



Program Overview and
Summary Research Findings:
nformd.on.sexual.assault

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RESEARCH ISSUE

Since August of 2007 nformd.net has been piloting an online sexual assault education and prevention program at what will total 20 different colleges and universities across the U.S. The question we faced in designing and implementing the project was as follows: Could an online program positively impact sexual assault understanding? The answer we believe is Yes.

Sexual Assault on Campuses

One out of every four college women experiences some kind of sexual assault.¹ In fact, women in college “are at greater risk for rape and other forms of sexual assault than women in the general population or in a comparable age group.”² While most college women take precautions against rape by a stranger, roughly 90% of college sexual assaults are committed by dates and acquaintances or in “party rape” scenarios—by someone the victim knows and does not fear. Given the numerous causes of college sexual assault, their deep cultural roots, and the high presence of alcohol, most college women are not prepared to handle the most common assault situations.

Challenges Facing Existing College Programs

To date, little research has been done on college programs dealing with sexual assault, and to the extent they have been studied, they have been characterized as follows: “[S]exual assault prevention programming remains a confused, scattered, and sporadic enterprise with little scientific underpinning.”³ Some reports suggest only short-lived positive effects from campus programs.⁴ Even these evaluations are believed to overstate the programs’ effectiveness, while much of the methodology is thought to be limited or flawed.⁵ The greatest impact current programs have is typically on knowledge about rape, with much less positive results on curtailing actual assaults.⁶

The prevailing view is that many programs are ineffective for one or more of the following reasons:

- They engage students for a limited time frame (usually only an hour or so).
- They have a limited scope (reaching only a fraction of the college community)
- They do not follow-up with students over time.
- They aren’t based strongly enough on sexual assault research.

When students return to the general culture of college community, whatever value the program contained becomes overwhelmed by the causal factors listed above, not to mention that students simply forget what they learned over time.

PROGRAM FORMAT

The nformd. Net program uses an on-line format. Such a format allows us to address many of the challenges facing pre-existing programs, and based on current research, we believe it might reach students more positively than other methods. The online format enables us to fulfill a number of objectives simultaneously.

Relieving Time Constraints and Widening the Scope of Participation

While campus-housed programs often need to compete with other orientation efforts for time and space, to say nothing of students’ attention, an online format permits students to take the program on their own time. Students can ideally view the program from home in the weeks

before arriving on campus or early in the fall semester once on campus. In addition, the flexibility of on-line completion of the program likely allows a larger percentage of the community to participate.

Despite a literal release of time constraint—an online program could theoretically be 25 hours long—we still had to budget for what students would absorb and view. The present program runs approximately one hour, not including testing.

Peer-Based Yet Research-Based

Peer-based sexual assault programs have several perks. They include the fact that peers seem to resonate with peers on the issue of sexual assault, many peer educators can reach more students than one administrator, cost effectiveness, and having peers communicate the problem to other peers suggests that it is not a purely “academic” issue.

Despite those benefits, peer-based programming often faces skepticism. Can most peer educators become knowledgeable enough to field difficult questions on the issue? Can peer educators run sessions? Will they be taken seriously enough? Does the lack of an authority figure suggest a lack of certainty?

Our program combines the perks of peer presentation—through peer actors—with the scholarly knowledge of our team and the authoritative voice of the internet.

Protagonist vs. Antagonist

On-line programs do have their limitations. They run the risk of talking at students rather than speaking to them, and the non-interactive nature of a one-directional on-line program risks leaving students unable to voice important questions and concerns.

In an effort to remedy this problem, we designed a protagonist vs. antagonist dialogic structure for the program. Two uninformed players raise objections, ask questions, and typically debate two informed players hopefully asking the very questions and concerns held by the students taking the program.

Genuine Survivor Stories

On-line programs can be purely academic—full of useful information but lifeless and lacking emotional connection with the viewers.

