How Confident are Confidants? 
Assessing the Sexual Assault-Related Resource Knowledge of College Students

Author
Angelica Puzio
Wake Forest University
Amanda Konradi
Assistant Professor of Sociology & Co-Director of Gender Studies
Loyola University Maryland

Abstract
A quasi-experimental study assessed attitudes toward sexual violence policies and campus resources among undergraduate students at a medium-sized, Mid-Atlantic university. An online survey discovered significant differences between students who received different levels of sexual assault education during and after orientation. Students with higher levels of sexual assault education were more confident in their understanding of campus sexual assault policies and resources, irrespective of the accuracy of their knowledge.
Introduction

Annual victimization rates for sexual assaults on college and university campuses are estimated to be as high as 5.15 percent (Kilpatrick et al., 2007), and four-year rates for women are as high as one in five (Krebs et al., 2007). However, only a minority of incidents are reported to parties who can initiate a criminal or administrative investigation.

A survey of 45 campus sexual violence studies assessing “disclosure, service utilization, and service provision” found consistently low reporting rates to law enforcement, from zero for “dating violence, sexual coercion, and date rape” to 12.9 percent for “forced sexual assault” (Sabina and Ho, 2014; Krebs et al., 2007), and similarly low rates of reporting to campus entities (Sabina and Ho, 2014). Three studies found that students who have been sexually assaulted were particularly unlikely to contact residence life staff (Sabina and Ho, 2014, p. 203). A minority of students who reported sexual assault to campus units sought out campus crisis centers and campus health centers (Amar, 2008; Krebs, 2007). On the other hand, the majority of studies show that almost two-thirds of students who had been sexually assaulted (more than 65 percent) chose to disclose their experiences to others outside of campus personnel (Sabina and Ho, 2014, p. 217). Above all other sources of social support, they confided in their friends, mostly women (Sabina and Ho, 2014, p. 217). Students also told family members, but with much less frequency than they told other students (Sabina and Ho, 2014, p. 217).

Research about how victims of sexual assault make decisions regarding the criminal justice process shows that individuals in whom they confide can play an important role in helping to give meaning to what happened and influence whether or not victims label their experiences as crimes. Initial contacts also strongly influence whether or not victims of sexual assault choose to engage with the criminal justice process (Konradi, 2007). We should expect that the peers in whom student survivors confide will also influence whether or not they define their experiences as violations of the campus code of conduct and whether or not they initiate the campus adjudication process.

Given college students’ low rates of reporting sexual assault and high frequency of disclosing sexual assault to peers, there is a need for information about: 1) what students know about definitions, so that they can appropriately label incidents as actionable violations of campus codes; 2) what students know about campus resources, processes, and procedures that are relevant to making decisions about securing medical and mental health care and/or activating processes of accountability; and 3) how comfortable students are to act as confidants and advocates for their peers. This study focuses on these issues at a mid-sized, predominantly white, private institution located in the Mid-Atlantic region.

Students to whom victims initially divulge sexual violations may or may not feel confident in providing emotional support or helping a peer determine if pursuing campus administrative (or criminal) adjudication is desirable. Whether they feel competent in the role of “confidant” may follow from whether they believe that they adequately understand campus definitions and policies, and have the interpersonal skills to address their peers’ trauma. That is, students’ willingness to assist peers who disclose sexual assault may be predicated on the confidence they have in their knowledge base.

What students know about campus-specific definitions and policies related to sexual assault reflects campus policy documents provided to them, such as student handbooks and annual security reports, content on the campus website, and prevention and education programming they are offered or required to complete.2

Thus, students’ confidence in their knowledge about campus policies is subject to the educational efforts of campus administrators. This matter has not been previously explored, but literature about the efficacy of passive and active sexual assault education programming is relevant to thinking through what students may know about campus policies and how they may best learn about them.

In the next two sections, we review research about college students that provides a context for this study. The first section, “Campus Resources and Students’ Knowledge of Them,” pertains to the provision of information about sexual assault resources for students. The second section, “Efficacy of Training,” focuses on which forms of sexual assault prevention training have been most effective to change students’ attitudes and behaviors and engage them in taking responsibility for the safety of their peers.

