Sexual Assault Prevention & Education Within Purity Culture: A Process Evaluation of an Intervention Conducted with Community Partners at a Christian University

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Abstract

Background & Purpose: Many victims of sexual assault are rising to advocate for sexual assault prevention on college campuses, including Christian college campuses. Some reports indicate that Christian campuses shy away from the topic and refuse to allow needed programs on sex or sexual assault to be introduced to their campuses, even though it is so adamantly needed. The purpose of this study was to increase the promotion of sexual assault awareness and prevention to students on the campus of Charleston Southern University.

Methods: A one-day seminar was offered in partnership with a community health organization on campus. Over 75 students attended to hear survivor narratives and an awareness message. Primary analysis of survey data collected involved qualitative and quantitative analysis of open and closed-ended questions. In total, the research team reviewed 34 pre-intervention surveys and 9 post-intervention surveys.

Results: Descriptive data analysis revealed that participants found the sexual assault awareness and prevention program to be “most informative” and “informative.” Qualitative analysis of open-ended questions found that content was accepted by audience because of the “openness” of the speaker. Emergent themes included: unwanted contact, not the victims fault, and attire of victim caused sexual assault.

Conclusion: Culturally-informed awareness and prevention programs that are realistic, open, peer-led, and create a comfortable non-threatening atmosphere have a vital role to play in educating students on Christian campuses on the subject of sexual assault prevention.

KEYWORDS: Christian campus, sexual assault, awareness and prevention; community programs; campus programs
Background

In our society many people tacitly accept the stigmas that are associated with sexual assault, namely that the victim is to blame in some way. Some of these stigmas may be a result of cultural and religious beliefs, and social norms. These factors are ingrained in our psyche and have had great influence on the ways sexual assault is spoken about, adjudicated, and prevented on college campuses. According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) sexual violence is any form of sexual activity that an individual does not consent to, can’t coherently consent to or doesn’t freely consent to (Center for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2015).

It is well known that 1 in 5 women experience sexual assault in their lifetime (CDC, 2015). Many of these women are between the ages of 18 and 24. The age range is crucial to note because it identifies a group of women who are usually entering their college years. Out of the 1 in 5 women who experience sexual assault only 5% ever report the assault to the authorities (CDC, 2015). According to the current statistics we are still unaware of the vast number of women and men suffering in silence from these experiences. Sexual assault affects a person’s physical and emotional well-being. Out of the women and men who experience the assault only 1 in 10 involve the use of a weapon and 80% are student rape and sexual assault victimizations (Langston & Sinozich, 2014). Awareness campaigns operate at many levels to try to address these distressing statistics; one campaign started at the White House explicitly mentions the numbers, making to the statement “1 is 2 many” (CDC, 2015).

The 1972 Education Amendments that included Title IX was passed by Congress. This law makes it a crime for any federally-funded athletic program, educational institution or facility to discriminate against females because of their gender (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). Title IX aimed at leveling literal playing fields in a world that heralded norms stereotyping what
women could and could not participate in athletically and eradicated that dividing line, forcing
institutions who received federal money to become accountable for their financial investments in
ensuring opportunities for both sexes.

The Clery Act was passed in 1990 by President George H. W. Bush (Clery Center for
Security on Campus, 2012). The Act was pushed into enactment by the parents of Jeanne Clery,
a student at Lehigh University who suffered from a fatal sexual assault in her campus dorm
room. The Clery Act, more recently known as the Campus Sexual Violence Elimination Act
serves to guide the handling of sexual assault cases by college campuses. Campuses are directed
to help protect the victim of these crimes and assure that they know their rights, understand
resources available, and are briefed on actions that can be taken to report and prosecute offenders
(Clery Center for Security on Campus, 2012). Although the law was set up to protect victims of
sexual assault, the past year has exposed the poor enforcement of these laws by educational
institutions.

In the past year there has been an uproar from sexual assault victims that are filing
complaints against their schools for the re-victimizing process they experienced after reporting
their rapes. During the reporting of their sexual assaults women have reported being asked what
they were wearing, how short was their dress, and if they “climaxed” during the assault (Gordon,
2014). In some cases the assailant, when found guilty, was only suspended for a year (Gordon,
2014). These incidents have caused anti-rape activists to raise their voices in protest throughout
the nation’s campuses (Layton, 2015).

In light of the increasing number of reports that have been filed and the victims who were
forced to go public with their stories, the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Civil Rights
issued federal investigations of many institutions of higher learning. Beginning in May 2014 a
widespread investigation was issued for a total of 55 colleges and universities in the United States, these including Ivy League colleges such as Yale University and Howard University. Since May of 2014 the number of colleges and universities on this list have grown to 95 (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). According to the Washington Post (2014), the U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights has seen a dramatic increase in complaints on sex discrimination from 391 in 2010 to 2,354 in 2014 (Layton, 2015).

