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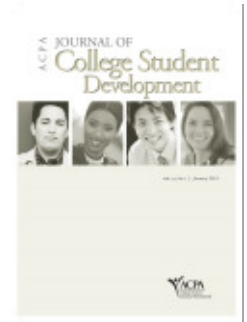
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## Utilizing Peer Education Theater for the Primary Prevention of Sexual Violence on College Campuses

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## Utilizing Peer Education Theater for the Primary Prevention of Sexual Violence on College Campuses

Sarah McMahon    Judy L. Postmus    Corinne Warrenner    Ruth Anne Koenick

To address the widespread problem of sexual assault, many colleges and universities are providing primary prevention education programs. Although a number of such programs exist and appear in the literature (for review see Vladutiu, Martin, & Macy, 2011), the role of peer education theater offers a unique approach. Peer education has been demonstrated as effective for delivering health messages, is cost-effective, is well-received by students, and engages students in a potentially powerful way (White, Park, Israel,

& Cordero, 2009). The purpose of this paper is to present a theoretically based approach to a campus sexual violence prevention program using peer education theater. We provide the results of an exploratory study that evaluates the impact of the program on students' rape myths and bystander attitudes and that determines whether the program produces positive outcomes by key variables such as gender, ethnicity, athlete status, and fraternity/sorority status. We conclude with implications for student affairs professionals and educators.

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## SEXUAL ASSAULT PREVENTION ON COLLEGE CAMPUSES

The primary focus of rape prevention programs on college campuses often is to change individuals' beliefs in *rape myths*, defined as false beliefs about rape shaped by sexism and other prejudices individuals hold (Burt, 1980). Addressing rape myths is important not only because they represent problematic attitudes, but also because they are cited as an explanatory predictor in the actual perpetration of sexual violence, or proclivity to rape (Hinck & Thomas, 1999).

In addition to reducing rape myths, an increasingly popular strategy for the primary prevention of sexual assault is bystander intervention. This approach frames sexual violence as a community issue and suggests that all individuals have a responsibility to intervene in situations that may lead to sexual violence and respond during or after the assault occurs (Banyard, Plante, & Moynihan, 2004; McMahon, Postmus & Koenick, 2011). The bystander approach has been identified as holding particular promise for addressing sexual assault in college settings, where bystanders are often present during the "pre-assault phase" where risk markers appear, and if equipped with the correct skills, can interrupt these situations and prevent sexual assaults from occurring (Burn, 2009). Evaluation of a number of bystander programs have appeared in the literature and demonstrate promise for creating positive change in attitudes and behaviors (e.g., Banyard, Moynihan & Plante, 2007; Foubert & Perry, 2007). Hence, bystander intervention may be a potentially powerful prevention tool to ultimately reduce the occurrence of sexual assault (Banyard et al., 2004).

As student affairs professionals consider implementing rape prevention programs, questions remain about how to best deliver

such programs in a realistic, practical format for large, universal groups of college students. Although one-dose interventions have been criticized as having a limited ability to produce sustained change (i.e., Lonsway, 1996), reviews of the number of sessions necessary to produce change are mixed, with some studies even indicating short sessions can be as effective (see review by Vladutiu et al., 2011). Clearly, there is a need for further research to investigate this issue. From a practicality standpoint, the reality is that, many times, those who work with college students are afforded only one opportunity to provide universal prevention programming to students at large-setting venues such as new student orientation. Given these constraints, finding single-use methods that are most effective in producing change in large-scale settings is important. Black, Weisz, Coats, and Patterson (2000) suggested that one-dose sexual violence interventions may be more effective if they are carefully selected, delivered by peers, and able to evoke emotion, such as the use of peer education theater.