Campus Resources and Students’ Knowledge of Them

Studies have shown that, to date, campus administrators’ efforts to provide information about critical definitions...
and information about sexual assault resources and the procedures available to students are uneven (Karjane et al., 2002; Krivoshey et al., 2013). In one study, 33 percent of a sample of 60 universities offered students “poor” information about sexual violence on their websites (Hayes-Smith and Hayes-Smith, 2009). In another, only 54 percent of 224 undergraduate criminology students attending a university in the Southeast recalled receiving information about sexual assault resources, and only 39 percent knew where on campus they could obtain information (Hayes-Smith and Levett, 2010). When asked about specific resources available to them, the students were only able to identify four of nine options that existed. Consistently, other studies have found that when information was available, fewer than half of students were familiar with it (Banyard et al., 2007; Walsh et al., 2010). Interestingly, one study that found that 97 percent of surveyed female students knew about campus resources determined that the rate at which those resources were used was significantly lower (20 percent) (Nasta et al. 2005).

It is unclear whether women are more knowledgeable about sexual assault resources than men, a finding of some studies (Banyard et al., 2007; Walsh, 2010) but not others (Hayes-Smith and Levett, 2010). To the extent that gender differences do exist, it is unclear if they stem from women’s greater concern about being targets of sexual assault or differential educational practices. From the standpoint of enabling students to serve as confidants, it appears that passive forms of printed information may not be effective educational tools.

**Efficacy of Training**

The efficacy of programs depends on several factors, including whether they are directed at a single sex or a mixed audience; whether professional or peer educators/facilitators are used; the program format, length, number of sessions, and delivery method (lecture or video); and whether the program focused on risk reduction, gender role socialization, sexual assault education, deterrence, rape myths, rape awareness, or self-defense (Vladutiu, Martin, and Macy 2011). Thus, Vladutiu et al. (2011) recommended that universities develop programs with specific outcomes in mind and select strategies that work best to achieve each outcome. The best way to communicate policy information that concerns campus resources, definitions, and procedures to students has not been the focus of investigation. The current study seeks to address this area further.

Bystander education programs frequently ask college students to “spread responsibility for safety to members of the broader community” (Katz and Moore, 2013, p. 1,055. See also, Banyard et al., 2004; Foubert, 2000). These programs typically “promote prosocial attitudes and behaviors related to both sexual assault and helping others. Participants are educated on prevalence rates, indicators of high-risk situations, and how they, as bystanders, can promote safety” (Katz and Moore, 2013, p. 1,055) by interrupting situations in ways that prevent assaults. In the last decade, bystander programs have proliferated, as well as the development of validated measures for effectiveness that facilitate the comparison of outcomes (Katz and Moore, 2013).

In a recent meta-analysis of controlled evaluations of 12 bystander programs involving 2,926 students, Katz and Moore (2013) discovered that students who participated in bystander training reported a greater confidence and willingness to intervene, and a greater frequency of doing so. The greatest effect sizes were for bystander efficacy — a student’s “perceived competence in helpfully responding to sexual assault risk” — and intent to help (Katz and Moore, 2013, p. 1,062). These results suggest that education about campus policies and how to initiate campus adjudication processes might also increase students’ belief that they are capable of assisting their peers. It is possible that bystander programming can be expanded to encompass education about campus policy and procedures.

Katz and Moore (2013) noted that bystander studies conducted with younger college students had greater effect sizes, although results were not statistically significant. On this basis, they suggested including bystander education in new student orientation programs. It is a federal requirement to educate first-year students about adjudication procedures, as well as about definitions of “sexual assault,” but the timing for doing so is not specified. Early training is desirable, given that students are at highest risk of experiencing sexual assault during the first several weeks of the term. Although there is evidence that single-dose prevention programs are effective (Banyard et al., 2009), Fisher et al. (2003) have pointed out that students who receive sexual assault training during orientation periods lack a context to make sense of it, potentially impeding their use of it. This study enables us to explore Fisher’s concern.