To break through the computer screen, we included video testimonials from actual sexual assault survivors. Building on pre-existing research, we also knew that encountering stories of rape survival—stories that focus on the consequences of sexual assault rather than the act of sexual assault—accomplishes a great deal towards developing empathy in men and helping women understand that sexual assault should be a genuine concern.⁷

Realistic Scenarios

By placing the viewer at a party, in a dorm room, or other campus situation, we depict the factors leading up to campus rape. This not only enables us to teach students what to do and what not to do but to do so by meeting them in their world, or at least as close as we could get to it.

Gender-Specific Content

The online format also provides the advantage of allowing us to easily address male and female students together or separately based on how they self-identify when entering the program. This allows us to offer general information useful to each gender and then specific content better suited to each gender individually.

Continued Contact

Reaching students online means that we can easily continue interaction with them through emails and discussion boards. Since piloting of the program is still underway, no follow-ups have as of yet occurred.

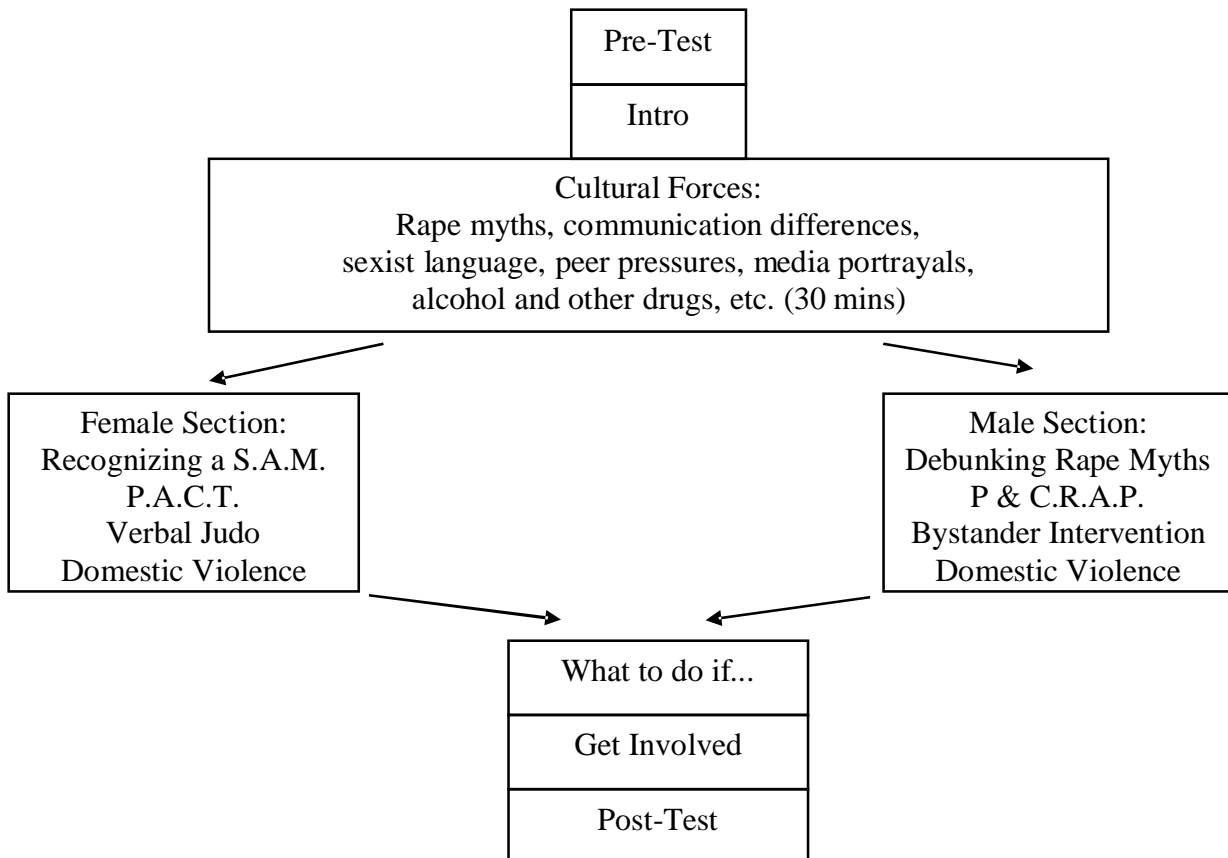
Verifiable Learning

Given the lack of research on the effectiveness of most campus-based sexual assault programming, perhaps the greatest advantage to the online format is that it makes testing easy. We believe it is imperative to assess the extent to which students learn from our program, and so we include pre- and post-tests to measure the extent of their learning.

