National Organization for Victim Advocacy

Strengthening Student Engagement:

Campus Strategies for Addressing Domestic Violence, Dating Violence, Sexual Assault, and Stalking (DVSAS)

Photo source: canva.com

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Special Thanks to Our Contributors

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Center for Changing Our Campus Culture

CAMPUS Technical Assistance and Resource Project

Introduction

At the National Organization for Victim Advocacy (NOVA), we understand that prevention and response to domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault, and stalking (DVSAS) on college campuses requires partnership, engagement and rapport building with students.

Campus-based professionals play a critical role in supporting student survivors of DVSAS. According to the The National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey, nearly **1 in 5 women and 1 in 14 men experienced sexual violence, domestic violence, and/or stalking during their lifetime.[1] The rates are even higher for culturally specific student communities.[2]** Despite expanded campus prevention and response infrastructures, many survivors remain unseen and unsupported due to enduring barriers that influence whether, when, and how students seek help.

While DVSAS continues to impact college campuses, there are strategies that can help campuses engage students—especially survivors—in ways that increase safety, belonging, and access to support while strengthening prevention and response.

Engaging students is most effective when strategies are grounded in and reflect the unique perspectives, experiences, and needs of student communities. By centering student voices and prioritizing their lived experiences, campus-based professionals can more effectively identify and address barriers to support, understand help-seeking behaviors, and respond to the specific concerns of unique student populations. This student-centered approach fosters environments of trust and belonging, strengthens the effectiveness of prevention and response efforts, and reduces obstacles to accessing resources. Ultimately, it promotes healing, empowerment, and meaningful engagement—calling on campus-based professionals to lead with empathy and responsiveness to student needs.

[1] Smith, S. G., Zhang, X., Basile, K. C., Merrick, M. T., Wang, J., Kresnow, M., & Chen, J. (2018). The National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey: 2015 data brief – updated release. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

[2] Collington, D., Carter, M., Tolliver, A., & Turner-Musa, J. (2019). Sexual Assault Among College Students Attending a Historically Black College/University. American journal of undergraduate research, 15(4), 37–45. https://doi.org/10.33697/ajur.2019.004

Understanding the Impact of Student Experiences

When working with students from a wide-range of experiences and backgrounds, remember that their perspectives are shaped not only by their time in college but also by the life experiences they bring with them. Their families, communities, and past interactions with institutions all influence how they show up and engage on campus.

Students want to be actively involved in shaping their campus environments and the resources designed to support them. They seek to see themselves and their communities reflected in these initiatives, and ensuring that student voices are heard is essential for meaningful engagement. A 2021 study found that students are more receptive to violence prevention programming when it is led by a "relatable peer facilitator who is attuned to the dynamics of campus life." [3]

Practice Tip: Meet Students Where They Are

Every student's perspective is shaped long before they arrive on campus. Take time to learn their stories, listen to what engagement means to them, and build on the spaces where they already feel connected. Responsive, student-centered approaches create trust and belonging that make true engagement possible.

Programs that empower students to lead, with guidance from campus-based professionals not only satisfy student preferences but also create more authentic and effective learning experiences. **Think about how your campus can create programs designed to help students shape their campus community.** Doing so will help students and student survivors gain the tools and confidence to carry these important conversations beyond formal settings, fostering awareness and change within their friend groups and broader communities.

[3] Philyaw-Kotov, M. L., Walton, M. A., Brenneman, B., Gleckman-Krut, M., Davis, A. K., & Bonar, E. E. (2023). *What undergraduates want in campus sexual assault prevention programming: Findings from a formative research study*. Journal of American college health : J of ACH, 71(6), 1879–1886. https://doi.org/10.1080/07448481.2021.1950161

Steps for Understanding Student Needs

This section of the toolkit outlines specific steps to help campus-based professionals better understand the needs of their students. As you review the steps, reflect on the unique student populations represented on your campus and consider how each step can be adapted to align with your campus culture, student demographics, and opportunities that are specific to your campus.

When engaging with student communities on campus it is important to build a strong foundation of trust and rapport to better understand the unique needs of students, challenges, and barriers. This process also creates opportunities to expand your own or your team's knowledge and responsiveness. Reflect on these core questions to assess your current approach and identify ways to more effectively meet students where they are.