Christian colleges potentially have more cultural stigma related to surviving sexual assault than other colleges because of teachings on sexual purity. Many Christian colleges believe that their campuses are absent of sexual activity and focus exclusively on teaching abstinence (Woodiwiss, 2013). This cultural barrier on some campuses has hindered the implementations of preventative programs and created issues for survivors reporting assault. The belief that if a woman is ‘touched’ then she is ‘impure’ is not only a road block for the victim seeking help, but also a safe guard for the perpetrator to hide behind. Survivors at Christian colleges have reported issues with talking to their administration and in some cases suffered insinuations that they as the victims were at fault for the sexual assault (Anderson, 2013). The victim is the one who suffers the shunning and blame in social settings after reporting.

Purity culture is a representation of theological thought that advocates traditional gender roles and abstinence until marriage as an ideal (Anderson, 2013). Scholars have noted problems with a blurring of lines in regards to rape and submission. For example, marital rape is controversial in some evangelical circles as many Christians consider it morally wrong for a woman to withhold herself from her husband because upon marriage her body is considered his (Woodiwiss, 2013).
The safest way to prevent the contraction of a sexually transmitted infection (STI’s) or sexually transmitted diseases (STD’s) is to remain abstinent (CDC, 2015). In an effort to limit the spread of STD’s and STI’s and promote safer sex, the Bush administration gave federal grants (approximately $1.2 million) to organizations that supported this movement. Conversations about abstinence contribute to what scholars now call, “Purity Culture” (Anderson, 2013). Examples of this culture’s impact on Christian college campuses abound. In an attempt to promote the practice of abstinence, the purity ring was promoted beginning in the 1990’s (Bario, 2005). The purity ring stands for waiting till marriage to partake in sexual activity. Some colleges hold ceremonies that involve signing a document and single-sex retreats to promote abstinence (Mintz, 2014). At Ozark Christian College the abstinence speech included the words “ladies, you’re princesses, and when you give pieces of your heart away to boys, you only have half a heart left. And what kind of prince wants half of a heart?” (Mintz, 2014). Purity culture complicates sexual assault reporting in cases where the culture of abstinence becomes conflated with conversations about a felony assault. Survivors at some conservative schools explain that they felt shame and fear when reporting because peers and administrators associated their assault with the words fornicator, impure, tarnished, and even broken (Bario, 2005).

An author of the present study and a senior student of Health Promotion at Charleston Southern University participated in a photo shoot for People against Rape, an advocacy group in Charleston, South Carolina. The photo shoot and story shared by a fellow survivor caused the student to face her own encounter with sexual assault, which she had kept silent for about four years. Taking steps to face her past, she began speaking out about it. The student began with a class assignment that involved crafting a sexual assault program proposal for her campus. After giving her speech in class, some students acknowledged that they were also survivors and had
been dealing with the aftermath caused by their assaults in silence. This knowledge and the
encouragement of faculty pressed the student to actually develop and implement the first sexual
assault awareness and prevention forum on her campus. The thought that helped the student
continually face the pain of her own past encounter was, “if me being uncomfortable for an hour
or three helps someone else know they are not alone, then who am I to keep silent.”

On March 7, 2013, President Barack Obama signed the Violence Against Women
Reauthorization Act of 2013 (VAWA). The Act focuses on combating different aspects of
sexual assault and includes emphasis on both prevention and prosecution (White House Council
of Women and Girls, 2014). The President has also begun a webpage called NotAlone, for
victims of sexual assault. The site is filled with a number of resources that can be used to find
helpful support mechanisms to aid in a victim’s healing and taking of action (White House

Problematically, the main focus of many past sexual assault interventions has been the
actions of the victim prior to the assault. Focusing on prevention measures such as not walking in
deserted areas alone, going on dates in public areas with big crowds, and avoiding binge drinking
and not accepting drinks from strangers only serves to limit the safe spaces offered to women
interested in remaining un-assaulted (Anderson, 2013). Rarely do such programs focus on the
guilt and prosecution of an assailant and the prevention of predatory actions. In contrast, People
Against Rape, an advocacy group in Charleston, South Carolina, stresses sexual assault
prevention from a “don’t rape!” perspective.