PROGRAM CONTENT

As mentioned earlier, we believed that one of the greatest advantages of an online program would be its ability to offer a comprehensive view of the sexual assault problem. While we recognized that a lengthy program could lose viewers by the end, we also recognized that we should seize the opportunity to delve into a variety of related subject matters.

While it is utterly impossible to offer a comprehensive account of what we cover in the 60-minute script, a very general outline of our program content is as follows:



METHODOLOGY

As the program was initially designed to provide education as quickly as possible given the seriousness of the issue, an experimental design was not originally included in the plan. However, research was planned to help evaluate the program and offer insight into this fairly new method of sexual assault education. That said, the value of an experimental design is recognized and is planned for the future.

However, the current data relies on a convenience sample of Universities who volunteered to have their freshman complete the program. The program includes demographic questions, pre- and post-tests of students' knowledge surrounding the sexual assault issue, and program evaluation questions. Most of the 45 test questions allow for answers on a 5-point Likert-style scale typically categorizing answers in terms of "Definitely True or Important to Definitely Not True/Important or Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree.

Before beginning the test, each student, who receives an email from their college that directs them to take the program, is presented with a research agreement that allows each individual to opt in or opt out of the research process. While each student has to complete the testing for college purposes, only those students who volunteer to have their data used are included in research. In addition, individuals schools sought IRB approval if their schools felt it necessary.

Furthermore, students were assured of confidentiality. So that administrators at colleges could verify which students completed the program and which did not, an administrator at every college has access to the names and final test scores of the students at that college. Access to such information is essential for colleges that want to track student performance in-house, to say nothing of requiring that students achieve a certain score by connecting student achievement to registration or part of a course grade. None of the six colleges represented in this report have put requirements on student achievement in the program, so all of the scores here are from first-time experiences with the program rather than re-tests.

While school administrators had access to student names and final test scores, no one—neither administrators nor members of nformd.net—are able to link identifying information with students' individual answers. In short, all of the data is effectually anonymous, and the data is randomized so that no one could connect any student's responses to a particular time of testing and/or testing order.

SAMPLE DESCRIPTION

The following findings are based on data from the first 1,638 students who viewed nformd.on.sexual.assault across six different colleges, and who consented to have their data used for research purposes. The sample roughly equally represents women (51.6%) and men and is predominately white, non-Latino (76.7%), Christian (71.9%), and heterosexual (93.3%). Nearly three-quarters of the participants report obtaining no sexual assault education during the last four years, and 94.8% no self-defense training lasting more than three days.

FINDINGS – MALE AND FEMALE PARTICIPANTS

Overall Scores

The average test score for men went from 68.1% (D+) to 83.9% (B), and for women it increased from 74.3% (C) to 86.8% (B+). More interestingly, the mode on the pre-test was a C (38.8%) followed by a D, with A as the least frequent pre-test score (1.1%). However, an A was the most frequently received post-test score [50.1%), followed by B, C, D, and F.

Magnitude of Problem

On the pre-test less than 30% of students identified sexual assault as a big problem, although the majority (78%) identified it as either a big or moderate problem. Yet after the program, 82% of students identified it as a big problem, with big or moderate reported by 98%.

Victimization Rates

Initially, almost 10% of students indicated personal sexual assault victimization, with another 6% unsure. However, on the post-test, self-reported victimization rose to 15%.

Sexual Assault Contributors

Several questions identified six issues deemed critical to the issue of sexual assault on college campuses—communication, alcohol, sexist language, peer pressure, media, use of violent language to describe – and asked students to rate their importance. Nearly 85% of students rated the factors as definitely or probably important on the pre-test. However, the percentage identifying each as definitely important rose from roughly 50% on the pre-test to 85% on the post-test.

