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It's Not Just the What but the How

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PREVENTION INNOVATIONS™
Research Center

Ending Sexual and Relationship Violence and Stalking

It's Not Just the What but the How

Informing Students about Campus Policies and Resources:

How They Get the Message Matters

Prevention Innovations Research Center,* University of New Hampshire

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Report prepared for the White House Task Force
to Protect Students from Sexual Assault

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SPECIFIC AIMS

We conducted a research study to examine the efficacy of different methods to deliver campus sexual misconduct policy information to first year students. We did this in order to determine if exposure to the policy increased students' knowledge of the policy and of campus resources and increased students' confidence to seek help or support for themselves, friends or strangers.

INTRODUCTION

Sexual assault (and attempted sexual assault) of women is the most common violent crime committed on college campuses today.[1] Approximately 20% of undergraduate women have been victims of sexual assaults that occurred when they were attending college,[1,2] and 8% of college men also report an attempted or completed assault while in college.[3] These incidence rates are not in decline.[4,5]

- The majority of attempted and completed sexual assaults on college campuses are perpetrated by acquaintances (e.g., classmates, residence hall neighbors, dates) or intimate partners of the victim rather than strangers.[1,6]
- Exposure to sexual assault is a key public health issue associated with a multiplicity of negative outcomes, including increased substance use, depressive symptoms, health risk behaviors, and symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder.[7-9]

The United States government, the general public, and students themselves are demanding change and believe that better policies will improve responses to and aid in the prevention of campus sexual assault. As college and university communities revise their policies, data is needed to determine the most effective way to deliver this information to students. The way campus sexual misconduct policies are communicated to students varies at colleges and universities across the country.[10] Many students receive information about sexual misconduct policies during new student orientation. However, various methods are used to deliver this information (e.g., online websites, in-person discussions) and little is known about how the delivery method impacts what is learned about policies and resources.

RESEARCH PROTOCOL

Researchers and practitioners from seven campuses across the United States agreed to collaborate in research examining the delivery of campus sexual misconduct policies. The diverse group of campuses included public and private institutions, a Historically Black University, and a Hispanic Serving Institution. Approval for conducting research was obtained from each campus' Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects in Research (IRB). In order to gather our sample, three weeks prior to the beginning of the semester, we e-mailed faculty members from each campus who teach large introductory courses for first year students (e.g., Introduction to Psychology, Introduction to Biology). This e-mail invited their students to participate in a randomized control study to examine the efficacy of different modalities to deliver campus sexual misconduct policies. On each campus, five large classes were randomized into one of four interventions and a control group condition. In all five groups (the control group and the four intervention groups), a pretest was administered during the first or second week of the semester, and a posttest was administered during the fifth or sixth week of the semester. At both times, each student received a paper copy of the survey, a bubble answer sheet, and a pencil. In each classroom, the researcher explained that this was a voluntary activity and that students who did not wish to participate could wait outside until the postponed course instruction commenced.

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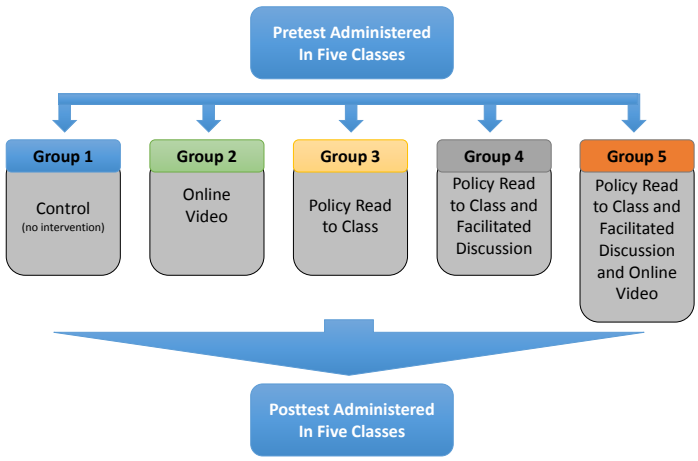
PARTICIPANTS

