



THE AWARENESS OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE POLICY WITHIN THOMPSON RIVERS UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

Undergraduate Research Experience

Award Program

Thompson Rivers University

Abstract

Thompson Rivers University (TRU) implemented new sexual violence policy in 2017; within this policy, they state a commitment to increasing the awareness of sexual violence. While increasing sexual violence awareness is important, another dimension to this is the awareness of the policy itself. Previous research conducted in the United States on student awareness of sexual violence policies found that there is a lack of sexual violence policy awareness among students (Potter, Edwards, Banyard, Stapleton, Demers, & Moynihan, 2016). There has been minimal research on this topic within Canada. This research aims to address this gap and identify if TRU students are aware of the sexual violence policy that is set in place to support them. Moreover, this research explores the process of how students became aware or could become aware of sexual violence policy in the future. The methodology of this research is a hand-written survey of 100 students that was distributed in public spaces on Thompson Rivers University's Kamloops campus. This survey included a diverse group of students based on program and social location. The findings indicate that the majority of TRU students have little to no awareness of TRU's sexual violence policy, as well as, other TRU policies. This supports the previous USA research that states many students are unaware of university policies (Brown, Henes, & Olson, 2016). Students who were aware, were primarily informed through poster campaigns, student orientation and the TRU website. Furthermore, students identified posters, social media and emails as their desired means for increasing their awareness.

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Territorial Acknowledgment:

This research was created, carried out, presented and documented within the traditional and unceded territory of the Secwepemc Nation within Secwepemcul'ecw.

As we share knowledge, teaching, learning and research within this university, we recognize that this territory has always been a place of teaching, learning and research.

We respectfully acknowledge the Secwepemc- the people who have lived here for thousands of years, and who today are a Nation of 17 Bands.

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Introduction- Locating Myself in the Research

It is important to be reflexive in our roles as researchers, this includes considering our own relationship to the topic we are investigating. For this reason, I share my relationship with this research and my own process of how I became aware of the sexual violence policy at Thompson Rivers University (TRU).

I was sitting in class during my 3rd year of my Bachelor of Social Work degree learning about policy, when I was first introduced to TRU's (then new) sexual violence policy. In compliance with the 2016 *BC Sexual Violence and Misconduct Policy Act* passed by the Provincial Legislature, Thompson Rivers University created their *BRD-25-0 Sexual Violence policy*. Prior to which, TRU had their Interim Sexual Assault Support and Response Protocol, as well as, a Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Task Force created in 2015. The *BRD-25-0 Sexual Violence policy* includes elements of support for those impacted by sexual violence, prevention and education work, and procedures for handling reports, investigations and disciplinary actions. All of which serve an important purpose within a university context.

The more I reflected on the policy, the more questions began to arise. I questioned whether students knew about this policy that was put in place to support them. What was the level of awareness within TRU students? If they were aware of the policy, what was the process of how they became aware? If they were not aware of the policy, how would they like to become aware and informed of policies such as this in the future? Are students aware of any of TRU's other policies? Finally, is this topic even deemed important by students? At this point, I had more questions than answers. This was the starting point for my Undergraduate Research Experience Award Program proposal and later the direction of my research.

Literature Review

While completing a literature review, there appeared to be a distinct absence of academic resources on the topic, especially within a Canadian context. While there is literature on policy awareness, like that of Love-Quick (2016) and Brown, Henes, and Olson (2016), they explore the

awareness of other policies including e-cigarettes (25.9% of participants correctly identified the policy), as well as, drug and alcohol use (35.6% of participants were aware of the policy). In addition, there is literature by Schulze and Perkins (2017), that focuses on a specific demographic- the awareness of sexual violence services within LBGQ- identified students. This group's rate of awareness was significantly higher than other studies (65.5% of participants stated awareness) (Schulze & Perkins, 2017). However, it is also shown in their research that this demographic has a high rate of sexual assaults and rape that may correlate with their awareness (Schulze & Perkins, 2017).

Garcia, Lechner, Frerich, Lust, and Eisenberg (2012) note the importance of understanding the awareness of sexual violence policy because it determines whether students are likely to report incidences and access support services available to them. They continue to state that the perceptions of sexual violence resources is an under-researched area (Garcia et al., 2012). Similarly, Vanderwoerd (2009) found in his research of rural campuses, that less than 40% of those interviewed were aware of sexual assault resources and interestingly, there was a large gap between the services known to women (44.2%) versus the services known by men (26.2%).