Rape Myths

Student rejection of 19 rape myths rose on average from 63.7% pre-test to 86.9% post-test. However, for a number of myths, including 3 regarding the description of a typical rape and the extent to which it involve a stranger, using force and encounter resistance, students answering correctly rose from 28% to 77%. Interestingly, students were initially quite familiar with the effects of alcohol on the ability to give/get consent for sexual ability and to resist unwanted sex.

In Case of Sexual Assault

Students also were remarkably familiar with the steps to take in case of sexual assault, with a high majority positing correct answers to six different potential responses. Correct answers increased 20% points or greater for all of the questions but one, which received minimal program coverage.

Women's Resistance

On the pre-test only a minority of students recognized that women may not resist a sexual assault because they do not label what is happening to them as sexual assault (20%) or because they might make the situation worse (32%). Once again, on the post-test the percentage of students answering correctly increased by more than 20% points, with majorities answering correctly.

FINDINGS - FEMALE PARTICIPANTS ONLY

Sexually Aggressive Men

Faced with nine research-based identifying characteristics of sexually aggressive men, 77% of women on the pre-test correctly answered that they definitely or probably were true, a figure that rose to 95% on the post test. More interestingly, the “definitely” correct average rose almost 50% from 34.3% to 82.9%.

Escape Tactics

On the pre-test, a majority of women said they would use tactics we consider least effective for escaping a sexual assault—saying “no” or using some form of violence. While “no” remained relatively constant—always a good thing to communicate—the likelihood of using violence as a primary tactic dropped dramatically on the post-test. At the same time, the percentage of women saying they were very likely to use verbal judo (non-force based tactics such as making an excuse to leave the bathroom, tricking the assailant into leaving the room, or pretending sickness or actually puking] increased 20% points or more depending on the exact tactic.

PACT

Female participants also were tested on their ability to retain a pneumonic device provided in the program regarding precautions (setting strong precedents, being aware of alcohol, communicating clearly and tallying red flags for men likely to be sexually aggressive) to help avoid sexual assault. Recall ranged from 70-95 percent depending on the precaution.

FINDINGS - MALE PARTICIPANTS ONLY

Sexual Assault

The number of men who said they had or probably had committed sexual assault went from 18 men on the pre-test to 20 men on the post-test.

Male-Male Rapes

On the pre-test, only 37% of men correctly indicated that most male-on-male rapes are definitely or probably committed by heterosexual men, a figure which rose to 82.4% in the post-test, and the percentage of just “definitely” rose from 7.4% to 64.7%.

P & CRAP

Male participants also were tested on their ability to retain a pneumonic device provided in the program regarding precautions to help avoid sexual assault situations. Recall ranged from 55-95 percent depending on the precaution.

PROGRAM EVALUATION

Overall Rating

High majorities (80-85%) of students rated all but two of the different components/elements of the program excellent or good (generally half and half), with less than 4% rating those components/elements as bad or very bad. Only the programs acting and length received lower ratings.

Women's Section

The women were quite positive about the three modules designed only for women, with majorities in the high 80% rating them as excellent or positive (generally slightly more excellent than good) and less than 2% rated any of the modules negatively.

Men's Section

The men also rated their gender-specific modules quite highly from 72-82% excellent or good (fairly equally mixed), another 14-20% rating them fair, and 3-7% rating them bad or very bad.

Usefulness

Roughly 3 in 4 students agreed or strongly agreed that they would recommend the program and that it was worth their time. Over 85% of students said it helped them understand factors surrounding sexual assault and that it would help them avoid becoming involved in one.

Helping Women Escape

Almost two-thirds of women (64%) strongly agreed that the program helped them better understand how to escape a sexual assault, and over 92% strongly agreed or agreed with this statement, while less than 1% disagreed or strongly disagreed with it.

Does the Program Help?

Nearly a majority of men (48%) strongly agreed that the program helped them to better understand how to address the issue and intervene when they saw potentially problematic sexual assault situations arising. However, a large majority (over 80%) agreed or strongly agreed with these statements and less than 1% disagreed or strongly disagreed with them. Similarly, 49% of men strongly agreed that it was important for colleges to provide such a program, 81% agreed or strongly agreed and only 4% disagreed or strongly disagreed. A data collection error allowed only 117 women to respond to this final statement but of those 56% strongly agreed, 87.9 strongly agreed or agreed, and only 1.7% disagreed.

