Choosing Prevention Products:
Questions to Ask When Considering
Sexual and Relationship Violence and Stalking Prevention Products

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Summary

Increased attention to sexual and relationship violence and stalking on campus has led to exponential growth in the number of vendors offering solutions to these pervasive public health problems.[1,2] This white paper offers a series of questions for college and university leaders to ask as they consider different prevention products and assess whether they will be effective in meeting the needs of their campus communities.

Purpose

The purpose of this white paper is to provide guidance to university and college leaders on how to choose products that address concerns of sexual and relationship violence and stalking from the perspective of prevention. This includes administrators, student affairs staff, prevention educators, and other campus leaders. The Campus Sexual Violence Elimination (Campus SaVE Act) component of the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA), requires that campuses provide "primary prevention and awareness programs" including "safe and positive options for bystander intervention" as well as "ongoing prevention and awareness campaigns." These regulations have brought increased attention to the public health problems of sexual and relationship violence and stalking on campus, and have led to a proliferation of products marketed to higher education administrators. Such products include in-person programs, interactive theater, social norms or social marketing campaigns, online modules, and lectures.

This white paper introduces a series of questions for stakeholders to ask prevention product vendors and consultants, as well as points for administrators when considering the purchase of prevention products. Ideally, such products would help campuses achieve their sexual and relationship violence and stalking prevention goals. The questions presented here are intended to help stakeholders assess a product's utility for advancing comprehensive prevention through building skills, enhancing community capacities, and changing social norms.[3]

It may be helpful to convene a taskforce to consider prevention products, or to engage with local or state community partners when embarking on planning for comprehensive prevention efforts. By engaging such experts and stakeholders, administrators increase the likelihood of producing a plan for preventing sexual and relationship violence and stalking that is viable and responsive to a school's campus culture.

> A taskforce might include school and community leaders, students, and experts in sexual and relationship violence and stalking prevention and response. This group can serve as an important resource to assist and advise administrators in creating a comprehensive prevention plan.

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The following questions will help stakeholders avoid purchasing products with a risk-reduction orientation (e.g., telling women students not to drink, warning them to avoid walking alone at night, etc.) that places the burden of preventing violence on potential victims. Before stakeholders assess prevention products, it would also be useful for them to consider the readiness level of their campus for initiating prevention efforts.[4,5]

Questions about Effectiveness

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) defines evidence-based decision-making as combining the best available research with experiential evidence from community data and field-based expertise.[6] Many products claim to be "evidence-based," but that term is currently being employed with too broad a meaning. Therefore, it is important to ask vendors follow-up questions about the quality of the evidence used to design their products.

How Can You Know If It Works?

It is essential to know whether prevention products have been thoroughly evaluated with scientific research methods. This is the primary way the leading prevention products are shown to be effective. More specifically, this means that prevention products should have stated, measurable learning objectives that can be evaluated. Ongoing evaluation and utilization of the best available evidence should also inform the product's evolution over time. A vendor or consultant should be able to describe how each of the learning objectives has been evaluated and the results of that assessment. Although there is little evidence on what reduces victimization or perpetration, indirect indicators of prevention outcomes that are measurable may include changes in knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, and/or behaviors.[7,8]

Questions Regarding Evaluation, Data Collection, and Data Protection

Campus leaders should ensure that the vendor or consultant has obtained permission to evaluate the product and its impact on the community for the duration of the product's use. Some products have data collection or evaluation components built into them, which can provide useful information on the product's efficacy in the campus community. It is critical to ask if your university will have access to data reports in a timely manner. In addition, student privacy and sound data collection methods are crucial to successful evaluation. The vendor should explain how they intend to protect data, particularly if it involves sensitive or personal information.

