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BRIEF REPORT

Graduate students' knowledge and utilization of campus sexual violence and sexual harassment resources

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ABSTRACT
Graduate students are uniquely vulnerable to sexual violence and harassment (SVSH) and largely marginalized in campus-based prevention and response efforts. **Objective**: This study is a preliminary investigation of graduate students' experiences with on-campus SVSH training and knowledge and utilization of SVSH resources. **Methods**: We conducted 21 in-depth interviews and 8 focus group discussions with 43 graduate students on three public university campuses in California. **Results**: Graduate students had limited knowledge of SVSH services, and mandatory SVSH training curricula was perceived to center around "responsible employee" duties rather than information about how to prevent or seek help for SVSH themselves. Graduate students had mixed experiences seeking SVSH-related assistance. **Conclusions**: Graduate students should be prioritized in SVSH prevention and education efforts beyond required responsible employee training. Graduate students are invaluable to the everyday success of universities; accounting for their vulnerabilities in SVSH prevention and response is vital for campus communities everywhere.

Introduction

Sexual violence and sexual harassment (SVSH) are significant problems on university campuses.[1] Greater public attention to SVSH, especially following the rise of the #MeToo movement in 2017, has generated increased interest in how best to prevent and respond to SVSH.[2] Undergraduate and graduate students have placed increased pressure on university administration regarding SVSH over the last decade[3] via lawsuits and high-profile protests and the federal government has, in multiple iterations, radically altered Title IX rules and regulations governing campus reporting processes which impact the ease of reporting.[4–6]

Despite these actions affecting the entire student body, campus administrators and leaders focus almost entirely on undergraduates. Moreover, although recent scholarship is starting to better reflect graduate students' experiences with SVSH,[7–10] research often focuses on graduate students within single disciplines[11,12] rather than considering graduate students more holistically within university systems, as research on undergraduates often does.[1] The needs of graduate students as a constituency are often ignored, with dire consequences: SVSH negatively impacts the well-being and success of graduate student survivors far beyond graduate school.[10,13] Although graduate students take on a multitude of positions in university settings as teachers, research assistants, and

sometimes even as staff members, attention is primarily given to the "responsible employee" designation attached to university employees which requires them to report instances of SVSH to campus Title IX offices. Research on university SVSH policies is emerging,[14] yet there is an absence of published work evaluating the SVSH trainings that graduate students are required to complete in most university settings.

Collecting data on three University of California (UC) campuses as part of a larger project,[15] this report provides a preliminary investigation of graduate students' experience with SVSH training and their knowledge and utilization of campus SVSH resources. Evaluation of both SVSH training and campus SVSH resources through graduate students' perspectives is critical to determining their utility and improving them. Without this attention, campus prevention and response efforts remain limited and disconnected from graduate students' needs.

Methods

Participants

Participants were recruited at UC Los Angeles (UCLA), UC Santa Barbara (UCSB), and UC San Diego (UCSD) via targeted and snowball sampling. From January to May 2019, graduate student interns first conducted 21 in-depth

interviews (IDIs) and then 8 focus group discussions (FGDs); a total of 43 graduate students participated. Each participant provided written consent to participate in the study and received a $25 Visa gift card in compensation for their time. The UCSD Human Research Protection Program approved the study; UCLA's and UCSB's institutional review boards (IRB) completed reliance agreements.

Procedure

Graduate student researchers completed trauma-informed training prior to data collection to mitigate the risk of triggering participants during discussions of campus violence. We collected data in private, confidential spaces on campus to protect participants' anonymity. IDIs were conducted to examine students' definitions of SVSH and determine their awareness of university SVSH resources and policies. FGDs convened to explore attitudes about SVSH as a campus problem; to examine the reporting process and graduate students' experiences as survivors and mandated reporters; and to garner communal perceptions of campus-based response and prevention programming. Centering graduate student knowledge and experiences, we sought recommendations for how graduate students could more actively participate in university efforts to both prevent and respond to SVSH and how the university supports survivors and reporters of SVSH. All FGDs and IDIs were transcribed verbatim from audio recordings. The first authors engaged in a multi-iterative coding process of transcripts using Dedoose (version 8.3.17) until arriving at full agreement on the coding schema. Three main codes emerged related to knowledge of SVSH resources, appropriateness of SVSH training, and help-seeking experiences of graduate students.

Results

Participant demographics

Twenty-three PhD students, 4 professional students (medical, law, etc.), and 16 Master's students participated. Six percent identified as Black, 16% Hispanic or Latinx, 25% Asian, 41% white, and 10% multiracial. Most identified as cisgender; four identified as genderqueer, non-binary, or transgender. Thirty-two percent identified as LGBTQ+; all others identified as heterosexual. To protect the anonymity of participants, demographic information is shared only when pertinent to specific data excerpts.

Knowledge of campus SVSH resources

Graduate students shared a vague knowledge that SVSH resources existed on campus, but many lacked the understanding about where and how to access them, or the appropriate order in which to do so, as described in a FGD:

> I don't have a lot of experience with hearing about sexual assault… if something happened to me or someone I know, what would I do? Who would I tell first? I'm not totally sure. I

know there's a lot of psychological help-lines I get emails about all the time. Maybe my program director. I'm sure I could look it up, but it's not immediately clear to me what I would do with that information.