There is some evidence that the outcomes of bystander education have lasting effects. For example, a recent
evaluation of an online bystander program directed narrowly at identifying high-risk situations and doing something to change the situations to “prevent a friend from being harmed” found significant improvement in reported intentions to act immediately after students participated in the program (Kleinsasser et al., 2014). Two months later, those who received bystander training sustained their level of intent and also reported more bystander behaviors. On the other hand, some meta-analyses of the effects of sexual assault programming found less promising results over the long term (Berklin and Forde, 2001; Anderson and Whiston, 2005). They discovered an attenuation of effects over 10 weeks or more after interventions (Paul and Gray, 2011, p. 101). Whether information about definitions and procedures is retained and applied needs exploration. This study assesses the accuracy of what students know more than 10 weeks after their orientation training, offering further insight into their retention of sexual assault-related information.

Because students, not campus or criminal justice personnel, are likely to first be told about the victimization of their peers, it is necessary to devote attention to their status as confidants. Having been confided in, what capacity do they have to help their peers choose and initiate a course of action that engages academic or criminal justice institutions? With this question in mind, this study addresses the following questions: How effective is training about a) definitions of “sexual assault” and “consent,” and b) about who on campus can be contacted confidentially and/or to activate the criminal or campus judicial systems? This further survey explores how college students rate their understanding of policies and procedures that would serve as a basis for assisting those who treat them as confidants; what college students view as the important aspects of serving as the point of first contact for victims; and what further information college students perceive that they need in order to help their peers.

**Methods**

An online survey administered in February 2015 at a medium sized, private residential Catholic university in a Mid-Atlantic city of roughly 600,000 assessed students’ knowledge and confidence in their knowledge, and their thoughts about undertaking the confidant role if sexual assault was disclosed to them by peers.

The student handbook section of the Campus Catalog (online and print) and the annual security report (online only) included definitions of “sexual assault” and “consent,” as well as information about how to make confidential reports, how to activate the campus judicial process, and how to engage the criminal justice system. Students were provided with a handbook upon arrival and an electronic link to the annual security report, which is published annually in October. Information about definitions and policy in these two documents was identical.

Sexual Assault Training received by the Class of 2017 in the fall term consisted of a presentation about “new student” survey data; an online tutorial to be completed before campus arrival that included discussion of sexual assault, healthy relationships, and stalking; and a presentation titled, “Community & Safety at University” by the Director of Student Life and the Director of Campus Safety upon students’ arrival on campus. Students also completed an online refresher course in November that reviewed definitions and asked them to apply their knowledge of sexual assault to specific scenarios.

Guided by the zeitgeist of increased national and inter-campus dialogue about Title IX compliance and bolstered prevention efforts, sexual assault training provided to the class of 2018 included everything used in 2017, and a substantive, lecture-style session administered by the Director of Student Life upon students’ arrival on campus. This two-hour session focused primarily on consent, sexual assault, and healthy relationships, although Title IX and campus support offices were briefly discussed. The session was followed by breakout discussion groups, which were moderated by campus peer leaders.

**Sampling and Data Collection**

All enrolled first- and second-year students of the classes of 2018 and 2017 served as the target population. Twenty-four weeks after the 2014 new student orientation, we coordinated with the Student Government Association (SGA) to send an email to these students requesting their participation in an anonymous study. The email contained an embedded link to a Qualtrics survey and informed students that completing it would result in their inclusion in a drawing for prizes. A follow-up reminder email was sent a week later. We made use of the SGA’s mass emailing capabilities to uncouple the survey from the administration of the orientation program.

Of the 2,166 students to whom we sent the email, 253 completed the survey, for a participation rate of 12
percent. Fifty-eight percent of students who participated were from the class of 2017, and 42 percent from the class of 2018. The majority of respondents identified as women (73.1 percent), and 24.5 percent as men. This was an over-representation of women, who comprised only 58 percent of the student body. Participation in the first-year cohort enrichment program (FYCEP; described below), for the class of 2017 and 2018 was 41 percent and 81 percent, respectively. This is representative of the class of 2017, but higher than the proportion of students enrolled in the FYCEP during 2018 (35.6 percent and 67.3 percent). The campus is regional (71 percent of students come from the middle states and 20 percent from New England) and the majority of students are white (79 percent white, 8 percent black, and 8 percent Hispanic in 2014). The majority of the student population identifies as middle class. A study of student religiosity conducted in 2008 found that students’ beliefs and worship practices were comparable to those at other Catholic institutions (Schehr and Modry-Caron, 2008).