Questions on Development and Content

Sexual and relationship violence and stalking are nuanced issues, so it is vital that prevention efforts are developed by people with expertise. The best interventions adhere to the principles for effective prevention put forth by Nation and colleagues in their 2003 comprehensive review of prevention programming.[9] Awareness programs, while potentially useful to increase individuals' knowledge of sexual assault and build relationships on campus, are only building blocks in a more comprehensive campus prevention plan.

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Were the Products Developed by Experts?

The developer and vendor or consultant should be well-versed in sexual and relationship violence and stalking prevention, as well as in implementing prevention strategies through the chosen modality. If it is an online product, for example, you might ask what online learning experts were involved. For an in-person prevention program, it will be important to consider who was involved in its creation to ensure that you can benefit from full knowledge of implementation challenges and opportunities. Engaging experts on campus or in the community in the selection of prevention products is a helpful way to vet products as well. Asking about the past experience and training of the people who created or informed the products you are considering can provide critical insight as you compare products.

What Theories Inform the Products?

Effective prevention strategies are informed by theories that have been developed and validated through rigorous scientific scrutiny. Effective prevention products should be grounded in theories that foster change. Diffusion of innovation theory is often associated with community-level change for violence prevention. Commonly used theories for individual behavior change include the theory of reasoned action, the theory of planned behavior, and the health belief model.[10] Vendors should be able to name the theories that guided the product's development and inform its implementation and evaluation.

Does the Product Incorporate Varied Teaching Methods?

Prevention efforts are most effective when they use multiple modalities such as text, video, audio, case studies, interactive exercises, gaming principles, and skills practice. Products should be developmentally and culturally appropriate to your audience and well-suited to the method of dissemination. It is important to know if your target audience will be engaged

by the product's teaching methods. The content might be excellent, but if members of a community do not find it engaging, they might dismiss it.[9]

Is the Product Trauma-Informed and Survivor-Centered?

Primary prevention is about reaching the entire community.[11] Since prevention efforts need to address a broad audience, it is critical that all efforts are promoting a campus culture that supports survivors. It is important to consider the impact of prevention products and programs on members of the community who are survivors and secondary survivors, and to ensure they are trauma-informed products.[12] Prevention programs have the potential to exacerbate victim-blaming and to shape a community's understanding of and reaction to sexual assault, so it is critical to consider how a product frames interpersonal violence.[13] Does the product let prospective participants know, in advance, what to expect throughout the curriculum? Does the product provide resources customized to the community? Does it refrain from both overt and subtle victim-blaming? Are there options for survivors to opt out of participating or to engage in an alternative? Does it normalize getting help and support? Does it acknowledge a range of survivor experiences and present the perspectives of multiple survivors from diverse backgrounds? The team selecting prevention products should incorporate the insight of survivors, ideally by including them as members.

How Have the Target Audiences Informed the Development of the Product?

The product should be informed by those for whom it was intended. A product built for graduate students would likely differ from a product designed for professional staff or pre-matriculation undergraduates. What kind of pilot testing and focus grouping has happened to create the product in its current form? Do those who tested the product reflect the community where it will be used? Does the vendor allow access to the product or to the materials necessary to perform focus groups in the user community? Can the product be customized or tailored to the community in which it will be used? Does the product or vendor include guidance or offer assistance and assurance of retaining fidelity with the original evaluated product?

Questions on Relevance to Your Community

Is the Message Consistent with Broader Prevention Messages?

It is critical for institutions to have consistent messaging across their prevention efforts. To determine whether this is the case, it is best to start by conducting an inventory of current messages in circulation, and discussing the desired messages. For example, a university may want to take a community approach that says that everyone on campus is a part of ending violence. Incorporating a product that focuses only on risk reduction could

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undermine this message. In the same vein, if campus leaders want to emphasize that violence has an impact on people of all genders and sexual orientations, then they should look for products that are inclusive in those ways. Likewise, [14] instead of discussing how perpetrators use alcohol to perpetrate or to minimize their culpability a product might state or imply that alcohol *causes* sexual assault or relationship violence, which studies have shown is unfounded.[14] In the absence of unified prevention messages across the campus, it is important to identify what the institution hopes to convey in order to gauge whether a product's message aligns with the school's desired prevention message.

