PERCEPTIONS OF SEXUAL ASSAULT IN

A SOUTHERN PLAINS COLLEGE CAMPUS

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Abstract

The prevalence of sexual assault on college campuses has long been a problem. Currently, roughly 1 in 4-5 women will be sexually assaulted while attending a four-year university. Given the high prevalence of sexual assaults, universities have begun to take steps towards educating students in order to lower these rates through the implementation of sexual assault prevention programs. To date, it is largely unknown how well university sexual assault prevention programs, such as 1is2many, decrease the frequency of sexual assault on college campuses. As a first step, the aims of this study are to survey attitudes toward the 1is2many training and to assess perceptions of sexual assault on campus. Data from an undergraduate student sample *(N = 36)* were collected through the use of an online questionnaire assessing information retained from the 1is2many program, perceived importance of the program, and personal sexual assault history. Results indicated that perceived importance was a significant predictor of more information retained from the program, controlling for gender and age ($\beta= .06$, $R^2 = .32$, *p* $= .02$). Contrary to hypothesis, students overestimated rates of sexual assault for men and women. The results of this study highlight perceived importance as a significant factor in retaining the information presented as well as a need for continued prevention efforts and research evaluating the efficacy of university sexual assault prevention programs.

Perceptions of Sexual Assault on a College Campus

Sexual assault on college campuses remains a pervasive problem throughout the United States. Studies have demonstrated that rates of sexual assault against women range from 12.5% to 33.3%, with an average 20-25% while attending a four-year university (Muehlenhard et al., 2017). While 16.9% of women are likely to be assaulted within their first year of college (decreasing to 11.1% during senior year), men are more likely to be perpetrators in their later years of college (Lee et al., 2003). These staggering rates highlight the need for efforts to reduce university sexual assault.

Certain legal, societal, and institutional barriers exist that preclude efficacious assault prevention. For example, definitions of sexual assault vary based on state and educational institutional laws. Oklahoma laws are behind several other state laws, indicating the need for re-evaluation of our laws in order to better protect our citizen and students. Oklahoma's laws regarding sexual assaults do not define consent, without consent, mental capacity, incapacity, sexual act, or force as of 2015 (DeMatteo et al., 2015). Though Oklahoma laws are lacking, Title IX is in place to help further protect university students against sexual assault. Title IX prohibits any sexual discrimination in education and gives students a 180-day window to report their sexual assault. According to Title IX, sexual assault is considered a legal violation if (a) it inhibits a student from participating or benefiting from their educational program. or (b) the university fails to eliminate the hostile environment for the victim, fails to end the sexual violence and its reoccurrence, or fails to remedy the effects for the victim (DeMatteo et al., 2015).

Despite these laws, many individuals do not officially report their assaults for various reasons, suggesting the existence of other barriers to appropriate handling of sexual assault

violations. For example, Sable and colleagues (2006) reported on studies that discovered between 42-75% of sexual assault victims do not seek help, and if they do, it is solely from friends and not family or officials. In this study, female student participants reported shame, guilt, embarrassment, fear of retaliation, and dependence on the perpetrator as the most significant barriers to reporting sexual assault. As for male student participants, there was lower fear of retaliation but greater concern for fear of being judged gay (Sable, et al., 2006). This evidence demonstrates a need to reduce rape myths, negative attitudes, and victimization of sexual assault survivors.

One strategy that has been used to help decrease the prevalence of sexual assault and increase awareness is the use of sexual assault prevention programs, which have been beneficial for decreasing non-supportive attitudes such as blaming the victim (Lee et al., 2003). Lee and colleagues suggested that these prevention programs need to include comprehensive information, require residence hall and Greek life meetings regarding the subject, and for both students and faculty to complete sexual assault prevention programs.

Effectiveness of these prevention programs can be reliant upon multiple factors including audience type, facilitator, format and program content. When creating comprehensive content that will be presented during the prevention program, the following is recommended for inclusion: rape myths, attitudes, and avoidance techniques along with motivations to rape, gender-role socialization, victim empathy, and risk education (Vladutiu et al., 2011). Single-gendered programs (i.e., separate male and female programs) are thought to be more effective than mix-gendered programs, as gender-specific programs allow for the inclusion of more detailed information. Additionally, students should be more frequently exposed to the program's content and should be re-trained throughout their education (Vladutiu et al., 2011). Another

factor thought to increase the effectiveness of a program is how well it is perceived by students (i.e., if the students believe the program is effective before completion). One study found that these perceptions can be influenced by gender, participation in club activities, previous reports of assault to their university, and personal beliefs regarding rape myths and attitudes (Streng & Kamimura, 2017).

