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Condom on a Cucumber: The Sex Education Needs of Trinity College Students

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“Condom on a Cucumber”: The Sex Education Needs
of Trinity College Students

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Research Paper
Trinity College
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“Condom on a Cucumber”: The Sex Education Needs of Trinity College Students

Introduction

Sex education is a controversial and sensitive subject. Many factors determine the type of sex education that is part of a school districts curriculum or lack thereof such as parental beliefs and desires, geographical area, and policies, to name a few. The sex education students do or do not receive is very important because it can easily affect how an individual's behavior. College students are assumed to have enough accurate knowledge about sex and related topics to make educated decisions that will not harm them or other, in any physical, mental or emotional realm. However, this may be a broad generalization.

My research question is: What are Trinity College student's sex education needs? To further explore this question, I will also be asking: What type of sex education did they receive in High School? Have they attended sex education programs at Trinity? Where sources they turn to for information on this topic? and What are some of their opinions about certain sex education topics? By focusing on these other questions I was able to determine what type of information that Trinity College student's require and want to learn about.

For the purpose of this research I defined certain terms that were commonly used. “Sex education needs” refers to a combination of student's understanding of sex topics, what the students articulate that they would like to know more about and what administrators believe would be important for these students to know more about. “Extensive sex education” refers to an understanding of extensive sex topics including

sex, birth control, rape and sexual harassment. It is similar to the commonly used “comprehensive sex education” however, not as broad.

This research has significance for the Trinity community and also in a broader context. Trinity College administrators will be able to benefit most directly from this study; however, this can provide information to many other organizations that are involved in informing people of sex and related topics, such as religious organizations and clinics. These places will be able to use this data to determine what information must be available to people through pamphlets or information sessions. It also has educational insights such as what methods of instruction are most effective. The information that is given during a sex education class must be remembered by these students for years to come. Therefore the method for instruction must be engaging and informative. Using the information from this study about what students found effective and remember about their sex education classes can aid education in a larger realm because these techniques can be used in other subject areas also. High schools can benefit from knowing where students are getting their information which may aid in constructing beneficial education classes. Parents may also have an advantage knowing the results of this research. Many are uneasy about discussing such topics with their child, however, it may help them if they realize what type of sex education students typically have and what students are lacking, if anything.

This study also focuses on the type of information that the students are interested in learning, which is a different approach than much of the research that is currently available. If you cater to what the students are interested in they will be more willing to listen and pay attention to the information. This is especially important on a college

campus when administrators are trying to get high attendance at their events where participation is not required. My research will provide Trinity administrators with the topics that these students are interested in and topics that they are lacking knowledge in, and therefore they will be able to create informational programs that this student population will benefit from and be interested in attending.

Through this research I found that, even though most Trinity students have received sex education in their high school career, many lack extensive sex education and rely on sources that are not completely trustworthy. In addition there are a variety of topics that students would benefit from knowing more about such as topics that are issues on campus and also ones that students show interest in.

Literature Review/Conceptual Framework

The resources available on college student's sex education needs are very limited. The main focus of research is on determining the effectiveness of types of programs that are provided by high schools. This is one of the reasons that made my research appealing. Although it is beneficial to understand the types of effective programs that are used with teens, college students are a different population and therefore different methods must be used. However, it is unfairly assumed by many researchers that college students already have a basic set of knowledge which does not always hold true. The research also failed to include student opinions and what they are interested in learning more about.

When research was mentioned about college, it was about programs that were effective. One strategy that was discussed that had an extremely positive outcome was a

peer education program that was established on a college campus. Sawyer, Pinciario, and Bedwell (1997) discuss the positive impact that it had on the people who were the peer educators. They noted that students rely on peers for their major source of information which can be detrimental if the information being passed on is inaccurate which is a topic my research investigates. This is one reason that peer educators are such a popular method of education. The peer educators that they focused on had increase levels of safer sexual behavior, confidence, and self-esteem after one year of being a peer educator. This is a different aspect of peer education because it is not a focus on the recipients of the education, but the benefits gained from actually being an educator.

