

TRAUMA ORIENTATION:

Meeting the Needs of Incoming Students With Prior Experiences of Sexual Assault



About the Author



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Erin McClintock is a prevention expert and strength-based mental health counselor with over a decade of experience in the field of collegiate wellbeing. As Director of Partner Education at EVERFI, Erin critically explores the issues of mental health and wellness and their intersection with sexual assault and substance use. Erin joins EVERFI after many years of overseeing wellness and prevention efforts on college campuses in Massachusetts. She holds a Master's Degree in Mental Health Counseling and completed her post-graduate training in trauma and addiction studies.

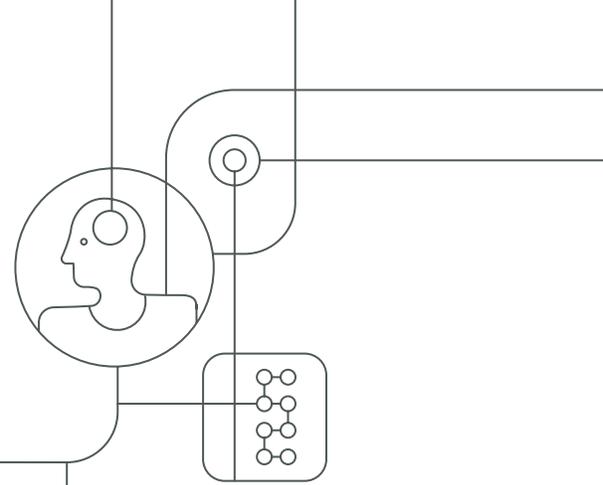
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Introduction

By now, colleges and universities are no stranger to the topic of sexual assault on campus. Often cited as an “epidemic”, an increase in attention to the issue has led to legislation being enacted and specific recommendations being implemented to guide institutions in preventing assault from occurring on their campuses. Social justice movements and prevention efforts have been built on the backs of personal experiences and statistics, frequently referencing that “1 in 5 women and 1 in 16 men will experience sexual assault at some point in their college careers.”

While the onslaught of attention that is paid to preventing sexual assault on campus is noteworthy, and has done a great deal to shed light on and advance prevention efforts, it is often just the tip of the iceberg. Unfortunately, by the time students arrive at college, many have already experienced an attempted or completed sexual assault. Inventories such as campus climate surveys, data from violence prevention programs, and intake data from university counseling centers have all helped to shed light on some sobering statistics about incoming students..

On a national level, research indicates that a large percentage of students have already experienced a sexual assault before stepping foot on a college campus. While numbers vary depending upon the surveying method, statistics of students who have experienced a sexual assault prior to attending college range from 11.3% (<https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/221153.pdf>) to 15.5% (<https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/182369.pdf>). According to the White House Campus Climate Survey Validation Study, an overwhelming 34% of female students have experienced a sexual assault at some point in their lives, with 21% of those assaults occurring after arriving at college.



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These findings have also been confirmed through EVERFI's own research. Each year, EVERFI supports hundreds of thousands of incoming college students through online prevention courses. Of the over 600,000 incoming first-year students that completed EVERFI's Sexual Assault Prevention course in 2015, 12% reported that they have experienced a sexual assault before arriving at college. Just as impactful, 29% reported that, before arriving at college, a friend or acquaintance had shared with them that they had experienced a sexual assault.

These insights become even more alarming when looking at climate survey data that assesses student experiences across their entire educational career. From an aggregate sample of institutions that employed EVERFI's campus climate survey, 27.5% of female-identifying students and 10.9% of male-identifying students reported having experienced sexual contact without consent prior to arriving at their institutions. These statistics were even higher among transfer students, of which a staggering 37% of females reported experiencing sexual contact without consent prior to arriving at their current institution.

These numbers echo and solidify the importance of taking a trauma informed approach to prevention and response efforts. The following tips are meant to guide your work and shed light on how to best support survivors of sexual assault through your institutions prevention efforts.