At Oklahoma State University, the sexual assault prevention program in place is the 1is2many campaign, because even one victim is too many when it comes to sexual assault. This program uses technology and outreach in order to help prevent sexual assault, dating violence, and stalking among students. 1is2many is fully online and includes a pre-test, videos, quizzes, and a post-test at the end of the training. Completion is required for all students and students must receive an 80% on all quizzes and tests in order to complete the program. In line with what has been recommended by Vladutiu and colleagues, the program's content includes information concerning consent, sexual assault, risk education, and victim empathy along with stalking and dating/domestic violence.

The 1is2many website provides useful information for students and is accessible to students at any time. This website includes information on what to do if sexually assaulted, how to report a sexual assault, how to support victims of sexual assault and domestic violence, and provides resources for students in need. Several useful definitions can also be found on the website including definitions of consent, policies, stalking, and sexual assault which a student can review if they are unsure of if what they experienced is able to be reported or if they need confirmation of what happened to them. Lastly, students can use this website to learn more about campus events and presentations over sexual assault.

The aims of this study were to determine student attitudes associated with sexual assault prevention programs on college campuses and to inquire about the prevalence of sexual assault on the Oklahoma State University campus. Two hypotheses were tested in this study; first, students who have a higher perceived importance for sexual assault prevention programs will retain more knowledge from the training program than those who do not believe prevention programs are important. Second, it is hypothesized that students will report that sexual assault is less prevalent than the true average rate of 1 in 4-5 women.

Methods

Participants and Procedures

Participants were undergraduate college students *(N= 36)* who were recruited through Oklahoma State University's research participant system. Participants self-selected into the online survey. Before continuing to the survey, informed consent was obtained guaranteeing that participants knew the sensitive material they would be asked about during the study. Due to the sensitive nature of the content and questions presented during the survey, participant data was made anonymous. After completing the survey, participants were debriefed and given resources to use if they had experienced sexual assault or were to have any negative effects from completing the survey. Participants received a half credit which could be designated to the course of their choice. Oklahoma State University's Institutional Review approved all procedures.

Demographics

Participants were asked to provide non-identifying demographic information at the start of the survey. Demographics being collected included age, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation,

and relationship status. Other demographics that were collected covered a student's year in school, major, living arrangements, and Greek life/club affiliations.

Sexual Assault Prevention Program

Throughout the survey, participants were asked to refer to the definition of sexual assault as "any sexual act that is non-consensual" including "any unwelcome sexual touching, indecent exposure…, non-consensual sexual penetration, or forceful sexual penetration." Participants were then prompted provide information on if and when they completed the 1is2many prevention program. They were given two sliding scale questions, scoring from 0 (not important at all) to 100 (very important), on their perceived importance of the 1i2many training both at the time they were completing the program ("How important did you believe the 1is2many training was at the time you completed the training?") and for sexual assault prevention programs in general ("How important do you believe sexual assault prevention programs are for preventing sexual assault on a college campus?").

Prevention Program Re-Testing

Participants were tested on the same information that was presented during the 1is2many training prevention program and how well they were able to recall the information they had once been taught. Questions covered requirements for consent, when students are at the highest risk of being sexually assaulted, and prevalence of sexual assault on college campuses (for both men and women). Examples of questions include, "what percentage of women/men will be sexually assaulted while in college?" Questions were given in multiple choice format. Knowledge of information covering the roles of drugs and alcohol in sexual assaults, conduct procedures following sexually assault, and negative consequences of sexual assault was further assessed.

Participant's re-test scores were summed to create a total score, receiving a "1" if they gave a correct answer and "0" if they gave an incorrect answer. A possible 25 points were available during the re-test section.

Sexual Assault History

Participants responded to questions assessing personal experience with sexual assault both during their lifetime and during their time as students at Oklahoma State University. Additionally, participants rated perceived safety from sexual assault while on campus ("How safe from sexual assault do you feel on the Oklahoma State University campus?") on a scale from 0 (not safe at all) to 100 (completely safe).

Risky Sexual Behavior

The Cognitive Appraisal of Risky Events- Revised (CARE-R; Katz, Fromme, & D'Amico, 2000), was included in order to survey participants' risky sexual behaviors within the past six months. Risky sexual behaviors (RSB) includes sexual activity with an unknown partner, unprotected sex, and unsafe methods of initiating sexual activities such as verbal threats, physical force, and continual pressure. Other items included, "had sex without protection against pregnancy" and, "had sex without protection against sexually transmitted diseases" with either a regular partner or a new partner. Answers ranged from 0-31+ times within the past six months. Items were summed to create a total score, with higher scores indicating more frequent risky sexual behavior. Included in the CARE-R are questions unrelated to RSB such as using condoms during sexual intercourse and choosing to abstain from sexual activity which were excluded from the total score.