Research also supports this survivor-affirming paradigm. One noteworthy study focused
not on victims of college rape, but on identifying risk factors for sexual aggression in college
males. The study used a total of 99 male student participants and found that a vast majority of
College males still accept many rape myths (Carr, 2004). The study showed a strong relationship between alcohol consumption and the acceptance of rape myths. Many of the males who were surrounded by friends that binged would commonly share the idea that getting a female intoxicated in order to have sexual relations was not wrong (Carr, 2004). These attitudes promote serial predations. According to the National Council for Women and Girls at the White House, studies show that 63% of males who admitted committing sexual assault acts reported having committed six rapes each (White House Council of Women and Girls, 2014). Fraternity culture also contributes to assault prevalence; another study revealed the relationship between fraternity membership and male students’ sexual aggression when drinking (Kingree & Thompson, 2013).

Federal investigations and activist movements are beginning to shed light on the problem of re-victimization when sexual assault survivors report their rapes, particularly within insular and conservative communities that subscribe to purity culture social norms (Woodiwiss, 2013). The focal point for new prevention campaigns are changing as awareness rises in order to stop further harm from being inflicted on victims of sexual assault. Through the use of prevention and awareness initiatives that focus not on women avoiding rape, but on perpetrators being prosecuted and prevented from victimizing students, health educators can inspire change through education and advocacy work. Education efforts must refute rape myths and expose the damage that comes as a result of victim-blaming social norms.

After study of the priority population and an extensive review of the literature, a team consisting of a senior health promotion student, health promotion faculty, an on-campus counselor and the director of community health partner Team Family Over Everything conceptualized a survivor-friendly program to be offered on Charleston Southern University’s
campus. The team designed a program that centered around survivor narrative and brought in professional community health educators from FOE to deliver a one-day sexual assault awareness and prevention forum. Emphasizing peer leadership, culturally-palatable messaging, and a review of local and campus resources, the curriculum consisted of a personal survivor story from a student peer, a speech from the Executive Director of FOE, introduction to local off-campus victim resources available from People Against Rape, and on-campus counseling resources.

**Methods**

The program curriculum described was delivered in April, 2015 at one site to a single group of college student participants attending Charleston Southern University, a Christian liberal arts institution in Charleston, SC. Participation in the one-day seminar was voluntary and free. The program offered two attendance incentives to participants, including class extra credit and chapel credit, which benefited the attending students by providing them with chapel credits towards their graduation chapel credit requirement. The purpose of this study was to offer a pre and post-intervention process evaluation of this peer-led sexual assault awareness and prevention programming. Pre and Post-intervention assessment data were collected during the seminar.

The marketing piece of the program consisted of the development and distribution of flyers throughout the Charleston Southern University campus. The flyers were placed in dorm halls, the book store, and classroom buildings. A promotion of the program was announced the day before via the ‘page of possibilities’, which is an events email sent from the Dean of students to the entire student body. The use of fraternities and sororities social media sites were used and also word of mouth. Help was gained from the Health Promotion club on campus in promoting the program and also gaining volunteers for the program.
A survey instrument focusing on needs assessment and process evaluation was developed by two of the authors of the present study, both of whom were involved in program implementation. The pre-intervention survey consisted of eight items, six closed-ended and two open-ended. Both of the open-ended questions related to participant knowledge of sexual assault and the three closed-ended questions focused on = participant knowledge of sexual assault while the final close-ended question gauged knowledge of available resources. The post-intervention survey consisted of six items, two closed-ended and four open-ended. Post-intervention questions addressed the usefulness of the material covered, sought potential areas of improvement, and inquired about likes and dislikes of the program’s tone and content.

 Fifteen minutes prior to the seminar beginning, volunteers handed out the pre-intervention survey to the participants. Surveys were kept confidential and did not seek names or identifying information of any kind. Prior to the beginning of the program all participants were instructed to hand in the surveys. The program commenced for about forty-five minutes. Within one minute of the conclusion of the seminar, post-intervention surveys were physically handed out and collected at the exit door.

 Survey questions were both quantitative and qualitative. Qualitative answers were coded for emergent themes found among the data.

Results

In total, the research team reviewed 34 paper survey responses for the pre-intervention needs assessment and 9 paper survey responses for the post-intervention surveys. There were approximately 100 total attendees at the seminar, for a total response rate of 34% (pre-intervention surveys) and 9% (post-intervention surveys).
Pre-intervention assessments indicated that students know that the assailant of a sexual assault can be a woman, husband or intimate partner. A total of 100% of participants agreed that it is not correct to introduce alcohol as a means of persuasion for sexual activity. An interesting result reported that only 50% of participants had knowledge of on-campus resources for victims of sexual assault. About 88% of participants believe that sexual assault is a big issue on college campuses, while about 9% do not.