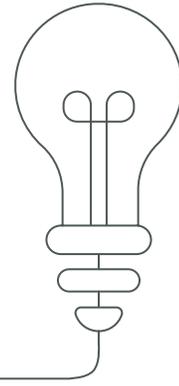
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Be Prepared

One of the most important elements of creating a trauma-informed, survivor-centered environment is preparation. Even before a student arrives on campus, they should be able to find indicators that a school is trauma-informed. According to data obtained through the EVERFI Sexual Assault Diagnostic Inventory, only 43% of colleges and universities report applying a trauma-informed lens to all of their prevention programs. Consider the following questions when exploring how to best meet the needs of survivors at your institution:

- Are you transparent about the content of programs related to sexual assault so that students are aware and can begin practicing self-care skills beforehand?
- Do you have an option in place for students who have experienced a sexual assault to participate in an alternative program when appropriate?
- Are resources and adequate staffing in place in the event that a student experiences distress during a sexual assault prevention program?
- Are policies written and programs conducted using [language that refrains from victim blaming and places accountability on the perpetrator?](#)
- Are students working as peer educators in sexual assault prevention programs taught using a [trauma-informed framework?](#)
- Are facilitators of sexual assault prevention programs trained to [effectively manage discussions](#), challenging any unhealthy comments that may create discomfort of those in the room?
- Is information about resources (hours, locations, contact information) easily accessible and can it be found in a variety of places?
- Are students taught positive, survivor-centered ways in which they can [support a fellow student](#) who may have experienced a sexual assault?
- Do you ensure that transfer students receive the same education, training, and information about resources as traditional incoming undergraduate students?

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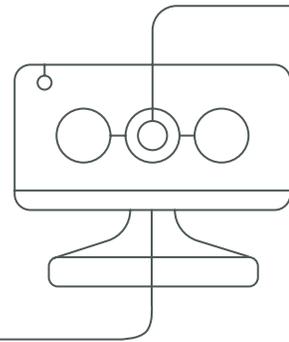


Know the Issue

While understanding what is happening [nationally](#) is a helpful starting point, it is crucial that institutions collect their own data to truly understand the severity of the issue. Data sources to consider to assess pre-matriculation victimization rates at your institution include data collected via online or orientation programs, campus climate survey data, and aggregated counseling center data.

As with any data, it is crucial to ensure that an institution does more than just ask the question—be prepared to enact any necessary changes based upon what you find.

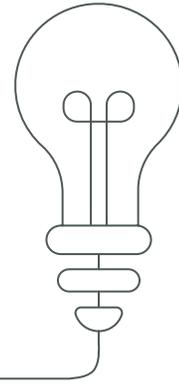
Allocate Resources



Just as greater numbers of students are entering college having already experienced a sexual assault, statistics also show that students entering college are increasingly more likely to seek out support through counseling. Given that college is a time in which many students may confront previous assault for the first time, it is imperative that institutions have adequate staffing in place to provide professional support should a student choose to utilize it.

Ensure that counseling center staff are trained and confident in their ability to help students work through prior trauma. Consider offering a professional development in-service that specifically looks at how to support trauma survivors. Institutions should also look at ways in which they can leverage relationships with local rape crisis centers, which can often help fill gaps in training, as well as after-hours staffing and care.

Know the Impact



Students who have experienced a sexual assault, whether before or after arriving at college, [may exhibit a vast array of responses](#) in relation to their trauma. Often, trauma reactions can manifest in seemingly unusual or unlikely ways, and it is important to note that there is no “one size fits all” reaction but rather a spectrum of behaviors as diverse as students themselves.

Students may become hyper-focused on their academics and collegiate social life, or disengage completely. They may engage in a variety of intimate relationships, or may refrain from sexual behavior altogether. They may actively seek out help from various people on campus, or not share their experience with anyone. It is important to remember that, when it comes to a trauma reaction, there is no right and wrong.

By ensuring that faculty and staff members are adequately trained, appropriate resources are in place, and a trauma-informed framework is woven throughout all sexual assault prevention efforts, institutions can ensure that they are doing their part to create safe, healthy communities in which all students can thrive.



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