- **Group 1: *Control group:*** Students completed pretests and posttests but did not receive an intervention.
- **Group 2: *Online video:*** Three days after the completion of the pretest, students were sent an e-mail asking them to watch a video on an embedded link. In the video, four student actors alternated reading the campus sexual misconduct policy specific to the institution. Given that each of the campuses had different sexual misconduct policies, the length of the videos ranged from 5 minutes and 39 seconds to sixteen minutes and 21 seconds (mean time 11 minutes, 33 seconds, standard deviation, 4 minutes, 44 seconds).
- **Group 3: *Policy read to class:*** Following the pretest administration, two members of the campus research team read the campus sexual misconduct policy to the class.
- **Group 4: *Policy read to class followed by facilitated discussion:*** Following the pretest administration, two members of the campus research team read the campus sexual misconduct policy and then spent 20 minutes facilitating a semi-structured class discussion about the campus policy.
- **Group 5: *Policy read to class, facilitated discussion, and e-mailed link to online video:*** Following the pretest administration, two members of the campus research team read the campus sexual misconduct policy and facilitated a 20-minute discussion. A week later, students in this class were e-mailed a link to the same online policy video that was sent to their campus counterparts who participated in *Group 2*. Therefore, participants in *Group 5* received two interventions: the same interventions as participants in *Group 2* and the participants in *Group 4*. (See Figure 1)

Figure 1: Overview of White House Task Force Campus Study



DATA ANALYSES

At each institution, student pretest and posttest data were matched using a unique identifier that participants were asked to create that allowed their survey to remain anonymous. The full sample was made up of 3,088 students who completed pretest surveys. We were able to match pretest and posttest data for 1,798 students (or 58% of the sample). Comparisons of participants with and without matched data revealed significant differences on demographic variables. Matched participants were more likely to be first year students, women, and to identify as White. Participants did not differ on whether they had taken part in bystander or sexual violence trainings prior to participating in the current study.

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OUTCOME MEASURES

In order to examine the efficacy of different methods to deliver campus sexual misconduct policy information to first year students, we compared pretest and posttest outcomes for the following questions.

A. Seven items were used to assess *knowledge* and *help seeking related to sexual assault*.

1. I understand my university's formal procedures to address complaints of sexual assault.
2. I know where to go to get help if a friend or I were sexually assaulted.
3. Please indicate how *confident* you are that you would know how to find the right office or resource at your university to get information or help or support for yourself regarding sexual violence, sexual assault, rape, or sexual misconduct.
4. Please indicate how *confident* you are that you could seek information or help or support for someone you DON'T know who is a victim of sexual violence, sexual assault, rape, or sexual misconduct.
5. I have confidence that my university uses the formal procedures to impartially address complaints of sexual assault.
6. Please indicate how *confident* you are that you could seek information or help or support for someone you know who is a victim of sexual violence, sexual assault, rape, or sexual misconduct.
7. I would NOT go to any of my university's offices/professionals for information or assistance on sexual violence, sexual assault, rape, or sexual misconduct.

B. Items used to assess knowledge of campus sexual misconduct policies.

In addition, a set of similar *knowledge* questions was administered on each campus *regarding campus policies*. The number of questions ranged from 6 to 10 with an average of 8 questions depending on the length of the campus policy. The questions were designed to assess similar aspects of knowledge of policies and resources, but used language specific to each campus. Participants' answers were scored "1" if correct and "0" if incorrect. The percentage correct was then computed and used as an outcome variable comparable across schools.

RESULTS

- We conducted an overall analysis across all outcomes.* After controlling for gender and year in college, there was a significant difference over time by training condition. To explore these findings in more detail, we conducted *paired sample t-tests* and examined the differences between average scores on each outcome measure for pretest and posttest time points computed separately by group. Findings for items 1-4 are presented in Figures 2-5.
- In the preliminary analysis, items 5-7 were not significant for any of the groups. For example, the scores did not change regarding participants' confidence in seeking help for someone they knew was a victim because the participants' pretest mean for each group was relatively high compared to the mean scores on the other items for the comparable group.