Another way to reach college students with educational information about sex is through the campus radio. Van Haveren, Blank and Bentley (2001) studied this type of program at Kansas City University which proved successful. The hosts of the show were two psychology predoctoral interns and an obstetrician gynecologist. They encouraged people to call in and ask questions which made the show more interesting and also tried to get many guest hosts. For example, for the show about alcohol and sex, they broadcasted it from another student service office. Not only did this keep the show more interesting but it also gave the students more information about what services were available on campus. Both the radio and peer-educators are interesting and engaging ways to educate students, however, neither one of these articles directly addressed the needs of the students and what topics they wanted or needed to learn about. However, I do believe that this type of research could be extremely beneficial in creating ideas of programs for Trinity once it is established what the student's needs are.

Methodology

To conduct this research I used a survey and interviews. The survey was comprised of thirty-seven questions, with three open-response questions and the rest multiple choice. It was e-mailed to two hundred randomly selected freshman and sophomores, one hundred from each grade, after approval from the IRB. I decided to use freshman and sophomores because they will be at Trinity for the longest and will be able to benefit the most if administrators do decide to use this information to create sex education programs. These students will also be the ones who will most likely have the best memory of their high school sex education.

The survey included questions about source of sex education, high school sex education, sex, birth control, pregnancy, sexual harassment, relationships, Trinity College sex education programs, and what they are interested in knowing more about (see survey in appendix). This data was then analyzed using SPSS. The open response questions were about what they remember about their high school sex education, methods of birth control, and information about sex they would like to know more about. These open response questions gave me the chance to further understand these students' ideas about this topic.

The interviews were conducted with the Director of the Women's Center, Laura Lockwood and Director of the Health Center, Julia Taka (pseudonym). I was able to have a face to face conversation with Laura, however, had to converse with Julia through e-mails. Some of the questions that I discussed with them included: What type of programs do you think Trinity lacks? What do you believe the most important aspect of

this subject is for the students to know? What kinds of sex education programs does Trinity provide now? (See interview questions in appendix).

Findings

There were numerous insightful and interesting findings from this data. However, I will focus on main trends that I found that are most pertinent to my research question. First I will focus on the survey. There were 80 respondents, 60 percent females and 40 percent males. Of this group, 83 percent had received sex education as part of their high school education. This could mean in a class or even an event or speech that was sponsored by the school. However, the type of high school education greatly varies from in depth programs, to just learning how to put a “condom on a cucumber.” I spilt my findings into three major parts to accommodate the discussion and areas that I focus on later on.

Lack of Extensive Sex Education and Unreliable Resources

One of the questions in the survey asked was: “If a girl is on a birth control pill, is it still possible for her to: contract an STD? get pregnant? contract AIDS?” and the respondent had to answer yes or no for each question. The correct answer for all of these questions is yes. For the STD question, 1.4 percent (one student) thought that the answer was no. Six students (8.1 percent) got the question wrong about pregnancy and one student (1.4 percent) got the question wrong about contracting AIDS.

Another question that I asked was “Currently, what source do you turn to most often (for sex education information)?” Friends was the greatest source with 66.7 percent

turning to them for information, then 14 percent turn to the internet, 9 percent to High School education, 3.8 percent to parents, 2.6 percent turn to siblings and Trinity sex education events, and 1.3 rely on TV.

Integrating the answers from the two above questions we can determine the sources that students are relying on if they got the question about birth control wrong. Both people who got the question wrong about birth control and STDs relies on friends for sex information. All but one person who got the question about pregnancy wrong also relies on their friends. The other person relies on their high school education. Lastly, the person who got the question wrong about AIDS also relies on their friends.

Related to this topic are Trinity events. Forty-eight percent have attended one or more sex education event organized by Trinity College. Of these students 18.4 percent found it very helpful, 79 percent found it somewhat helpful and 2.6 percent found it not helpful at all. Males were more likely to find them helpful, but less likely to go. Of the males surveyed, 36.7 percent had attended an event and of these students, 4 (33.3 percent) found it very helpful, 8 (66.7 percent) found it somewhat helpful and no one found it not helpful at all. Of the females, 56.8 percent (25 students) have attended an event. Three of whom found it very helpful (11.5 percent), 22 found it somewhat helpful (84.6 percent), and one female student (3.8 percent) found it not helpful at all.