FUTURE EFFORTS

Future plans include adding the following informational modules to the program.

- Same-sex assault module
- Ethnic/Religious Specific Modules
- High School Modules
- More bystander intervention
- More attention to predatory model, e.g. no separation

Future efforts also will include (1) refining the program based on student feedback and learning outcomes, (2) initiating an experimental design to further assess the program's effectiveness, [3] completing pre and post-surveys of campuses to determine the degree to which the program affects cultural change, and [4] completing follow-up studies of students who have taken the program to determine its far reaching success.

CONCLUSION

Overall, we are pleased with our initial efforts at an online education program on sexual assault. Clearly, certain areas did not improve as much as we would like, which means the program needs to be reworked accordingly. Future versions of the program will need to involve stronger acting and we may need to reconsider its length, though we are not sure that a little long is at all problematic if it begets student understanding.

However, it is also clear based on pre-test scores that students need this kind of education. A majority of students were often ignorant about essential sexual assault issues. More importantly, averages aside, it seems reasonable to hypothesize that the students who score the lowest on the tests are the ones most at risk of being involved in a sexual assault. Positively, students' knowledge can change as a result of an online sexual assault program. We saw strong, sometimes dramatic, increases in test scores across a range of categories—cultural factors that contribute to rape, rape myths, how to avoid/handle a rape situation, etc.

Also very encouraging is the fact that students overwhelmingly find the program worthwhile and useful, giving it high marks nearly across the board. It appears to us that students not only will sit through such a program but appreciate it and even recommend it. Furthermore, students appreciated the program despite the amount of testing involved, which suggests that such a program can continue as a way to measure student growth in understanding.

All in all, for a first effort at an on-line sexual assault program and an assessment of its effectiveness, we are pleased. Affecting campus-wide bodies of students with the kind of understanding provided by this program seems like a critical step towards creating real cultural change at any given institution and beyond. Without such cultural change, the problem of sexual assault will never be resolved.

ANONYMOUS STUDENT FEEDBACK

Negative Feedback (<2%)

Female

Dont make the guy who is learning about the program seem like such a dumb@\$\$. i would never want to talk to him cuz hes really stupid you would get someone more smart but not like a nerd just not a dumb jock wannabe.

Male

This was the worst thing I have ever done in my life. Sexual assault is NOT that big of an issue, believe it or not. I do not know one person who is a victim and f-ck you for trying to tell me it is a problem. I hope you one day realize what a big inconvenience you have caused college students. I also hope that one day you will get a real job that actually contributes to society. Thank you for completely wasting my time.

Positive Feedback: Men

"Very informative. Definitely needs to be seen at least once in a person's lifetime."

"Although many of these kind of informative programs are not helpful, this one actually provided a lot of helpful information."

"This program completely changed my thinking about rape and sexual assault."

Positive Feedback:

"It's a really great program. They introduced situations I was able to relate to, things that really happen in real life. It's almost like you're part of the group that's discussing sexual assault on your computer. They weren't blaming men. And they weren't blaming women. They were saying, 'Hey, this is an issue, let's talk about it.' It's very interesting, very modern, very up with the times. I highly recommend it to anyone."

"The program was very compelling and informative; I am so thankful that I was taught this information before setting foot on campus. I know I will definitely refer back to this website in the future and apply the information in college."

"The survivor stories were very beneficial because they gave a real life experience to relate the situations to."

"The verbal judo component was probably the most informative and impressive portion of the program. A big help!"

"I believe that every girl and guy in the world should view this program to learn exactly what sexual assault is."

¹ Sampson, 2002; National Institute of Justice, 1997.

² Sampson, 2002.

³ McCall, 1993.

⁴ Bachar & Koss 2001; Gidycz et al 2002; Yeater & O'Donohue 1999

⁵ Anderson & Whiston 2005.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Abbey et al 2006; Covell and Scalora, 2002; Geer et al., 2000; Schewe and O'Donohue, 1996.

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