## PEER EDUCATION THEATER

Peer education has gained popularity in higher education over the past few decades to educate students about a variety of health behaviors. There is both empirical and theoretical support for using peer education as a method for delivering sexual violence prevention messages. Theoretical support is found within diffusion of innovation theories (DOI; see Turner & Shepherd's 1999 review). DOI recently has been put forth by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention as one of the key social change theories that should be considered when developing sexual assault prevention programs (Cox, Lang, Townsend, & Campbell, 2010). Based on the work of Rogers (1983), this theory is used to explain how ideas (or "innovations") are accepted by

communities. Briefly, certain “opinion leaders” in communities can spread knowledge and ideas to others and thereby diffuse the information throughout the community. Key to the theory is the communication channels by which the innovation is diffused; those introducing the idea must be well respected within their community. In order to be persuasive, those who deliver the message must be similar to those who receive it (Cox et al., 2010). Thus, using DOI, peer education is one method to introduce sexual violence prevention, as peer educators share backgrounds with their fellow students. Research has indicated that peer educators are typically viewed as “credible” sources of information because of their similarities to other students (White et al., 2009).

Research on using peer education with students about sexual violence suggests that this approach is more successful than are traditional programs facilitated by professionals because students are more likely to pay attention to their peers and are more comfortable discussing these issues with their peers (Kress et al., 2006; White et al., 2009). More specifically, theater, used as a form of peer education, has been demonstrated as an effective method for conveying health messages, including sexual violence. Used as “entertainment education,” the underlying premise suggests that it is engaging and entertaining while also delivering educational information to the audience (Singhal & Rogers, 1999). Several studies have reported that peer-led theater performances resulted in improved attitudes about sexual violence (Black et al., 2000; Heppner, Humphrey, Hillenbrand-Gunn, & DeBord, 1995; Kress et al., 2006). However, the literature has yet to determine the effectiveness of peer education theater in impacting attitudes about bystander behavior or rape myths. To address this gap, this current study assessed the impact of a peer education theater program, called SCREAM (Students Challenging Realities and Educating

Against Myths) Theater, on students’ attitudes about rape myths as well as on a range of bystander behaviors.

## SCREAM THEATER

The intervention under study was SCREAM Theater, a peer education theater program that uses bystander intervention principles and is rooted in the theories of DOI and entertainment education. SCREAM is housed within a large, public university in the Northeast. Approximately 20–30 undergraduate students are recruited to join SCREAM as peer educators who receive information and biweekly training about sexual assault and other forms of interpersonal violence as well as how to develop characters and perform in improvisational theater.

SCREAM Theater performs in many venues, including at a mandatory New Student Orientation for all incoming college students. The presentation is 75 minutes long and uses theater to depict a sexual assault, including opportunities to become engaged bystanders before, during, and after the assault. All scenarios are developed by the peer educators and are based on real-life situations on campus. SCREAM actors show different bystander perspectives, including friends and acquaintances who either blame or support the victim, do not want to become involved in the situation, or ignore or confront the perpetrator.

At the conclusion of the skit, the actors remain in character and answer questions from the audience. This interactive segment allows the audience to question the characters about their behaviors. The actors are trained to understand the dynamics of sexual assault and the nuances of their character and are able to respond in realistic language to which the audience of peers can relate. After the in-character segment, peer educators introduce themselves to the audience, discuss the purpose

of their character, provide an educational message about sexual violence, and talk about why they joined the program. Discussion is facilitated with the audience members as they are asked what the bystanders could have done differently. At the conclusion of the program, the audience is provided with resources about sexual violence.

Brief student evaluations of New Student Orientation have consistently ranked SCREAM Theater as one of the favorite programs by students on campus. In an effort to move beyond anecdotal reports to provide an exploratory evaluation of SCREAM, the research questions for this study included the following: (a) Were there significant changes in students' attitudes about bystander intervention and rape myth acceptance after participating in the program? (b) Did these changes in rape myth acceptance and bystander attitudes differ based on gender, ethnicity, athlete status, fraternity/sorority status, and other demographic characteristics?

## METHODS

Approximately 3,000 students attending New Student Orientation were invited to participate in a short paper survey before the initiation of SCREAM and again 3 weeks later, completing an online survey. A total of 2,465 students returned surveys before the program; 693 students completed the follow-up online survey. The surveys for those participants who did not answer the reliability check question were eliminated resulting in a final pretest sample of 2,338 and posttest sample of 643 for a 28% retention rate. Before SCREAM began, researchers explained the purpose of the study and reviewed the Institutional Review Board-approved informed consent. For both surveys, students were invited to enter raffles to win gift cards to the bookstore.

