

The Crucial Role of Campus Sexual Violence Advocacy Programs: A Call for Implementation and Research

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Campus sexual violence (SV) has emerged as a significant public health concern in the United States (Mellins et al., 2017), demanding comprehensive interventions within higher education institutions. In 2014, the White House Task Force called for efforts to better identify and prevent this issue, spurring increased attention to violence prevention and response on college campuses (Senn et al., 2018). In response, campus advocacy programs have become pivotal in supporting survivors and fostering safer environments.

Campus sexual violence (SV) advocates play a vital role in supporting survivors and fostering safer academic environments. These trained professionals or peer supporters provide confidential assistance, crisis intervention, and ongoing support to survivors of SV on college campuses. SV advocates serve as a crucial link between survivors and the often-complex Title IX process, offering guidance, emotional support, and empowerment (Wood et al., 2021). The services provided by campus SV advocates are comprehensive and multifaceted, including confidential support and counseling for survivors, assistance in navigating the reporting process and legal systems, coordination of medical care and forensic exams, advocacy for

academic accommodations, referrals to on campus and community resources, and education and prevention programs for the campus community. By collaborating with campus officials and students, advocates develop and implement policies and protocols that prioritize survivor well-being and ensure a trauma-informed approach to prevention and response (Wood et al., 2021).

The potential impact of SV advocacy programs is significant, given the prevalence and consequences of campus sexual violence. Approximately 13% of college students report experiencing rape or sexual assault, with higher rates among undergraduate women (25.9%) and gender nonconforming students (22.8%) compared to cisgender men (7%) (Cantor et al., 2020). Survivors often experience multiple forms of psychopathology, including PTSD, depression, anxiety, increased suicide risk, disordered eating, and substance abuse (Dworkin et al., 2017). A large-scale study found that compared to non-victims, survivors reported significantly higher rates of loneliness, hopelessness, difficulty functioning, overwhelming anxiety, and sleep problems (American College Health Association, 2016). Moreover, a systematic review on the impact of

campus SV on educational outcomes revealed that across all studies, sexual assault was associated with more academic problems including lower grade point average, dropping out of university, and self-regulated learning problems (Molstad et al., 2023). These impacts underscore the critical need for SV advocates.

While anecdotal evidence strongly supports the positive impact of advocacy services, there is a striking lack of empirical research evaluating their effectiveness. This gap in research is particularly concerning given the widespread implementation of these programs and their potential to significantly influence survivor outcomes. Limited available studies show promising results. Recipients of advocacy services report less violence exposure over time (Voth Schrag et al., 2024), and survivors indicate that advocates help mitigate barriers to seeking support by improving awareness of resources and addressing fears of judgment (Dills et al., 2016). However, more comprehensive research is urgently needed to fully understand and optimize the impact of these programs.

We call for immediate action on multiple fronts to implement SV advocacy programs. Institutions of higher education should

prioritize the establishment and expansion of high-quality, evidence-based campus SV advocacy programs, ensuring they are well-resourced and integrated into the campus support framework. We urge researchers, institutions, and funding bodies to conduct rigorous evaluations of campus SV advocacy programs, including a range of methodologies from quantitative outcome studies to qualitative investigations of survivors' experiences, with a particular emphasis on longitudinal research to understand long-term impacts. Additionally, policymakers should work to create and enforce high-quality ethical standards for campus SV advocacy programs. As survivors ourselves, we understand the profound impact of SV on college students' holistic health. By investing in both the implementation and evaluation of campus SV advocacy programs, we can create safer, more supportive environments for all students while contributing to evidence-based practices in campus sexual violence prevention and response. The time for action is now – to support survivors through advocacy programs and to conduct the necessary research to refine and improve these crucial interventions.

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