**Measures**

**Independent Variables**

We used self-reported class year as a proxy for the nature of the mandatory sexual assault training that students received from the university. As discussed earlier, the class of 2018 received more comprehensive training about definitions than the class of 2017.

We obtained data for three other independent nominal variables that had the potential to impact students’ knowledge of resources and policies or their confidence in their knowledge: participation in the FYCEP, exposure to additional sexual assault education, and student gender.

The FYCEP involved cohorts of 16 students, who took a two-term seminar sequence together. Discussion, enrichment activities, and close contact with peers, faculty, a designated administrator, and a student leader (the FYCEP team) were intended to build academic skills, foster camaraderie, and help students situate themselves within the institution. For the class of 2018 (but not 2017), student involvement with their FYCEP cohorts began when they arrived on campus in August. Following the training session, cohort student leaders guided discussions about definitions of “sexual assault.” Students not enrolled in the FYCEP also had guided discussions, but with other leaders and students they might never again encounter.

Students were asked to describe any additional training pertaining to sexual assault that they had received as university students to address the fact that the survey was conducted 24 weeks after the fall 2014 orientation and included students who were in their second year. Their answers were coded into three categories: 1) none; 2) general programming (i.e., Take Back the Night, self-defense courses, an enrichment session, training to be a resident assistant or related position, course work, or reading on their own); and 3) bystander programming (Green Dot). Because bystander education aims to inculcate a desire and intention to intervene, exposure to it could be associated with greater confidence in one’s knowledge. However, we have no basis to believe that bystander education programming at the university offered more information about procedures for reporting or engaging adjudication processes than other types of programming. Thus, we combined the latter two categories to create a dichotomous measure (more training/no more training) for the purpose of assessing whether additional training beyond orientation was associated with higher levels of knowledge and/or confidence in sexual assault resource-related knowledge.

**Gender** was a self-report measure that asked students to identify as a man, woman, or a transgender individual. Orientation training about sexual assault was mixed by gender for both the classes of 2017 and 2018; thus, men and women in the sample received the same information.

Data on participant race, ethnicity, and religion were not recorded. These variables were not expected to impact the retention of information provided through orientation programming or individuals’ assessment of their knowledge.

**Dependent Variables**

Two measures were used to assess the impact of training: accuracy of student knowledge and confidence in understanding the sexual assault policy and resources.

**Accuracy of understanding** was determined by scoring each student’s multiple choice responses to factual questions about campus-specific “sexual assault” and “consent” definitions and procedures for reporting, including to whom confidential reports could be made and who could activate campus and criminal systems of accountability. Scores were then summed into indexes reflecting overall knowledge about definitions (0–14 points) and knowledge of reporting (0–43 points). Definitional questions
asked students to identify correct statements about what constitutes consent and sexual assault. Reporting questions asked students to identify appropriate campus offices and resources for incident reporting, mental and physical care, and judiciary process initiation after a sexual assault, as well as where this information could be located. We summed the definition and reporting indices to form a global knowledge measure (0–57 points).

Students’ confidence in their knowledge of campus sexual assault policy and related resources was measured both quantitatively and qualitatively. Students were asked to report how confident they were in their understanding of the campus policy using a Likert scale, with five indicating highly confident and one indicating not confident at all. Participants were also asked to describe their “main concern should a friend come to you seeking help after a sexual assault” and what topics, if any, regarding sexual assault they “would like to know more about” on the campus. The answers to these responses were open coded.

