual Assault Prevention Measures

Different approaches result in varying implementations of sexual assault prevention and consent education. The sex-neutral approach showed that students poorly estimated the frequency and kinds of sexual interactions their peers were engaging in, compared to what their peers actually reported their sexual interactions to be (Yadlosky et al., 2017). This finding is alarming because students' perceptions about their peers' sexual activity inform the behaviors they themselves participate in (Yadlosky et al., 2017). Because students may be more inclined to participate in risky sexual behavior, behavior that put them at risk for disease and infection transmission or unwanted pregnancy, if they perceive their peers to be participating in risky behavior, measures need to be taken to more accurately represent students' sexual behaviors. When using a sex-neutral approach, student affairs professionals should be providing students with accurate information about the behaviors of their peers (Yadlosky et al., 2017).

Some universities have implemented social marketing campaigns to implement a positive approach to sex that encourages healthy behaviors, such as contraceptive use (Thomas et al., 2016). One such campaign explained the positive and healthy behaviors of sexual partners and encouraged bystander intervention (Thomas et al., 2016). Just under 90% of students surveyed about this campaign remembered seeing the banners and reported an increase in knowledge of bystander interventions (Thomas et al., 2016). This positive approach was both proactive in the knowledge provided to students and reactive in encouraging bystander intervention in the event that a sexual assault occurred.

Negative approaches to sex education are focused on the punishment or consequences of misbehaving or committing sexual assault and are therefore reactive approaches. These approaches use consequences as a deterrent, typically without

much emphasis on proactive education (Graham et al., 2017). While the deterrent to committing sexual assault in the negative approach method is focused on punishment, it can ensure clearer policies on sexual assault.

In addition to the aforementioned tactics, there are others that do not necessarily fall into a particular approach method. Graham and colleagues (2017) encourage institutions to clearly and thoroughly define consent in their policies and to explicitly connect consent to sexual assault. Clearly defining policy is a proactive step toward ensuring that universities take a clear, unambiguous stance on sexual assault. After conducting their study, Thomas and colleagues (2016) concluded that it would be helpful to educate students on the prevalence of sexual assault since most students know a victim or a perpetrator. No matter which approach is implemented by a university, the context of gender scripts should be included in those conversations (Fenner, 2017). By including a discussion about gender frameworks, students can see how their behavior is influenced by gender inequality and oppression.

Best Practices Moving Forward

While the existing research on consent education is limited, the best practices moving forward include a call for more research, a combination of tactics from neutral, positive, and punitive approaches, and a focus on nuanced education programs that include proactive and reactive components. Some of the suggestions given here are informed by my personal experience with consent and sexual assault. The lens I use is rooted in feminism and is critical of the normative gender roles, sexual scripts, and gender scripts that inform consent and sexual activity (Fenner, 2017).

Feminist Lens

Sex exists in a gendered framework which influences the way that student affairs professionals talk about sex. A feminist lens is critical toward concepts of gender roles that influence responsibility in sexual interactions (Yadlosky et al., 2017). For example, Fenner (2017) accurately notes that in societal attitudes toward sexual assault, women are stereotyped as victims and men as aggressors. Although men are the most common perpetrators of sexual assault against women, gendered scripts inform the stereotype that women are victims. Feminism also breaks down the gender script which portrays women and girls as sexual gatekeepers, or the sexual partner in charge of ending a sexual interaction (Fenner, 2017). The belief that that women and girls are the sexual gatekeepers absolves men of responsibility for their sexual interactions. Using a feminist framework to inform how sexual consent and sexual assault policies, programming, and

education are written is critical to change the way students view sex, thereby reducing the frequency of sexual assaults on campus.

Application of Comprehensive Sexual Assault Prevention and Response

Comprehensive and continuous consent education is necessary. Like many other first-year undergraduate students, I went through a consent and sexual assault awareness training during orientation. The training was at most an hour long, and I do not remember much more than the free condoms handed out at the end. One-stop-shop sexual consent and education training sessions like the one I experienced shift students' opinions during the session, but the changes do not last over time (Fenner, 2017). Given the lack of retention after singular workshops, continuous education is necessary if student affairs professionals truly want to see a drop in the occurrence of sexual assault. Continuous education can include methods such as the aforementioned social marketing campaigns. One benefit of social marketing campaigns is that they are cost effective and reach a large audience if they are placed in highly trafficked areas (Thomas et al., 2016). In addition to expanding the number of students exposed to consent education, there needs to be continuous training of students on campus in bystander intervention. This training is necessary for situations when initial consent education does not permeate through to the entire student body, and students are the only people around when sexual misconduct is occurring. Training students in bystander intervention teaches them not only that consent is important, but that they can play an active role in enforcing it.

Although I do not recommend using a negative approach to consent and sexual assault education, I do recommend that universities have a strict and succinct policy of consent. While there should be severe consequences for sexual assault, they should not be presented as the sole or primary reason for not committing sexual assault. For the sake of sexual assault survivors, clear policy and guidelines stipulating what sexual assault is and what consent entails are critical in navigating the reporting process written policy should be paired with the continuing education mentioned previously.

Campus Collaborations

When changing practices of consent education on campus, student affairs professionals must consider who will be in charge of making sure this change is enacted. With the shift that I have proposed, a multitude of student affairs functional areas would be impacted. The areas most affected by my proposed changes would be orientation, on-campus housing, and wellness or health centers. I envision that orientation would provide a comprehensive and mandatory consent education for first-years and transfer students, on-campus housing or residence

life would provide ongoing education and awareness inside residence halls, and wellness and health centers would focus on programming focused on healthy sexual relationships.

Additional functional areas such as campus safety and student conduct may shift how they respond to policy violations involving consent and sexual assault if the policy is rewritten to clarify language and definitions. Fraternity and Sorority Life, athletics, and other areas that already require mandatory consent and sexual assault awareness education may not shift drastically, but a change in policy may change how those departments work with their students.

Conclusion

Institutions should consider the best practices for educating students on consent with proactive measures rather than purely reactive measures. While there is still far too little research on best practices for consent education, the existing literature demonstrates that a comprehensive and continuous approach is the first step. This approach should utilize a feminist framework, applying a critical lens to the gender roles and scripts that inform students' sexual interactions to help redistribute inequities in gender. In this article, I identified some functional areas which would be most affected by a shift from reactive to proactive education, but this shift should not be limited to those functional areas. If each functional area were to develop three goals concerning how to integrate consent and sexual assault awareness into the work they already do, there would be less need for large-scale programming, which could avoid creating a new position or putting extra work on a single office. In my current role, for example, I already send out a newsletter every other week to alert students of volunteer opportunities in the Burlington, VT area. I include volunteer opportunities at sexual violence prevention hotlines, women's shelters, and other avenues of involvement. My newsletter is one example of a proactive educational measure that I have integrated into my existing position description without creating much extra work for myself. That said, any additional work created by this shift should be viewed as worthwhile. If student affairs professionals want to lower sexual assault rates on campus, we need to prioritize consent education that works. Each functional area has to determine what, if anything, they are currently doing surrounding consent education, and what they can do moving forward. Both proactive and reactive practices of education and prevention need to be analyzed and researched to determine the most effective methods.

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