Sexual Assault Beliefs and Prevalence: A Campus Study

Amanda Lee and Gretchen Sechrist, Ph.D.

Abstract

This study was conducted to learn more about students’ perceptions and beliefs regarding sexual assault and Title IX issues at a small liberal arts university. Undergraduate students completed an online survey. Results indicated that students were aware of definitions of sexual assault and Title IX procedures. Students were less aware of reporting procedures and what happens after filing a sexual assault report. The need for more effective sexual violence prevention and educational programs are addressed.

Background

Sexual violence on collegiate campuses is a nationwide epidemic. 1 in 5 college women will experience sexual assault in their college years (McMahon, 2008; Flack et al., 2016). Due to the fact that sexual assault can have devastating psychological, physical, and academic effects it is important to understand what perceptions and ideologies contribute to the prevalence of sexual assault.

Climate surveys can be used to understand the prevalence of sexual assault on collegiate campuses, but also to measure the perceptions and knowledge students have regarding sexual assault. A climate study concerning sexual assault has yet to be conducted on Mansfield University’s campus.

The purpose of this study was to assess students’ general knowledge of sexual assault, Title IX, and sexual assault resources on campus. Furthermore, questions assessing incidents of sexual assault on- and off-campus are included, as well as the level of support received.

Research Questions

1. What is the baseline knowledge of sexual assault and policies for students?
2. What is the current percentage of sexual assaults at the university?
3. If students have been sexually assaulted at the university and had not told an official, what were the reasons why students did not report?
4. What are the students’ perceptions of the university’s sexual assault response and policies?
5. Have students received training on sexual assault, consent, and Title IX?

Participants

291 Mansfield University students. The majority of the sample identified as non-Hispanic (83.6%), heterosexual (83.9%), White (90%), females (75.3%) between ages 18-23 (88.3%). The participants were mostly first year students (32%) pursuing an undergraduate degree (93.8%) and living on-campus (51.9%).

Procedure

The survey was administered with permission through campus email. Students voluntarily completed the online survey after passing age verification and acknowledging informed consent. The 16-question survey utilized skip logic and took about 10 minutes to complete. The question format consisted of 7-point Likert scales ranging from either "Very Likely" to "Very Unlikely" and "Strongly Agree" to "Strongly Disagree," multiple choice, checkbox, and yes/no - type questions. Most questions had a "Prefer not to say" and/or "Other" option.

Questions assessed general perceptions of the university, perceptions of how the university would handle a report of sexual assault, the level of information students have received in regards to sexual assault, and the prevalence of sexual assault on campus. After completing or exiting the survey, students were informed of counseling options on and off campus.

Results

Students generally had positive perceptions of the university’s response to sexual assault incident, and have some knowledge of reporting procedure on campus. Some key questions asked were:

- "I feel safe on this campus" (83.2% Agree vs 1.7% Disagree)
- "The University would take steps in order to ensure the protection and safety of the individual making the report" (72.5% Likely vs 3.8% Unlikely)
- "What happens when student makes claim of sexual assault (37.1% Agree vs 22.6% Disagree)

When asked if students perceived sexual assault to be a problem on campus, most participants selected “Neutral” (28.2%), however almost ¾ of participants chose “Agree” (Figure 1). Since coming to college participants have received the most information on Title IX protections (83.8%), the definition of sexual assault (71.5%) and the definition of consent (70.8%).

Since attending college, 9.6% (n = 28) of participants have experienced unwanted sexual contact. 40.5% of assaults occurred on-campus, 37.8% occurred off-campus and 2.7% occurred during school-sponsored activity held off-campus.

Discussion

Students were generally positive toward the university, in addition to positive perceptions of how campus officials would handle sexual assault claim. Yet students only had somewhat of an idea of the campus reporting process on campus. Students did rely more so on informal disclosure when sexually assaulted than disclosing to campus officials; this finding corresponds with Sabino and Ho’s (2014) research that more than 65% of sexual assault or dating violence incidents are informally disclosed. Barriers to reporting a sexual assault were also similar to the reasons cited by Amar and colleagues (2014), such as lack of recognition that their experience was a crime and wish to not publicly disclose experience. Additional barriers to reporting cited by Binder (1981) that were found in this study were embarrassment and guilt for the experience.

The increased dispersal of outside resources for sexual assault victims is needed, as well as information released about the campus adjudication process. Additional training for friends and campus officials is needed to properly help sexual assault victims. Mansfield University students do believe sexual assault is a safe place; this research can contribute to what campus officials and students can do in order to create an open, supportive atmosphere for sexual assault survivors.

Figure 1.