To ensure that students’ quantitative ratings were consistent with their narrative responses, we also asked respondents to describe their level of confidence in their “knowledge about sexual assault resources on the campus.” Four ordinal categories were developed from these responses: 1) zero to little (hardly any, none, don’t know what to do, etc.); 2) somewhat confident (fairly, relatively, pretty, or mildly); 3) confident (confident, good, medium, adequate, or decent understanding); and 4) highly confident and capable (very confident or well informed.).

Hypotheses
Analysis sought to address the following hypotheses:

1. Members of the class of 2018 would have significantly better knowledge of definitions than those in the class of 2017.
2. Students who received additional sexual assault training after orientation would have significantly better knowledge of definitions than students who did not receive additional training.
3. Measures of student definitional knowledge would not be affected by participation in the FYCEP.
4. Male and female students’ knowledge of definitions would be similar.
5. Students who received additional training, beyond that supplied through orientation, would have significantly better understanding of reporting procedures than students who did not.
6. The accuracy of students’ knowledge of definitions and reporting procedures would correlate with measures of confidence in their knowledge.
7. Thus:
   a. Students in the class of 2018 would report significantly higher confidence than those in the class of 2017.
   b. Students in FYCEP and students who were not would report similar levels of confidence.
   c. Students who received additional training after orientation would report significantly higher confidence than those who did not.
   d. Male and female students would report similar levels of confidence.
8. For the classes of 2017 and 2018, both knowledge and confidence would depend on whether or not the students were involved in additional training and/or the FYCEP program.

Results
The mean for total knowledge for the entire sample was 33.37 (SD = 4.48). The means for the subcomponents of definitions and reporting were 9.28 (SD = 2.24) and 27.20 (SD = 4.63), respectively.

Mean confidence reported on the five-point Likert scale was 2.76 (SD = 1.78). A Pearson correlation between the Likert measure of confidence and the coded open responses showed that they were strongly correlated ($r = .631, p < .001$). The total knowledge measure did not correlate with either the Likert measure ($r = .008$) or the qualitative measure ($r = .102$) of confidence in knowledge, contradicting Hypothesis 6.

Knowledge
Univariate factorial (2 x 2 x 2 x 2) ANOVAs were used to analyze differences among the independent variables on knowledge confidence, reporting knowledge, and definitional knowledge. The data supported Hypothesis 1, although the observed effect was weak. Students in the class of 2018 ($M = 9.7, SE = .348$) had significantly higher levels of definitional knowledge than students in the class of 2017, but the differences in scores were quite small ($M = 9.5, SE = .425$), $F(1, 222) = 3.409, p = .035$.

Hypothesis 2 was supported. Students with additional training ($M = 10.1, SE = .463$) had significantly higher definitional knowledge than those without ($M = 8.6, SE = .372$), $F(1, 222) = 4.997, p = .026$. 
Hypothesis 3 and 4 were additionally supported. Gender and participation in the FYCEP did not affect definitional knowledge. There were also no significant interactions between gender, class year, FYCEP participation, and additional training for definitional knowledge.

Hypothesis 5 was not supported. Additional training was not associated with reporting knowledge.

Confidence
Hypotheses concerning relationships between knowledge of definitions and confidence received some support. We found support for Hypothesis 7a. There was a main effect of class year, whereby first-year students ($M = 3.3, SE = .271$) had significantly higher confidence in their knowledge than second-year students ($M = 2.5, SE = .331$), $F(1, 224) = 3.283, p = .039$.

Hypothesis 7b was supported as well. Students who participated in the FYCEP ($M = 3.4, SE = .267$) had higher confidence in their knowledge than those who did not ($M = 1.83, SD = .359$), but the results did not meet our alpha criterion of .05: $F(1, 224) = 3.565, p = .06$.

In contrast, Hypothesis 7c was not supported. Students with additional training in sexual assault content did not have significantly higher confidence in their knowledge than those without it. The quantitative confidence of men and women was not significantly different, supporting Hypothesis 7d.

Lack of significant interactions among gender, class year, FYCEP participation, and additional training for confidence in knowledge contradicted Hypothesis 8.