1

Gather Information

Reflect on what you currently know about the student communities you serve on campus and identify what more you need to learn. Consider where and how you can gather this information:

- Are you reviewing campus climate surveys, facilitating focus groups, or collaborating with student-facing offices or population specific centers to learn more?
- Does the information you are gathering accurately reflect the experiences of the communities you are working with?

2

Building Relationships

Building meaningful partnerships requires time, trust, and reciprocity. Consider the following guiding questions:

- What relationships do you currently have with students, faculty/staff, and community partners?
- Where can new collaborations and partnerships be built—especially with trauma-informed, population specific, survivor-centered organizations that reflect the communities you serve?

Steps for Understanding Student Needs

3

Create Opportunities

Creating opportunities to identify and reduce barriers that limit student engagement and access to DVSAS-related services and supports. Consider where students may find the most barriers to accessing services or policies related to DVSAS.

- How can you intentionally reduce barriers—such as language access, or community stigma—and create new opportunities for students to lead and participate in prevention and response strategies?

4

Foster Student Leadership

Student leadership brings advocacy to life. When students help shape prevention and response efforts, the work becomes more authentic and lasting. Consider the following guiding questions:

- Are students themselves included in shaping these ongoing dialogues through leadership roles such as peer advocates, peer educators, or other?
- What timelines or systems are in place to ensure these connections are long-term and sustainable?

Strategies for Student-Centered Engagement

What we may deem as helpful may be harmful or a potential barrier to students due to their lived experiences. Creating engagement strategies without adopting a tailored approach to the specific needs of your campus community, may unintentionally isolate or harm students. To create more adaptable, student-centered engagement, consider the following strategies:

Create space for Student Voice and Choice

Invite students to define what support looks like for them, what safety means, what people/groups/communities constitute their network, and how they prefer to be engaged. Even when students are unsure, allow the space for that to exist.

Address access and connections proactively

Before engaging with students, anticipate and plan for access needs by providing accommodations. This may include addressing physical access, providing resources in plain language, having interpreters and translated materials ready, or creating policies that prioritize people's differing needs. Meet students where they are by integrating tools that support them in expressing their access needs, empowering them to shape their own narratives, and reminding them that they are in control of their process.

Strategies for Student-Centered Engagement

Create targeted outreach and communication plans

Design outreach efforts that will help you intentionally work with specific student communities. These plans should also be translated to meet the language needs of the campus community. Your plans should demonstrate an understanding of who your student communities are on campus and how they prefer to receive information.

Leverage digital engagement tools

Use social media strategically and make it work for you! Creating and sharing resources and information on platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, Threads, etc. can help increase engagement and visibility. Consider creative approaches, such as "going live" with campus departments, starting a "Thread" on prevention tips, or sharing information and scenarios on TikTok to make your outreach dynamic and relatable.

Foster peer connection and community

Offer opportunities for students to network and build community. Peer to peer engagement is essential to the college experience. Encourage student-led spaces for information sharing, leadership development, and student advocacy to help sustain and strengthen your efforts.

Strategies for Student-Centered Engagement

Regularly assess and adapt your efforts

Use student input and feedback to further develop response strategies. Share how you are making improvements with students to demonstrate a commitment to adapting programs to their needs.

Build connections with local community resources

Get familiar with the local community resources in your area, such as faith institutions, cultural organizations, community organizations, the arts community, etc. These partnerships can provide additional spaces for students to connect to art, culture, and community, which can be a critical component of healing for many. Partner with these local institutions on events or outreach.

Empower Student Voices

Create opportunities for students to become advocates against DVSAS, or to share their stories in their own ways. **Participation should always be voluntary.** Student survivors should always have full control to share as much or as little as they want, and to share in the way they feel is most authentic and safe for their experience.

Where to Begin: Team Reflection Starter

Don't know where to start? Use these core questions to help your campus Coordinated Community Response (CCR) Team assess where you are now and where you can grow. Use these questions during your next CCR team meeting or planning session to foster open dialogue and collective action.

1. **Safety & Belonging:** How can we adapt our prevention and response efforts to prioritize safety and belonging for student communities on campus?
2. **Student Voice:** In what ways are student voices meaningfully included in planning or decision-making?
3. **Building Trust:** What is one strategy we use to establish trust with students and survivors on campus?
4. **Representation:** What steps can we take to ensure a variety of student experiences inform our DVSAS prevention and response strategies?

Need additional support?

NOVA Student Populations Team:
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For additional information visit the NOVA Website: trynova.org

NOVA A Community for Advocates

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