Sexual Harassment

Included in the section about high school education, were questions about whether they learned about rape, date rape drugs, and sexual assaults. Seventy-eight percent learned about rape and date rape drugs, and 69.7 percent learned about sexual assaults.

Also asked was have you been sexually harassed while at Trinity College, which 26.4 percent of the students believe that they have. This included 15 females (34.9 percent of females) and 4 males (13.8 percent of males). An interesting aspect, which correlates with Trinity events, was the relationship between attending a Trinity event and the student perceiving that they were sexually harassed. Of the students who believed they have been sexually harassed, 63.2 percent (12 students) had attended a Trinity event, and 36.8 percent (seven students) had not. Of the students had not perceived that they have been sexually harassed, 42.4 percent of these students (23 people) had been to a Trinity event, and 56.6 percent (30 students) had not.

Sexual Acts and Drinking

Included in this survey was a question incorporating sexual harassment and drinking which asked: "Does being drunk or under the influence of a substance make the guidelines for sexual harassment more lenient?" A total of 18 students (24.3 percent) felt that they have, which included 27.3 percent of the females (12 students) and 20 percent of the males (6 students). Another question on this topic that was part of this survey was "Have you ever made a sexual decision when under the influence of alcohol that you have regretted later?" Forty-three students (58.1 percent) believe that they have, 26 of whom were female and 17 were male. Respect for your body and sexual acts were a common theme during the interviews that I conducted, which will be analyzed in during the discussion.

Topics of Interest

There was a multiple choice question and a free-response question for this topic. The free-response question was located on the page before the multiple choice question, so that there was no prompting of responses. The free-response questions asked: “What kinds of information related to sex would you like to learn about?” for which there were a variety of answers, but due to the fact that it was towards the end of the survey there were less responses than the other free-response questions. Six people mentioned that there was “nothing” that they needed to know about. For the following topics there were two people who mentioned each: oral sex and its hazards, abortions and alternatives, statistics at Trinity, positions and karma sutra.

The multiple choice question asked: “Would you like to know more about,” and stated to select all that were of interest. The options were: safe sex, masturbation, sexual harassment, STDs, what’s normal/what’s not, rape, and getting tested. The following were the number of people (with the percentage in parentheses) who responded to each option: 17 (21.3) for safe sex, 13 (16.3) for masturbation, 12 (15) for sexual harassment, 17 (21.3) for STDs, 34 (42.5) for what’s normal/what’s not, 11 (13.8) for rape and 32 (40) for getting tested. The majority of this data will not be used directly in the discussion, however, is important for the implications of this study and future research.

Discussion

Lack of Extensive Sex Education and Unreliable Resources

In the survey I wanted to get an idea of misconceptions and knowledge people had about sex education and therefore decided to ask questions about birth control pills.

This subject was chosen because it is a basic topic of sex education and a form of birth control that is commonly used. Although many people got this question right it is still significant that some got the answers wrong.

The most intriguing aspect of this is that all the people who got these questions wrong, except one, rely on friends for sex information. This is important because many people rely on their friends. Evidence shows that friends are not always a reliable resource and which makes the fact that so many are relying on their friends dangerous because this can become a cycle of misinformation. The more dependable sources, such as Trinity sex education events, are not ones that students are relying on. Even though almost half of these students filled out who the survey have attended one or more of these programs and 97.3 percent have found them either somewhat or very helpful, people are not relying on them for their information. Trinity's programs must not be covering the topics that students need to know more about. This is understandable considering that Trinity offers very few events and lacks variety in their events. Currently, there are only two big programs that occur during the year: Vagina Monologues and Maria Falzone, a sex education comedian. There use to be a Health Education Coordinator on campus that would organize events however, the college has not had one since last fall semester. Julia Taka, the Director of the Health Center believes that Trinity is lacking programming. Both Julia, and Laura Lockwood, Director of the Women's Center believe that Trinity would greatly improve its sex education with Peer Educators. These people could be available to students to be a major source of information on sex topics and also be reliable due to the fact that they would be trained and be acquiring their information from

the Health Center and Women's Center. This would also be a great source because students are turning to their friends for information.