Post-intervention process evaluation indicated high levels of support for the seminar. Descriptive data analysis showed that most participants found the sexual assault forum to be very informative and respondents cited their changed perception of sexual assault. The recurrent theme identified throughout the surveys was the acceptance of how “real” the speaker was and how “easy” the atmosphere felt. A few participants requested that future programs have more crowd involvement.

Qualitative analysis of the data found that most participants found the forum to be generally valuable and encouraged the presence of similar future programs. At the close of the forum there were common comments such as “I hope there will be more events like these,” “we need this on campus,” and some stated that either they were survivors or had close relatives who were. Many students liked the idea of a peer being involved with the forum and giving a personal testimony.


**Discussion**

The purpose of the program was to provide an educational and nonthreatening atmosphere for college students to learn and speak on sexual assault. The program followed a protocol that emphasized peer-leadership, centered survivor narrative to personalize the issue, and offered educational awareness and prevention along with identification of local victim resources. Participation in the event was extremely favorable due to the accessible location of the forum and the incentives offered for participation. Some of the findings agreed with the literature on cultural beliefs and stigmas that are associated with aiding in blaming the victim. Students in the forum reacted favorable to the ‘openness’ of the speaker and the ‘realistic’ approach taken throughout the program. They specifically requested more sexual assault programs and more audience related participation opportunities.

Given that many Christian Colleges do not allow such programs to occur on their campuses, program efforts must increase to reach this priority population of college students. The results of this process evaluation indicate that institutional and student support and satisfaction are likely outcomes of culturally competent intervention efforts.

**Limitations**

A number of limitations are acknowledged regarding this study, including the low number of collected post-intervention surveys. The surveys were taken in close proximity of other individuals, which could have altered the honesty of the participants. Another limitation of the study was the lack of completed or returned surveys. The pre-intervention survey had a higher return than the post-intervention survey, causing the results to be somewhat unreliable. The demographics of the participants, their economic status and whether or not they live on or off campus were not taken into consideration. This sexual assault pilot study is only the
beginning of many to come, and provides a starting point for community and student leadership in sexual assault prevention programming efforts.

Conclusions

Sexual assault is an act that demoralizes the victims and blame should never be placed on the victim. According to the literature, many Christian colleges reject the idea that they could possibly have any form of sexual activity much less sexual violence on their campuses (Woodiwiss, 2013). It is important that sexual assault awareness and prevention programs be allowed on these campuses, so that victims know their rights, what to do next, and that they are not to blame. Programs like these can promote healing and denounce stigmas associated with sexual assault, and they can be offered in formats that strengthen the culture of faith and community on campus.

Ultimately, the results of this study have provided possible models for future interventions.
Acknowledgements

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References


Table 1
*Pre Intervention Survey Responses, closed-ended*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>Yes/True</th>
<th>No/False</th>
<th>No response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Q. 2: Can sexual assault involve a husband or intimate partner?</td>
<td>34</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q. 3: Is it acceptable to introduce alcohol for sexual persuasion?</td>
<td>34</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q. 5: Does the perpetrator have to be a man?</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>33</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q. 6: Most victims of sexual assault are assaulted by strangers.</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q. 7: Knowledge of resources on campus for victims of sexual assault</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q. 8: Belief that sexual assault is a big issue on college campuses</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2
*Pre-Intervention Survey, Open-ended Question Emergent Themes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Q. 1: What do you know about sexual assault?</th>
<th>It's wrong/inappropriate</th>
<th>'unwanted contact'</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Q. 4: Is the victim ever to blame? If yes when?</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Victim provoked assault</th>
<th>Attire provoked assault</th>
<th>No response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>21</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table 3

*Post Intervention Survey Responses, closed-ended*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Q. 2: How informative was the program? (Likert scale 1-5, from low to high)</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 = 22.2% of responses</td>
<td>7 = 77.8% of responses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No response</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q. 3: Has your perception on sexual assault changed?</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table 4
*Post Intervention Survey, Open-ended Questions’ Emergent Themes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Q. 1: How were you informed about the event?</th>
<th>Page of Possibilities</th>
<th>Chapel</th>
<th>Student Planner</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Openness of speaker &amp; easy atmosphere</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>realistic &amp; involved men</td>
<td>4 = 44.5% of responses</td>
<td>2 = 22.2% of responses</td>
<td>2 = 22.2% of responses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informative (laws &amp; stats)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Q. 4: What did you like most about the program?</th>
<th>Page of Possibilities</th>
<th>Chapel</th>
<th>Student Planner</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>More involvement from audience</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blank, No response</td>
<td>3 = 33.3% of responses</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>informative (laws &amp; stats)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Q. 6: Ideas for future programs</th>
<th>Page of Possibilities</th>
<th>Chapel</th>
<th>Student Planner</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2 = 22.2% of responses</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

355