Student Intentions and Desire for Information
Sixty-two and a half percent of the 253 study participants described the primary course of action they would take should a peer come to them in need of assistance after being sexually assaulted. Seventy-three percent of those who identified an action indicated that they would attempt to ensure the general safety of the friend, but did not describe a specific means for doing so; 16 percent said they would assist the friend in reporting to the proper authority; 5 percent said they would ensure the immediate physical health of the friend via medical assistance; and 4 percent said they would attend to the emotional wellbeing of the friend through the university counseling center or residence life office.

The 43.4 percent of the 253 participants who indicated wanting additional information “about how to respond to sexual assault” specified the following topics: policy and procedural information such as reporting procedures and legislative information related to the Clery Act and Title IX (51 percent); information about survivor support advocacy (16 percent); bystander awareness training (12 percent); and information about the incidence rate of sexual assault on campus (6 percent). Fifteen percent of respondents who wanted additional information did not provide substantive or interpretable responses.

Students made additional comments about a need for procedural information focused on their desire to better understand the logistics of making reports, who on campus was appropriate to approach in confidence, and what the differences are between the campus and criminal systems. The following three examples are illustrative:

“Orientation needs to include more about policies on sexual assault and how situations will be handled … letting them [victims] know every place they can go on campus for help, what forms must be filled out, the time frame to report it, consequences for the offender, etc. I know the answers to none of these questions and am in the second half of my sophomore year. Regarding the incidents of last semester, that is troubling when I really reflect on how much I do not know.”
— Sophomore, woman

“I understand the concept of sexual assault, but I have hardly any idea how to actually proceed with reporting an incident.”
— First-year, man

“I think that most people understand what consent is and they know that has to be verbal and cannot be forced, however I cannot confidently say that me or any of my friends are totally comfortable with knowing which resources to use on campus.”
— Sophomore, woman

Discussion
The current study examined differences in students’ confidence in their knowledge of definitions and sexual assault resources and campus policies across class year, participation in a first-year cohort enrichment program, and whether or not they had additional, non-required training or education in sexual assault. Key results indicated
that those who had additional training beyond formal orientation had more accurate definitional knowledge in comparison to their peers. Meaningful differences in definitional knowledge were not found between the class of 2018 and the class of 2017; however, the class of 2018 — those who had received a more recent and extensive training — were more confident in their understanding. Students who participated in the FYECP, through which these issues receive more discussion during orientation training, also expressed greater confidence in their sexual assault knowledge.

Given that those who reported higher confidence did not have significantly higher levels of knowledge, it is relevant to discuss the ways in which sexual assault training programs may provide students with an inflated sense of confidence or awareness, yet lack the necessary educational scaffolding for responding to assaults. Narrative responses supported this concern, as respondents indicated that they desired greater policy and procedural information than any other type of information about sexual assault. While many universities have increased their mandatory sexual assault trainings for incoming students due to heightened national awareness about Title IX breaches and major publicity scandals, this may have produced more confident students, but not necessarily more knowledgeable ones. Further research is required to test the possibility that standard training methods provide students with a false sense of confidence in their knowledge about what sexual assault is, what resources are available, and how to pursue adjudication on campus.

Why did the expanded training in August 2014 that focused explicitly on definitions of “consent” and “sexual assault” not result in a meaningful difference in knowledge between the class of 2018 and the class of 2017? It is quite possible that factors such as general publicity on campus (i.e., Sexual Assault Awareness week, held in April 2014, and a “Consent is Sexy” campaign during the fall of 2014) brought the class of 2017 to an understanding of campus definitions comparable to new students in the class of 2018 who had the expanded orientation training. It is also possible that the extra session received by the class of 2018 did not give them information that went beyond the online training they had already completed, or they were exhausted at the end of a long orientation day and tuned out the presentation. We believe this second possibility is less likely, given the class of 2018’s higher confidence in their knowledge.

Although all students had access to documents that described reporting procedures, in compliance with the Clery Act, the training they received — online, lecture presentations, and face-to-face discussions — did not focus on post-assault decision-making. Thus, it is not surprising that we discovered no significant differences in reporting knowledge between students who received training in 2013 and 2014, or who did and did not receive additional post-orientation training. Students’ comments spoke specifically to their lack of understanding about how to activate administrative and criminal justice processes and whom they could consult confidentially.