*We used a repeated measures analysis of covariance. Gender and year in college were used as control variables. Overall, the interaction between time and treatment group was significant, indicating that there were differences from pretest to posttest that differed by treatment condition across the five groups.

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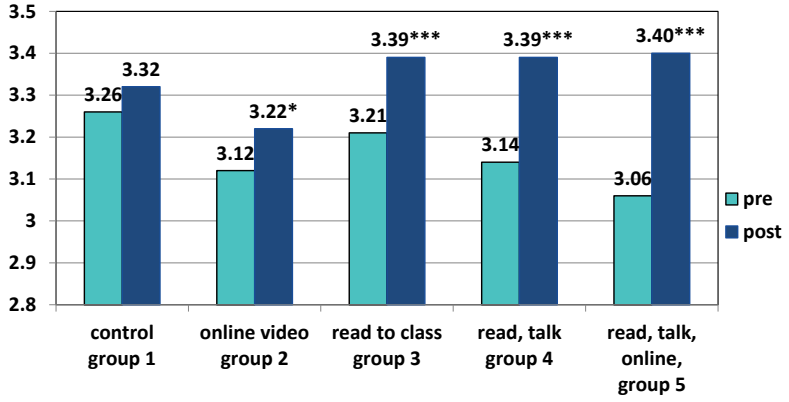
- The analyses were conducted with first year students and for the sub-sample who reported not having taken part in sexual assault or bystander trainings prior to attending their college or university. The results presented in this report are for the overall sample that had usable data.
- The overall findings show that all of the groups had some variables on which scores improved over time, but the largest change in scores was seen for groups that received the information presented in two or more ways (e.g., *Group 4* participants who were read the policy in class and immediately participated in a facilitated discussion). Given the number of *t-tests* we performed, we highlighted results for the more conservative significance level of p <.001 but also noted other one-tailed significant findings that did not meet the more conservative criteria.*

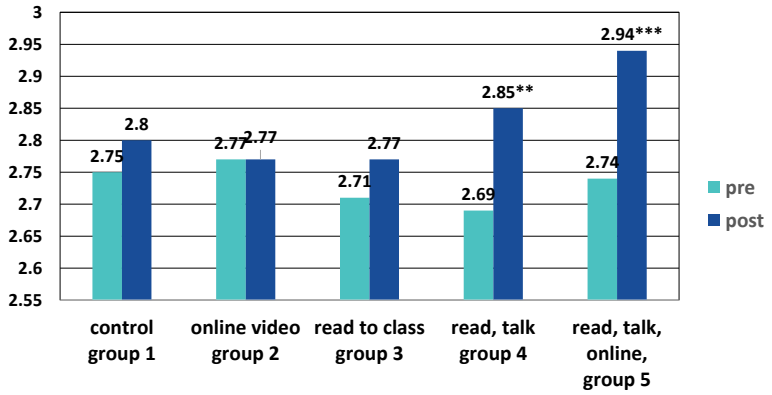
  - **Group 1** (n = 413), the control group. Participants showed changes in perceptions of knowing where to get help for themselves or a friend (Figure 2) and increases in policy-related knowledge (Figure 5). Two possibilities for this outcome are: campuses are creating environments where students may be increasing their knowledge about policies and resources, generally during the fall semester outside of the specific intervention tested in this study, and/or participants may have increased their knowledge because of the repeated exposure to the surveys.

Figure 2: Knows where to go to get help if self or a friend were sexually assaulted



Significant difference from pretest to posttest,
† p < .10 * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001

Figure 3: Confident can find right place at university to get information for self regarding sexual violence, sexual assault, or sexual misconduct



Significant difference from pretest to posttest,
† p < .10 * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001

*Not shown in the figures is the significant increase in understanding of the university's formal procedure for addressing sexual assault complaints in all 5 groups (p < .001).

