2021

Sex Ed 101: A Case for Sex Education as Part of the First-Year Student Experience

Ansleigh Seaver, PA-S, MPAS-2
Butler University

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/buwell
Part of the Higher Education Commons, and the Medical Education Commons

Recommended Citation
Seaver, PA-S, MPAS-2 A. Sex Ed 101: A Case for Sex Education as Part of the First-Year Student Experience. BU Well. 2021; 6(1).

This Articles and Multimedia is brought to you for free and open access by the Undergraduate Scholarship at Digital Commons @ Butler University. It has been accepted for inclusion in BU Well by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Butler University. For more information, please contact digitalscholarship@butler.edu.
Sex Ed 101: A Case for Sex Education as Part of the First-Year Student Experience
Ansleigh Seaver, PA-S, MPAS-2

Abstract: Many students do not receive any, much less comprehensive, sex education during their high school years. Universities should prioritize integrating sex education curriculum into their first-year student experience. Promoting sex-positive dialogues will foster a campus community of communication and acceptance.

When students arrive on college campuses at the start of their freshman year, they open the door to new friends, new experiences, and new choices. Many universities assist students in preparing for the transition to college life by advertising the school's academic, extracurricular, and social opportunities. Sex and sexuality are also discussed at many new student orientations, but often only within the context of Title IX training and sexual assault prevention. Many first-year college students may be embarking on their first sexual encounters, and these individuals need much more than a simple seminar on how to avoid sexual assault, especially those who did not receive comprehensive sex education in high school. Incorporating comprehensive sex education into the first-year student experience would likely decrease rates of sexually transmitted infections ("STIs"), increase students' understanding of safe sex and healthy relationships, and decrease stigma surrounding sexual activity. Providing increased access to medically accurate, comprehensive sexual health information will promote a campus culture of acceptance and open communication.

There is currently no law in Indiana regulating public schools' sexual education curricula — indeed, no law mandates that public schools teach sex education at all. The only sexual health-related topic in which schools must provide instruction is HIV prevention. Furthermore, no law requires the information provided be medically accurate. Thus, many college freshmen who received an Indiana public-school education likely arrive on campus without an understanding of even the most basic information, such as how to prevent pregnancy or practice safe sex. Two-thirds of first-year college students report “hooking up” at least once during their freshman year, and a recent case study found that first-year students who were required to live on campus felt even more pressured to participate in social situations that frequently led to sexual encounters. In contrast, students who attend high schools with comprehensive sex education programs are more equipped to make safe choices. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has reported that individuals ages 15-24 are responsible for one half of all newly diagnosed STIs. It is therefore a matter of public health that all first-year college students receive comprehensive sex education.

Comprehensive sex education is the gold standard of sexual health education, and its benefits are numerous. First, it provides accurate information about anatomy and biological processes, contraceptive and STI-prevention tools, as well as the transmission and treatment of STIs. Second, it is demonstrably superior in its effectiveness at preventing pregnancy and STI transmission, when compared to more limited education. Third, it has been shown to reduce other risky behaviors, such as underage drinking and illegal drug use. Fourth, in a study on the influence of comprehensive sex education on college students, students who received comprehensive education reported to (1) be “more knowledgeable about sex,” (2) have “developed safe sex practices,” (3) had “a more positive view toward sex,” and (4) developed “a more positive view towards contraception.” Fifth, researchers have found that students who are more informed about human sexuality report decreased feelings of sexual guilt, with the largest impact on female students, as well as increased feelings of tolerance and open mindedness. Increasing positive attitudes about sex will empower students, decrease stigma, and create a more just campus environment.

The University of California at Berkeley provides a leading example of university level sex education. One of the class offerings is “Topics in Sexual Health,” a peer-led seminar to provide information and a safe space for discussion. This course is available to all students and discusses basic topics like human anatomy, STIs, safer sex, birth control, and other sex-related topics. While this course is not specifically directed at first-year students, it provides the benefit of allowing all students an opportunity to participate in a sexual, health-based learning environment. By providing a venue for more in-depth exploration of sexual health topics, UC Berkeley is creating a campus culture that destigmatizes and promotes acceptance of sexuality.

When considering implementing a sex education curriculum for college students, it is crucial to consider students’ needs when it comes to on-campus sexual health resources. Research gathered from multiple two- and four-year institutions found that students at four-year institutions “expect that they will be able to meet their sexual health needs on campus and want to feel emotional support from their college community.” The authors specifically concluded that “individuals in this life stage require support to have positive sexual health outcomes, particularly due to the insufficient (sometimes nonexistent) sexual health education they receive during adolescence.” Many institutions provide sexual health resources through an on-campus health center, but campus administrators should consider that students may not feel comfortable seeking out this information on their own. Incorporating sexual health education into the first-year student experience will therefore ensure equal access to information for all students. A cooperative effort between campus life and student health would ensure that students are familiar with basic sexual health facts and be aware of resources available on-campus.

Despite its benefits, sexual health education is a sensitive subject that many university administrators may deem too controversial to promote widely on campus. Many institutions provide information to students about campus sexual assault, but by educating students about sex itself, they can help address a culture of sexual shame that discourages reporting. Evidence shows that offering comprehensive sex education to first-year university students provides a net benefit to campus culture. Without minimum standards for sex education, there is no way of ensuring that students transitioning to college life have the information needed to make safe choices. Education, as well as easy access to contraceptives, would decrease risky behaviors, destigmatize sexuality, and encourage the reporting of sexual misconduct.
Transitioning into adulthood is not like being shot out of a cannon; it is more akin to learning how to ride a bike without training wheels. Students need institutional guidance in making this transition and universities should be willing to accept the challenge for the benefit of their communities.

References