The surveys included two previously used

scales, including a revised version of the Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale (Payne, Lonsway, & Fitzgerald, 1999). The revised version was selected because the scale includes updated language for college students (see McMahan & Farmer, 2011). There are a total of 19 statements about sexual assault with Likert-type scale responses ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*), with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .86 for this study.

The Bystander Attitude Scale, Revised (BAS-R), which is a modified version of Banyard's Bystander Scale (Banyard, Plante, & Moynihan, 2005; for scale development information see McMahan et al., 2011) also was used. The scale contains 16 items, each a different bystander behavior. Participants indicate how likely they are to engage in the behavior on a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*not likely*) to 5 (*extremely likely*). Cronbach's alpha was .78 for this study.

A variety of demographic variables also were collected to determine whether attitudes and behaviors about acting as an engaged bystander varied according to demographic characteristics. These were based on previous literature and studies (i.e., Moynihan & Banyard, 2008; McMahan et al., 2011) and included gender, fraternity/sorority membership, athlete status, knowing someone sexually assaulted, and previously attending a sexual assault prevention program.

To answer the first research question (i.e., whether participation resulted in changes in rape myth acceptance and bystander attitudes), paired *t* tests were utilized. To explore the second research question about the impact of demographic categories, a series of regression analyses were conducted.

## RESULTS

Of the sample of 643 students who matched pretests and posttests, 55% were female

TABLE 1.  
Attitudes Scale/Subscale Means and Paired *t* Tests

Scale/Subscale	Time 1	Time 2	Paired <i>t</i> Tests				
	<i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	<i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	$\Delta M$	<i>SD</i>	<i>SE M</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
Rape Myth	2.50 (.55)	2.29 (.59)	.22	.46	.02	642	< .001
Bystander Attitudes	3.68 (.57)	3.80 (.53)	-.12	.48	.02	639	< .001

with most of the respondents identifying as White (53%), followed by Asian (27%). The remaining ethnic groups had less than 6% of the total sample in each. A total of 25% of the respondents planned on pledging in the Greek system, 44% identified as high school varsity athletes, and 15% as on athletic teams. A total of 40% of students attended a sexual assault prevention program prior to seeing SCREAM, and 33% knew someone who had been sexually assaulted.

The first research question asked whether attending SCREAM resulted in significant changes in rape myth acceptance and bystander attitudes from pretest to posttest. Both the Rape Myth Acceptance and the Bystander Attitude scales showed significant changes in the second round of data collection, as participants reported a decrease in rape myth acceptance and an increase in their positive attitudes to intervene as a bystander (Table 1).

The second research question asked whether changes in rape myth acceptance and bystander attitudes were consistent among a variety of demographic groups. The variability in ethnicity was not large enough to conduct meaningful analysis because categories other than White and Asian were too small. Change scores were created for the rape myth acceptance scale and the BAS-R, and independent *t* tests were run with gender, athlete, varsity athlete, and fraternity status groups. There were no significant differences between groups on any test (Table 2).

To determine which variables contributed most significantly to predicting rape myth acceptance and bystander attitudes, two regression analyses were conducted. Pretest scores were entered as independent variables using demographic factors as control variables. Dependent variables included the rape myth acceptance and bystander attitude posttest scores. The model of rape myth acceptance was significant with an adjusted  $R^2$  of .47. Pretest scores and gender were the only significant variables, with higher scores (greater rape myth acceptance) on the pretest and being male related to higher scores on the posttest (Table 3). For bystander attitudes, the results were significant and the adjusted  $R^2$  was .43. As with rape myth acceptance, the significant variables were pretest scores and gender (female related to more positive bystander attitudes). Hence, males were more likely to have higher rape myth acceptance and less positive bystander attitudes than were females.