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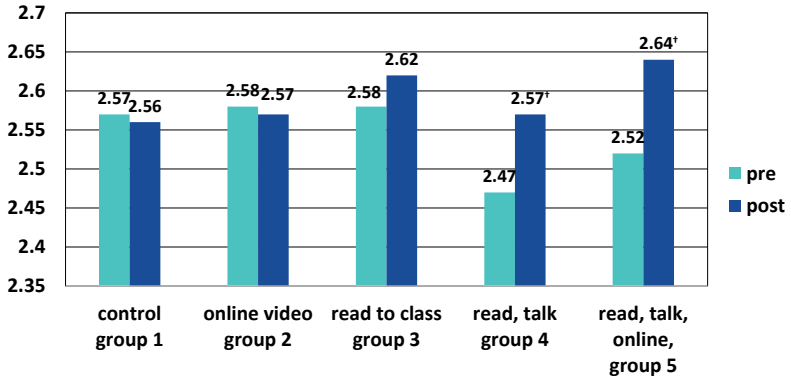
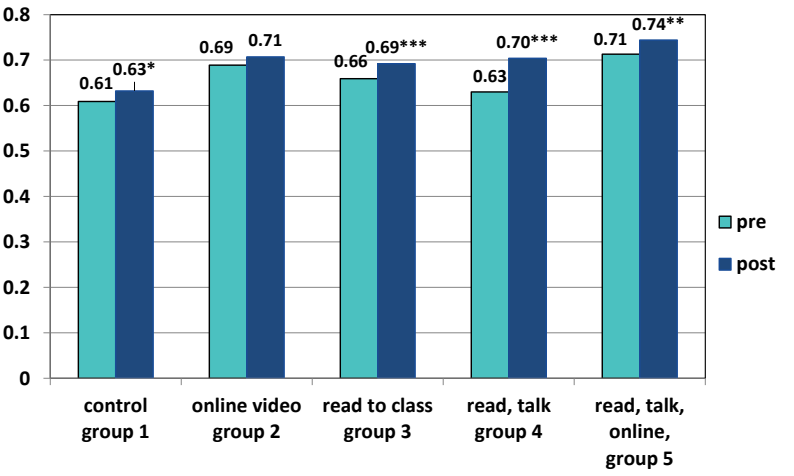
- **Group 2** (n = 219) was asked to watch the online video. Using less conservative significance levels, this group reported changes in perceiving that they knew where to get help if they or a friend were sexually assaulted (Figure 2). It should also be noted that the majority (71%) of participants in this group reported that they did not watch the online video because it was not required. Thus, this group essentially serves as a second control group.
- **Group 3** (n = 515) listened to the campus policy read aloud in their class. *Group 3* participants increased their perception of how to get help if they or a friend were sexually assaulted (Figure 2). They also increased their knowledge of policy-related information (Figure 5).
- **Group 4** (n = 330) was read the policy in class, and then participated in a facilitated discussion following the policy reading. This group showed significant changes on the greatest number of outcomes. These participants reported greater perceived knowledge of where to seek help if they or a friend were a victim of sexual assault (Figure 2); and knowledge of policy-related information over time (Figure 5). At the less conservative significance levels of $p < .01$, participants in this group also increased confidence in knowing how to find the appropriate campus office/ resource to get help/support regarding sexual violence, sexual assault, rape, or sexual misconduct for themselves (Figure 3), friends, or strangers (Figure 4).
- The same pattern was found for **Group 5** (n = 321), which also received a reading of the policy followed by a facilitated in-class discussion and a link to the online policy video. Significant change was seen across most outcomes – greater perceived

Figure 4. Confident can find right place at university to get information to help a stranger regarding sexual violence, sexual assault, or sexual misconduct



Significant difference from pretest to posttest,
† p < .10 * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001

Figure 5: Sexual Misconduct Policy Mean Quiz Scores



Significant difference from pretest to posttest
† p < .10 * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001

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knowledge of where to seek help if they or a friend were a victim of sexual assault (Figure 2); and improved knowledge of policy related information (Figure 5). At less conservative significance levels this group also reported greater confidence in seeking help for themselves (Figure 3) or strangers (Figure 4). It should be noted that as in *Group 2*, few participants in Group 5 reported that they watched the online policy video since it was not mandatory to do so. In fact, 80% said they did not look at the video.