In response, another graduate student highlighted how being acquainted with campus SVSH resources and procedures is not necessarily a prioritization for graduate students *until* something happens:

> Oftentimes we are busy with our coursework, research and teaching. We don't really avail ourselves of these on-campus resources. Now that you are asking me all these questions, I feel I should definitely know more and don't wait until we become victims… We should be more aware of these social problems.

Multiple graduate students remarked on their responsibility to seek out information on their own, as one participant summarized:

> None of the information I have received as a new graduate student has been around the safety of graduate students… except for the employment paperwork that mentions Title IX. But otherwise, I feel like it is on grad students to make themselves aware of the resources on campus.

Appropriateness of mandatory SVSH trainings

The (in)ability of mandatory campus SVSH trainings to adequately address graduate students' needs was remarked on by many participants; one man in a FGD explained his view of the training by describing its "clickability." Men on another campus echoed this same sentiment:

> I feel like there is this lack of personal attention you get from [SVSH training] where you… find it to be a chore and… just sort of click through it and are doing something else at the same time… And it's just sort of a process you do so the university can check off a box to say, 'We taught them something, let's move on,' without a very directed attempt to help people really understand.

Such views of online training demonstrate graduate students' perceptions of appropriateness. Even the assumption that this knowledge is important for graduate students as caretakers for undergraduates in teaching and mentoring capacities falls short:

> As teachers we [do not] receive that much training to handle students… If we are in the line of fire one day, like if a student is in crisis in our office or in our classroom, I don't think we receive any training. No one told me where to send students, I learned about CARE [the sexual assault resource center] from students, but no one said, 'Hey you're teaching and someone's in crisis. Send them to CARE.'

In one interview, a graduate student connected the lack of transparency about these processes with the need to find resources for themselves and their friends without institutional aid:

> If more students knew what was available to them and if they were informed of previous outcomes from similar cases, I think they would feel more comfortable initiating the [reporting] process. At least from my perspective it's almost like a black

box that you're entering in. I think there's… this notion that it's very unlikely to have a positive outcome… Everything - I had to figure out. My friends had to figure it out. We did it on our own.

Help-seeking experiences

Graduate students reported conflicting experiences after deciding to seek help related to SVSH experiences. Some received support from those around them, including appropriate accommodations from administrators:

One of my friends was a teaching assistant for a class and an undergrad misbehaved with her… She approached the professor and told him about it and it led to the suspension of that student. That was a good thing.

Another graduate student relayed a story of her friend being harassed while working on campus. This led the student to reach out to her boss:

[Her boss, a woman] made it so that [the perpetrator] could no longer see her… This person is now a ghost as far as the graduate student was concerned and couldn't make appointments anymore and it was like boom - done. Even now if this person comes in, my friend's boss will just put her in a different room… Like, how wonderful to say something, feel insecure about it, be believed, and [hear someone say], 'You don't have to deal with it. We will do something about it.'

Not all graduate students had such positive reporting experiences. During a focus group, one participant shared their expectations and reality of what help-seeking looks like on their campus:

Once I was made aware of [SVSH] resources, I had a really bad experience with them. I was made aware of CAPS [counseling and psychological services], and I thought, 'Ooh this is so great!' And then I had a really bad experience.

As the conversation continued, the student explained that there were two major problems with getting help:

A) People aren't being told about the resources that are available and B) the resources aren't cutting it. So, it's like, once they are available, they are still not good enough. I think there's an even deeper issue beyond that, that it's just not… up to par.

Discussion

Graduate students' knowledge of campus SVSH resources in our study was limited. While there was a basic understanding of the existence of SVSH resources, many participants did not know where to start looking if they needed help. Perhaps more importantly, students highlighted that until they experienced a problem, neither familiarity nor usability of SVSH resources were stressed to them. The possibility that students in crisis might not know how to access help – whether graduate students themselves needed help *or* undergraduates came to them for aid – is a substantial flaw in current implementation of SVSH resources.

The appropriateness of the mandatory training was called into question by many participants. Most graduate students' knowledge of SVSH resources focused on their position as responsible employees, rather than as students vulnerable to SVSH themselves. Further, they highlighted how certain populations, such as international students, come to the university without adequate knowledge of Title IX and are often responsible for navigating the system to find that information themselves. This indicates a need for mandated SVSH training to be improved to better educate graduate students overall so that it provides tailored information to key groups such as international students. At the same time, training for graduate student specific support staff in SVSH resource and counseling centers on campus should be funded and strengthened.

Help-seeking experiences of graduate students who endured SVSH and sought resources varied; while some found support, others had re-traumatizing experiences. Use of campus resources is not yet well-documented for graduate students, and existing research demonstrates that compared to undergraduates, graduate students under-utilize and have less awareness of available services[16] and have less confidence in accessing campus resources.[17] This is a preliminary study, and further research is necessary to determine how best to support graduate students' exposure and access to campus resources. It is important to determine whether these findings are specific to the UC system or apply to graduate student populations more broadly, as university SVSH prevention and response efforts, including resources, are not universal.

Knowledge of SVSH resources and campus reporting processes is essential for graduate students' ability to be teachers and mentors and is critical for graduate students who need help themselves. This preliminary study demonstrates the need for research and evaluation of responsible employee trainings and in-depth analyses of graduate students' knowledge and utilization of campus SVSH resources. Increased attention to graduate students is vital for most impactfully preventing and responding to SVSH on university campuses.

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