Participation in the FYCEP may have been associated with greater confidence in knowledge for two reasons. First, students who discussed the content of the lecture with a group of peers and a leader with whom they would have a long-term relationship may have had deeper conversations and thus felt more confident in their understanding. This possibility is consistent with previous findings that small group discussions lead to greater reduction in rape myth acceptance (Vladutiu et al., 2011). Second, some of the FYCEP teams may have returned to the issue of defining “sexual assault” and “consent” through enrichment sessions, raising the group mean. This possibility is consistent with what Vladutiu et al. (2011) reported is effective in reducing rape myth acceptance. Although these students had higher confidence levels, their knowledge was not better than the average student. While it is important that students have spaces for critical discussion about sexual assault issues, further research might examine the ways in which this increased confidence can be paired with a more robust knowledge regarding campus policies and resources.

Our discovery that students in the class of 2018 were more confident in their understanding of campus policy than the class of 2017, independent of an objective measure of greater knowledge, is worthy of consideration. It is possible that students who were aware that they had received training on definitions, because they sat through a lecture, simply believed themselves to be better prepared, independent of what they knew. Second, students may think about what they learn in terms of working knowledge and not mastery. A more extensive, in-person orientation may have provided them with a level of understanding that felt more useful than what they received online, whereas the measure developed for this study was derived from written policy and measured
mastery. Third, students’ confidence reports may point only to their perceived ability to offer empathy and provide immediate security to their peers. As indicated in their open comments, they did not feel well prepared to help their peers make decisions about reporting to officials on or off campus.

Students who feel confident in their knowledge are more likely to extend themselves to peers, yet lacking accurate knowledge relevant to decision-making, their actual assistance may be limited. Campus administrators must take this potential byproduct of training seriously.

When given the opportunity to comment openly about their needs, students expressed a desire for more information about procedures. This may follow from knowing that they had explicitly received training on definitions, but not procedures, or from the way they responded to a timely warning email that they received in the fall. The email presented them with information that a student-on-student assault had taken place in a campus dorm, perhaps causing students to recognize their lack of procedural knowledge. This possibility suggests that Fisher et al.’s (2003) concern about the relationship between information and context is relevant. In addition to providing information as part of the timely warning, offering additional educational opportunities about procedures for making confidential reports, how to secure accommodations, how to access medical treatment, and on- and off-campus systems for holding assailants accountable would be useful.

Students’ concerns about their lack of procedural knowledge suggests that engaging in passive education about these issues, through handbooks, annual security reports, and even websites, is insufficient (Vladutiu et al., 2011). Sexual assault education delivered in-person to students should encompass procedures in place on campus for responding to assaults.

Our finding of no gender differences in knowledge indicates that mixed gender programming is acceptable for educating students about definitions and policies (Vladutiu et al., 2011). The absence of a gender difference in confidence levels also suggests that both men and women feel capable of assisting their peers. However, it is possible that the gender similarity could be due to self-selection (i.e., only men and women who were invested in issues of sexual assault chose to complete the survey).

Limitations
This is an exploratory study conducted as an opportunistic quasi-experiment. As such, membership in the experimental and control groups (classes of 2018 and 2017) were not randomized and/or matched. To further validate the study’s results, more rigorous study conditions are needed. While the results suggest the persistence of effects beyond 10 weeks in contrast to Paul and Gray’s (2011) report of attenuation, lack of a pretest makes it impossible to establish this definitively.

Our collection of data about participants’ exposure to additional programming sought to control for external effects. However, we had no control over maturation effects in the older class of 2017, and we did not have information about respondents’ exposure to sexual assault programming prior to enrollment. Yet, following Fisher et al. (2003), we postulate that an additional year spent navigating the university likely provided the class of 2017 with a greater context for their knowledge and contributed to greater confidence in that knowledge. This was not the case, lending more credibility to the argument that the differences that we found in confidence levels resulted from differences in the formal training that the classes of 2017 and 2018 received. We also had no control over historic factors that impacted students in the fall of 2014, including the report of a sexual assault on campus. However, we know that all students were sent the same administrative email about it, and that they also received the same October email message with a link to the online, federally mandated annual security report. Additional training beyond orientation resulted in greater knowledge; however, we cannot determine what types of training were most effective from our data.