Do Products Provide Sufficient Dosage to Accomplish the Prevention Goals?

Like medication, prevention efforts require sufficient dosage to be effective. Cutting down the prevention dosage, like cutting a pill in half, could lead to inadequate or no effect or could potentially cause harm. One-time programs are tempting, and vendors or consultants may claim that they "check all the prevention boxes," but a solo packaged program or a single annual event will not change campus culture. Providing only certain elements of a larger prevention program, even one that has been found to be effective, can short-change a community. If this is a one-time program, how does it fit with other efforts? Are there booster programs or ways to reinforce the program's messages over time? Is there potential to intentionally build off of this program to increase dosage?

Can Products Be Adapted to a Community's Target Audience?

It is vital that prevention messages are socioculturally relevant and reflect a community's diversity. For prevention efforts to be effective, members of the community need to see situations and people like those they would regularly encounter.[15] Bringing in an expert speaker or showing a film or video can augment prevention efforts, but how can campus leaders operationalize or reinforce the lessons learned within the community after a one-time event? If a product uses images, videos, or case studies, do the people in them reflect the characteristics and diversity of the community? Are diverse persons centered and included naturally, or does it feel as though people with marginalized identities are tokenized and considered an add-on to those the product assumes is the core constituency? Ensuring that students, faculty, and staff see themselves and their environment reflected in the video, product, and collateral materials can reinforce that violence is an issue on their campus and signal that everyone is a part of the solution.

Questions on Investment

How Much Does the Product Really Cost?

It is important to consider the full costs of using a product over time and the impact of that investment. Paying a one-time speaker fee might provide an excellent event for Sexual Assault Awareness Month, but how will that single afternoon contribute to building knowledge, teaching skills, and encouraging action? When comparing prices, make sure to factor in any additional fees for retaining a license over time or training future facilitators. Considering the cost of the product itself as well as personnel time and administrative costs over time to implement the product will help ensure that efforts are sustainable.

Who Owns the Product?

Paying for or acquiring a product is not necessarily the same as owning it. Is the cost for this product one-time or yearly? Does that fee include access to forthcoming revised versions, or a license to use and adapt the materials in a way that makes sense for the community where it will be implemented? If the product produces data about the community, will the institution have access to that data, or receive an analysis that was performed for you by the vendor? Does purchasing the product imply consent for the vendor to use those data or participant responses, including in publications and reports? How is sensitive student, faculty, and staff information protected? Community members will want to know how information will be used and secured, especially if that information is highly personal.

Conclusions

The expertise, time, and resources necessary to develop effective prevention strategies can often prove too high a burden for individual campuses to assume alone. Products offering solutions to sexual and relationship violence and stalking have proliferated, and it is crucial for college and university leaders to become well-informed consumers. The key questions reviewed in this white paper can help guide campus administrators and their partners as they select the prevention products that best resonate with their comprehensive plans for sexual and relationship violence and stalking prevention and the needs of their unique communities.

Prevention Innovations Research Center

Prevention Innovations Research Center (PIRC) is internationally recognized for its collaborative research and community engagement focusing on sexual and relationship violence and stalking prevention and response. PIRC conducts scholarly, cutting-edge

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research that informs policy and practice and convenes practitioners and researchers to develop strategies for evidence-based, innovative approaches to violence prevention. In addition, PIRC's team of researchers and practitioners provide training for university, military and community practitioners, mentor students, support community-based practitioners, and advise institutions. PIRC is located on the campus of the University of New Hampshire in Durham. For more information about the Prevention Innovations Research Center or about peer-reviewed resources, please visit our website*:* *http://cola.unh.edu/prevention-innovations-research-center/peer-reviewed-publications.*

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