Data Analytic Plan

Thirty-eight participants were enrolled in the study. Of those, 2 were removed from analysis due to not completing the majority of the survey. Outliers were not screened due to low sample size and to avoid biasing results. Correlations were run between perceived importance of the 1is2many prevention program, perceived safety at Oklahoma State University, CARE-R scores, and re-test performance. A regression was conducted between perceived importance and participant re-test scores controlling for age, gender, and sexual risk patterns.

Results

Sample characteristics

A total of 36 participants completed the survey (N = 36) with an average age of 20.42 (SD = 2.64). Demographic information indicated a primarily female (72.2%) and Caucasian (80.6%) sample. Sexual orientation was divided between heterosexual (94.4%) and bisexual (5.6%). Given that the 1is2many prevention program is mandatory on campus, the finding that only 91.7% had completed the program needs more investigation. Participants demonstrated low levels of RSB (M = 4.34, SD = 6.16). Ten participants have been lifetime sexual assault victims (27.8%) with three of them (8.3%) having been sexually assaulted while attending Oklahoma State University. Five participants (13.9%) reported that they had a friend who had been assault while attending Oklahoma State University and one (2.8%) reported being a witness to a sexual assault at Oklahoma State University. Participants rated relatively high perceived safety at Oklahoma State University (M = 72.17, SD = 24.30). Finally, participants scored an average of 18.08 out of 25 during the retest section (SD = 3.53).

Main Findings

A moderate, positive correlation was found between a participant's perceived importance of the 1is2many sexual assault prevention program at the time of completion and their re-test scores ($r = .49$, $p < .01$) and between participant's perceived importance of sexual assault prevention programs in general and their re-test scores ($r = .50$, $p < .01$, see Table 1). Regression analysis suggested that perceived importance was a significant predictor of re-test performance ($\beta = .06$, $R^2 = .32$, $F(4,34) = 3.45$, $p = .02$). Participants reported an overestimation of sexual assault rates against women, with a modal response ($n = 15$) of 45% (correct answer 20%) of women being sexually assaulted. Furthermore, participants ($n = 12$) answered that 16% of men would be assaulted while in college, while the correct answer was 4%.

Discussion

The current study aimed to advance the literature relating to student perceptions of sexual assault prevention programs. The first hypothesis was supported such that a high perceived importance of sexual assault prevention programs was positively associated with high re-test scores. Participants who believed sexual assault prevention programs, such as 1is2many, were important were more likely to do well during their re-testing. While these results are only correlational, it suggests that believing assault prevention is important plays a role in meaningful education among college students.

The second hypothesis was not supported in this study. Results showed that while women have been found to be sexually assaulted at a rate of 20-25%, most participants in this study believed the rate was much higher, 45% or 60%. Alongside these findings, participants also reported believing that men were sexually assaulted at a higher rate than the correct 4%,

answering either 16% or 23%. A possible explanation for this is the multiple-choice question format. Providing a continuous range of response options, such as 0-100%, may reduce response bias and allow students to consider the full range of options.

There are possible limitations to this study that could have affected results. Data were collected from a convenience sample mainly consisting of psychology and speech students, limiting generalization to all college students. Also, due to the low sample size of the study, there was low variability in age, gender, and ethnicity, further limiting generalizability. Future studies should consider recruiting a representative sample of the college student population. Another limitation associated with the study is the possibility for dishonest responding due to the sensitive nature of material covered in the survey. However, the survey was made anonymous to reduce the likelihood of dishonest responding. Finally, the multiple choice formatting likely produced response bias. Future studies should consider utilizing continuous-response formatting to reduce bias.

The present research marks a first step towards a more comprehensive line of research evaluating the efficacy of university sexual assault prevention programs. The results collected in this study may be used to complete a formal program evaluation. Randomized controlled trials comparing 1is2many with other prevention programs and no-treatment control conditions are strongly recommended, both within universities as well as across universities. As stated previously, researchers recommend programs that aim to educate students about prevalence of sexual assault, reduce rape myths and other non-supportive attitudes, and promote proactive behavior in reducing the frequency of sexual assault.

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Table 1. Correlations

	Completion[a]	General[b]	Safety	RSB	Retest
Completion	-				
General	**.76****	-			
Safety	.29	-.10	-		
RSB	.003	-.01	.07	-	
Retest	**.49****	**.50****	-.21	.15	-

Note. **p<.01

[a]Refers to the question, "How important did you believe the 1is2many training was at the time you completed the training?"

[b]Refers to the question, "How important do you believe sexual assault prevention programs are for preventing sexual assault on a college campus?"