## DISCUSSION

This paper introduced SCREAM as an example of an innovative approach to delivering bystander education through peer education theater on college campuses—an approach that shows promise for preventing sexual assault (Black et al., 2000). Specifically, there were no significant differences in demographic groups. It appears that using a single-dose intervention significantly altered students' attitudes about

TABLE 2.  
t Tests by Selected Demographic Variables

Variable	Rape Myth Attitudes			Bystander Attitudes		
	$\Delta M$	<i>SD</i>	<i>p</i>	$\Delta M$	<i>SD</i>	<i>p</i>
Male	.22	.42	.66	-.10	.48	.34
Female	.21	.47		-.14	.48	
Nonathletes	.22	.47	.93	-.10	.44	.38
Athletes	.23	.45		-.15	.57	
Nonvarsity Athletes	.22	.46	.82	-.11	.46	.37
Varsity Athletes	.23	.45		-.14	.51	
Nonfraternity	.21	.45	.95	-.12	.48	.80
Fraternity	.22	.48		-.13	.49	

becoming engaged bystanders as well as their attitudes about sexual violence. Such findings should be compared to studies on multi-dose interventions to provide a roadmap for college administrators to choose appropriate sexual violence prevention programs for their campus.

An important finding was that the most significant predictor for both posttest rape myth acceptance and bystander attitudes, other than pretest scores, was being male. Hence, males were more likely to believe in rape myths and less likely to engage as bystanders than were females. Gender has

been consistently recognized as a salient factor in the impact of sexual assault prevention on a number of outcomes including rape myth acceptance (Currier & Carlson, 2009). Further exploration of the role of gender in bystander intervention is essential, including testing the effectiveness of delivering single-sex programs that have flexibility to address gender norms.

Interestingly, other variables, such as athlete status and fraternity status, were not significant, although they have been cited as “at-risk” groups for sexual violence (see Moynihan & Banyard, 2008). The present

TABLE 3.  
Regression Analysis of Rape Myth Acceptance and Bystander Attitudes

	Rape Myth Attitudes T2			Bystander Attitudes T2		
	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	$\beta$	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	$\beta$
Rape Myth T1	.69***	.03	.63	—	—	—
Bystander Attitudes T1	—	—	—	.48***	.03	.52
Gender	.14***	.04	.11	-.26***	.04	-.25
Varsity Athlete	.01	.04	.01	.02	.03	.02
College Athlete	-.07	.05	-.04	.06	.04	.05
Sexual Assault Education	.02	.04	.02	.03	.03	.03
Know Anyone	-.06	.04	-.05	.47	.03	.52

\**p* < .05. \*\**p* < .01. \*\*\**p* < .001.



study's findings suggest that peer education theater may therefore be useful for a number of types of students, including those considered at risk. It is important to note, however, that in this study incoming students were surveyed and indicated only their intention to join an athletic team or a fraternity; further research should confirm this finding with students who are active in fraternities and athletics.

The results of this study must be interpreted within the context of a number of limitations. First, the study was exploratory and therefore the results cannot be generalized. There was no comparison group, which is a common challenge when testing mandatory programs. Although the preliminary results of the program were positive, experimental studies using random assignment are needed. Additionally, the attrition from pretest to posttest indicates a need for careful interpretation of the results, although it appears somewhat typical, as college students can be a difficult group to recruit (Sax, Gilmartin, & Bryant, 2003). Selection bias also was a limitation in this study, because those students who responded to the posttest may have been more invested in the topic of sexual violence or motivated by the incentives. The current study lacked sufficient diversity to examine changes by ethnicity,

which needs to be addressed in further studies.

Despite these limitations, this exploratory study helped to identify areas needing further research in the new and growing area of bystander education on college campuses. Further studies should examine the impact of additional doses of prevention programs to determine if a significant change is produced for those receiving programs beyond a one-time intervention. The question of dosage is an important one for educators to consider, as many times student affairs professionals are limited to only one opportunity to provide information to students. The researchers plan to further evaluate the program with a longitudinal, experimental research design to answer these questions.

The bystander approach offers college administrators a new tool for engaging students by framing sexual violence as a community issue in which everyone has a role to play. Peer education theater may provide a particularly creative tool to deliver this education to universally based, large groups of college students.

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