Sexual Harassment

The majority of students recall learning about condoms, spermicide, diaphragms, birth control, abortions, STDs and HIV and AIDS as part of their high school sex education. Another subject that was remembered by about 73 percent of students was rape, date rape drugs, and sexual assault. Although these are topics that students are aware of still 26.4 percent believe that they have been sexually harassed while at Trinity College. Even though sexual assault does differ slightly from sexual harassment, it can be inferred that this topic was covered in most high school sex education classes if they had learned about sexual assault, rape and date rape drugs. Sexual harassment was also not defined in the survey because I was interested in their perceptions of whether they have been sexually harassed or not. The data about the number of people who perceive that they have been sexually harassed can be seen in both a positive and negative light. These students are only freshman or sophomores, which means that they have only been on this campus for either one semester or three semesters. It can be extremely surprising that these students, particularly females (40 percent of whom feel like they have been sexually harassed) feel like they have experienced this in the short time at this college. It also can be seen as a positive thing because it could possibly indicate that people are knowledgeable about this topic. If so many people believe that it has happened to them, maybe they have an understanding of sexual harassment. Even if this is true, it is still a topic that Trinity programs could address to attempt to decrease this occurrence. An

example is focusing on the reporting of it, which may deter students from committing an act of sexual harassment.

An interesting link is between whether or not a person has been sexually harassed and if they had attended a Trinity sex education event. Research demonstrates that if they believed that they had been sexually harassed, they were more likely to have attended a Trinity event than not. However, if they believed that they had not been sexually harassed, they were more likely not to have attended a Trinity event. The students who perceive that they have been sexually harassed may already be more aware of sex topics and are actively pursuing to learn more. Attending an event could possibly be due to the fact that they feel like they have been sexually harassed and they are seeking to learn about the facilities available on campus to help them. This is another topic that needs to be addressed at Trinity to raise the level of knowledge and information about the effects that sexual harassment can have on an individual, with a focus on where people can go to report it. An increase in reporting may also lead to a decrease in sexual harassment.

Sexual Acts and Drinking

With the setting of this research being a college campus, drinking is a concern which closely relates with sexual acts. Twenty-four percent of these students believe that being drunk or under the influence of a substance makes the guidelines for sexual harassment more lenient. Unfortunately, this may lead to people not standing up for themselves when they feel like the boundaries have been crossed in a sexual way, either verbally or by actions. Even when it is not an issue of harassment, 58.1 percent of students believe that they have made a sexual decision when under the influence of

alcohol that they have regretted later. Alcohol can have a major effect on people's decisions which can be extremely detrimental when it comes to sexual events because the consequences can be irreversible.

This is an issue of respect for one's own body and self which both Laura and Julia believe is an issue. Julia focuses on the self stating that "people will...do things that aren't truly in their nature to fit in," for example, feeling like "that group won't accept me unless...I sleep with this guy." These are decisions that have a huge potential for having a major impact on a person's life, and as the survey shows, students are making sexual decisions when they are drunk that they later regret. She also believes that students have an "exaggerated idea about who is doing what to whom," which can affect the way people act sexually due to peer pressure if they believe that engaging in sexual acts is a norm of this campus' weekend culture.

Laura focuses on respect for one's own body particularly in relation to females on campus. She believes that females are very casual with their bodies and that they are engaging in sexual activities to gain approval. She quoted a comedian that she once heard saying, "Women will think twice about who they lend their car to but not their bodies," which she believes has some truth on this campus. Laura also relates this to the pressure on campus to be thin. The girls who feel "under the gun" to be thin and do not have a positive self-image will be more likely to give their bodies away sexually to gain approval. When someone drinks they may be putting their bodies in a compromising situation during which the student may not be making the most educated decisions especially with out having the right knowledge.

Also it is important that students are not afraid of sex, but “embrace it” which is a topic that Laura believed was covered by the comedian, Maria. This is extremely important because for a person to understand sex they must know about it and their own bodies. Student can be unsure about sex topics and how their bodies work in general. This was reflected in the fact that 42.5 percent of the students stated that they wanted to know more about what’s normal/what’s not. Due to insecurities about what is normal or not, students may not even know what types of questions to ask, or when to seek help due to their ignorance.