- As noted above, *Group 2* and *Group 5* participants were asked to watch an online video about their campus sexual misconduct policy. In both groups, the majority of participants (over 70%) reported that they did not watch the video. This suggests that in order for web-based information to be effective, students may need reminders as well as incentives that resonate with the target audience coming directly from the top leaders of the institution.

CONCLUSIONS

In the present study, we examined different methods to deliver campus sexual misconduct policies to students on seven colleges and universities throughout the United States. On each campus, participants completed pretests prior to the intervention (with the exception of the control group which received no intervention) and 4 weeks later completed a posttest to determine if the delivery method affected their recollection and understanding of campus sexual misconduct policies. Our findings indicated that all students showed some attitude and knowledge change (likely the result of new Violence Against Women Act and Clery amendments that went into effect this fall and resulted in campuses presenting a variety of information about sexual assault policies to students beyond the interventions assessed in this study or as a result of repeated exposure to the survey at pretest and posttest time). Even so, the likelihood of students' recollecting and understanding campus policies increased as the number of different delivery methods increased. A previous exploratory study on students' understanding of a campus consent policy highlights the importance of student engagement.[11] In other words, it may not be enough to read students the campus policies in a class OR ask them to watch a video on their own time; rather, there may need to be an activity (such as a facilitated discussion) following the reading so that students can have help processing the information in a way that will give them more in-depth understanding of the policy. These interventions also occurred during the first and second weeks of the fall semester. This is a time when new students are inundated with a great deal of information and many are living away from home for the first time, so it is not easy to gain their full attention. For these reasons, messages regarding campus policies should not be limited to the beginning of the semester.

Further, the most consistent changes, across all groups, were in students' knowledge of policy-related information and their perceptions of understanding the university's formal procedures. Less consistent were changes in confidence about seeking help and resources. This suggests that universities need to go beyond presenting information to students about policies and resources if they are trying to motivate students to actually use these policies and resources. For instance, students need time to learn, process and practice skills that will increase their knowledge about sexual misconduct policies and their confidence to act in pro-social ways to help themselves, friends or strangers. More information about how to encourage students to seek help from trained individuals on campus who provide aid is needed.

We found that less than 30% of the students who were sent an e-mail invitation from their instructor inviting them to watch an online video reported that they watched the online video (Group 2 and Group 5). The low response rate to this requested task indicates the need for campus administrators to mandate such tasks. From facilitated research focus groups, students report that when they are asked by their campus administrators to complete online programs they often "click through" and engage elsewhere. These findings indicate that sexual misconduct policies need to be delivered in an engaging manner and hold students accountable for obtaining this knowledge.

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Campus sexual misconduct policies, need to be followed by lessons for students to become engaged community members. Although the participants who received both the in-class policy reading and the facilitated discussion had significant improvement in their knowledge about how to seek help for themselves or a friend if they were sexually assaulted (Figure 2), the group discussion minimally improved their confidence (Figure 4) toward helping a stranger or person they did not know who was a victim of sexual assault. For that reason, additional strategies are needed to train students and other campus community members in how to be actively involved in helping others.

In conclusion, campus sexual misconduct policies need to be disseminated in a manner that is engaging for students and provides opportunities for them to increase their knowledge and develop skills so that they are able to help themselves, their friends, and strangers. The methods of delivery should vary and should not be limited to one type of delivery method or a single dosage. Colleges and universities seem motivated to create communities that are free of sexual assault. This goal will be reached through strategic planning and resource allocation for multiple prevention and response strategies that reach students, faculty, and staff in ongoing ways throughout each student's years on campus.

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