It is not possible to generalize these results to the campus. The response rate was low and the sample also reflects the potentially unique sector of students who were interested in the topic to begin with. Additionally, women were over-represented in the study population. We also do not know to what extent outcomes were affected by participants’ race, class, or religiosity.

The study assessed students’ knowledge and their self-assessed capacity to act, not their intent to help, or actual reports of helping behavior. There is no guarantee that attitudes actually translate into behavior, or that knowledge will either. This study has also established statistical significance, not clinical relevance, and as Paul and Gray
(2011) have pointed out, it is essential to develop programming that achieves clinical relevance.

**Recommendations**

Sabina and Ho (2014) challenged colleges and universities to view “disclosure and service utilization as the responsibility not only of the individual, but also of the campus,” and to shift “the focus in research and practice from service utilization to service availability” (p. 222). We agree with them, and argue that attention must be paid to what students know, how prepared it makes them feel to act, and what they believe they need to take action when it’s warranted. While campuses may want students who have been sexually assaulted to come directly to administrators who are “trained’ to manage cases and interface with law enforcement, it is more likely that students will disclose to a peer before they go to campus police (or other form of law enforcement), an administrator, resident assistant, campus minister, counselor, etc. It is thus imperative that students understand the difference between confidential and non-confidential reporting, how to activate accountability processes (administrative and criminal) and navigate campus-based adjudication, and how to provide emotional support in a way that is not victim-blaming. Students can be assets in guiding peers to resources (Konradi and DeBruin, 2003).

This study suggests that to be most effective, bystander programs should be tailored to campuses and their specific policies and procedures. General programming should further include poster campaigns, public service announcements, and distribution of display items to students that contain key campus contacts (e.g., refrigerator magnets or key fobs).

A student body that is unaware of vital post-sexual assault policies and resources enables university administrators to operate quietly and conveniently. When students are not critically informed about the rights to which they are entitled, it remains alarmingly easy for universities to use publicity-minimizing “in-house” tactics to deal with sexual assaults. Campus sexual assault prevention programming and education should provide students with the necessary tools for seeking care, navigating the adjudication process, and recognizing sexual assault, stalking, and intimate partner violence. Further research should explore the scope of procedural information that students need and how they can best retain it.

**Endnotes**

1. We use college student and undergraduate student interchangeably.
2. Our concern here is not about students’ general knowledge about sexual assault or about what Title IX or the Clery Act require. Rather, we are interested in what they know about information that is specific to their campus.
3. The authors characterize the information as “poor.”
4. Paul and Gray (2011) also highlight the importance of the size of training groups on outcomes.
5. Students are asked to complete a questionnaire anonymously about their beliefs and behaviors, including their drinking habits. Reviewing the aggregate data with students allows student life staff to put issues on the table for discussion.
6. The university uses the “Think About It Online Tutorial with Relationships Module.” Students must demonstrate that they have “clicked through” the entire program to receive access to their rooms.
7. The completion rate for the refresher course is 94 percent.
8. Figures were obtained from the university website.
9. We did not record information about training students received prior to their arrival on campus or ask students about whether they had previously been sexually assaulted.
10. Although two students identified as transgender, their data was excluded from analyses on this variable due to an insufficient number of cases needed to perform parametric tests. It is important to note that more research is needed to assess the sexual assault resource-related knowledge and confidence of transgender, queer, and non-gender conforming college students.
11. It is possible that participants’ race or ethnicity could affect their trust in administrators to follow procedures; however, the dependent variables focused on their perceived ability to help someone make a decision about reporting and using resources, not on what decision they would advocate for a peer who had been assaulted.
12. In the second week of September 2014, a sexual assault occurred in one of the campus dorms, and
an incident alert was transmitted to all students via email. It described where the assault occurred, stated that the victim had been taken to the hospital for a forensic examination, and indicated that campus police and student life were investigating.

References