Conclusion

Trinity College students have a variety of sex education needs, that all appear to be based around furthering the knowledge on campus. Students would benefit from learning more about sexual harassment, effects of drinking and use of substances, and services around Trinity that can provide accurate information. Programs at Trinity would be a great method of raising awareness of sex education topics. For students to participate and benefit from Trinity’s programming and to increase interest and attendance at these programs Trinity could try to appeal to more topics the students show interest in. It would be advantageous to create programs that would be beneficial and cater to student’s ignorance while also including more fun information that students want to know about such as karma sutra.

Trinity might benefit from reinstating its program of peer educators. It is a difficult program on such a small programs, such as Julia Taka points out, because these people then become the “face” of sex education. However, if there could somehow be a

large number of these educators, there will be less pressure on them to being the people providing information. As Sawyer, Pinciario, and Bedwell (1997) found in their study, the people who are the peer educators greatly benefit from these programs, so the Trinity community could only benefit from recruiting as many students as possible for this program. Also, this is a cost-effective program, which is especially important with the current financial position of the college.

In future research, it would be beneficial to study the types of programs that students would find interesting. The data from this study illustrated that there was a difference between males and females of finding Trinity programs helpful. Therefore, it would be useful, to increase awareness of these topics, to cater to the needs and interests of the students, even if it is found that males and female students require different programs. Also, the current data set that was created from the survey could serve as a resource for other research, especially because I could not cover all the data that I collected from this study.

In conclusion, there are various sex education needs of Trinity College students. At the forefront is for students to understand and know what types of services are available at our college, and knowing where to go. Sex is a topic that our society has made hard to talk about. Therefore, students need to know about the places on campus where they can find people who want to talk to them about these topics and can also provide them with accurate information.

Resources

Richard, V. A., Blank, W., Bentley, K. (2001). "Lafeneline": Promoting Sexual Health Through College Radio. *Journal of College Counseling*, 4(2), 186-189.

Sawyer, R. G., Pinciaro, P., Bedwell, D. (1997). How Peer Education Changed Peer Sexuality Educators' Sexual Behavior. *Journal of American College Health*, 45, 211-217.

Appendix

Survey:

Informed Consent

*By creating a username below you consent to your participation in this research project.

This study involves an investigation of Trinity College student's sex education needs. I (the participant) understand that all of my responses in this study are completely confidential and will be used only for research purposes. I understand that my participation in this project is completely voluntary. I further understand that I am free to withdraw my participation at any time without any penalty.

The benefit of this project is to use the results to provide useful programs and information to the students of Trinity. There are no potential risks anticipated.

If I have any questions regarding this project or wish to have further information, I am free to contact Lara Dieterich, Senior Educational Studies and Psychology major at Trinity College, x4965 or lara.dieterich@trincoll.edu.

This survey will take you about 5-7 minutes. Just to make it clear: I CANNOT TRACE YOUR ANSWERS TO YOU NOR WILL I TRY TO. It is COMPLETELY confidential.

USERNAME: Please create a username using your favorite ice cream (type in as one word, with no spaces), followed by your favorite number and the day you were born (type in as two digits): (ex. mintchocolatechip1608). You will not need to remember the username; it will only be used in the collection of data.

Username:

1. What was your major source of sex education knowledge? *source_knowledge*

Parents High School education TV Friends
Siblings Internet Trinity Sex Education Events

2. Currently, what source do you turn to most often? *current_knowledge*

Parents High School education TV Friends
 Siblings Internet Trinity Sex Education Events

3. Were you taught sex education as part of you high school education? (This can include in-classroom instruction or outside the classroom, such as workshops, as long as they were sponsored by your high school) *taught_hs*

yes no

4. If so, I would like to get an idea about your sex education in High School. Please briefly describe the sex education you received and if anything sticks out in your mind about it (let me know if you even just thought it was boring). Any information that you can remember would be great: *hsmemories*

5. In high school instruction (including in-classroom instruction and other high school sponsored events)

were you taught about.....

a. Abstinence? yes no don't remember *abstinence*

b. Abstinence as an option, but not the only option? yes no don't remember *abstinence_option*

c. Methods of safe sex like.....

c1. how to use a condom? yes no don't remember *condom*

c2. about spermicide? yes no don't remember *spermicide*

c3. about diaphragms? yes no don't remember *diaphragm*

c4. about birth control pills? yes no don't remember *pills*

c5. about dental dams? yes no don't remember *dental*

d. Did you learn about abortions? yes no don't remember *abortions*

e. STDs? yes no don't remember *std*

f. AIDS/HIV? yes no don't remember *aids*

g. Rape? yes no don't remember *rape*

h. Date rape drugs? yes no don't remember *rape_drug*

i. Sexual Assaults? yes no don't remember *sexual_assault*

Go to page 2

Reset

6. What do you think sex is? (check all the apply) *sex_is*

anal sex vaginal intercourse oral sex genital contact

7. Do you think that someone practicing abstinence can be involved in: (check all that apply) *abstinence_includes*

oral sex kissing anal sex petting any sexual activity
except vaginal intercourse

8. If a girl is on a birth control pill, is it still possible for her to:

a. contract an STD? yes no *get_std*

b. get pregnant? yes no *get_pregnant*

c. contract AIDS? yes no *get_aids*

9. What are other methods of preventing pregnancy that you know of besides condoms, birth control pills and abstinence? Please explain, even if you do not know the exact name.

preventpregnancy

10. What is sexual harassment? (please check all that *you* believe apply, and please be honest)

sexual_harassment

unwelcome sexual advances demanding sexual favors

lewd comments sexual jokes talk about gender superiority

unwanted touching, or groping none of the above

11. Have you been sexual harassed while at Trinity College? yes no

you_harassed

12. Does being drunk or under the influence of a substance make the guidelines for sexual harassment more lenient?

harassment_influence

yes no

13. In a heterosexual relationship:

a. Who do you believe is expected to initiate sex? *initiate_sex*

male female no expectations, could be either one

b. Who do you believe is suppose to monitor safe sex (whether it be condoms, birth control or other methods?) *monitor_sex*

male female both no expectations, could be either one

14. Have you ever made a sexual decision when under the influence of alcohol that you regretted later? (The "sexual decision" can be something as small as a kiss).

yes no *alcohol_decision*

15. What kinds of information related to sex would you like to learn about:

more_information



Almost done....Go to last page

Reset

16. Would you like to know more about: (please select all that you are interested in)
information_about

safe sex

masturbation

sexual harassment

STD's

what's normal/what's not

rape

getting tested

17. Have you ever attended a sex education event organized by Trinity College (ex. sex comedian, etc.) *event*

yes

no

18. If so, how helpful did you find these programs?

Informative_event

Very helpful

Somewhat helpful

Not helpful at all

Now, I just need a little information about you.....

19. Sex: female male

sex

20. Age: 17 18 19 20 21 22

age

21. Year of Graduation: 2008 2009

graduation

22. High School Education: Public Private Private with religious
affiliation *education*

23. What grade(s) did you receive sex education? (select all that apply) *grade*

2nd 3rd 4th 5th 6th 7th 8th 9th
10th 11th 12th

I don't remember

24. In what state did you attend High School? (Or if you attended high school in
multiple states, in what state did you receive your sex education class, if you did receive
sex education?) *state*

**There is an option for outside the US*

Thank you for participating!

Your participation is greatly appreciated. If you have any questions or concerns, please
contact me!

Lara Dieterich:

lara.dieterich@trincoll.edu

X4965

Also, questions about sex education or sexual health can be answered by the following
organizations around campus:

Health Center: x2018

Women's Center: x2408

Office of Student Activities: x2171

Interview Questions:

Note: Not all questions were used for both interviews. The following questions were a basic guideline.

- What kinds of sex education programs does Trinity provide now? How were these decided upon?
- What type of programs do you think Trinity lacks?
- Where do you think Trinity students get most of their information about sex?
- What do you believe student's sex education needs are?
- What do you believe the most important aspect of this subject is for the students to know?
- Have you ever had parents question the sex education that is provided by Trinity?
- How do you think students' sex education and knowledge impacts campus life?
- Has there ever been an incident on campus that you felt could have been avoided with sex education?