Potter, Edwards, Banyard, Stapleton, Demers, and Moynihan (2016) explore how sexual misconduct policy is presented to students and the effectiveness of dissemination methods. They found that there was a significant increase in students' understanding of where they can receive supports, correct procedures and confidentiality, after solely reading the sexual violence literature and a combination of reading and discussing the literature with supports. It should be noted that all of these statistics were gathered within an American context and that these statistics could vary within a Canadian context. Also, it should be noted that many studies present this awareness of policy as a more female based concern. Vanderwoerd (2009) notes that campuses are specifically not as safe for female students as hoped. This is demonstrated through the gender differences noted on the prevalence of sexual harassment and assault reported by men (13.8%) and women (43.6%) in his research (Vanderwoerd, 2009). Moreover, Schulze and Perkins (2017) note that services and resources are typically created to be directed towards females.

Overall, policy awareness within university students is an under researched area- especially when specifically exploring sexual violence policy. The research among what is available indicates a disconnect between university policies and student awareness. In the future, more research is needed to increase this understanding and more effectively relay policy to university students.

Methodology

For this research, 100 students were surveyed to gather information. This survey was a brief questionnaire derived for mixed methods of quantitative and qualitative questions to gauge student's own awareness, their perceived importance of awareness and ways in which they have or could become more aware of the sexual violence policy. Participants were selected on a basis of convenience by distributing these surveys in public areas on Thompson Rivers University's Kamloops campus (with varying locations to promote student diversity). Assistance with question clarification was present if needed. Since Social Work and Human Service students can be exposed to this policy through their courses as I was, they were excluded from the study in order to more accurately gauge the general population's knowledge. Following the survey, participants received a small compensation for their time in the form of a \$5 coffee shop gift card, as well as, a list of resources for both on and off campus supports to continue promoting resource awareness.

Though one can try to be impartial, this research is influenced by my own framework. As a woman, I feel impacted by these policies and this promotes me to incorporate feminist theory into this work. This research is also impacted by my Social Work discipline, as well as, its ethics. Carrying out this research contributes to increasing social justice and service to humanity at Thompson Rivers University (CASW, 2005). Overall, this research was aimed to contribute to a gap that has already been noted by other researchers and create new insight into not only sexual violence policy awareness, but policy awareness in general.

Demographic

The age of participants ranged from 18 to 36, and within this, the majority of students were between the ages of 20 to 24. Regarding gender, 51% of participants identified as female, 47% identified as male, while 1% identified as non-binary and 1% wish not to disclose. Of those surveyed, 34% identified as an international student and 14% identified as Indigenous.

Participants were drawn from a variety of disciplines including Nursing, Natural Resource Science, Marketing, Communications, Tourism/ Events, Business Administration, Psychology, Electrical, Political Science, Computer Science, Visual Arts, Physics, Finance, English, Accounting, Early Childhood Education, and Journalism. Although, the majority of students were from the Faculties of Arts, Business and Science.

In contrast to those surveyed, TRU reported in 2017-2018 that 46% of their student presence on campus were between the ages of 19 and 24 and 84% within the age of 18-39 (TRU: IPE, 2018). They also reported in the same year that 52% of students identified as female, 46% identified as male, while 2% of gender was not reported (TRU: IPE, 2018). Of those who are on campus, TRU reported during the 2016-2017 school year that approximately 23.6 % identified as international students and 13.5% identified as Indigenous (TRU: IPE, 2018). Finally, they reported that annually the Faculties of Arts, Business and Science continually have the top three highest enrollments (TRU: IPE, 2018). This leads to the conclusion that this research, sampled by convenience, is not vastly different than the overall demographics found on Thompson Rivers University's Kamloops campus.

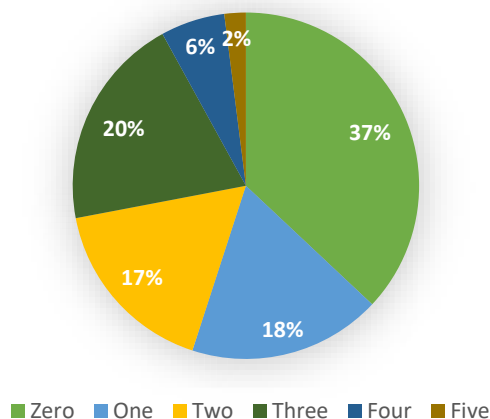
Results

When asked about their awareness of TRU's sexual violence policy, 52% of students reported some form of awareness, while 48% reported no awareness. When further exploring awareness within specific demographics, students who identified as Indigenous reported 50% with some form of policy awareness, while 50% reported themselves unaware. Furthermore, international students reported 47% with some form of policy awareness, while 53% reported

themselves unaware. When exploring gender, 25% of those who identified as female and 23% of those who identified as male reported some form of awareness, while 26% of those who identified as female and 24% of those who identified as male reported no form of awareness. The final 2% represented those who identified as non-binary (1% reported no awareness) and those who chose not to disclose (1% reported some form of awareness). This demonstrated no notable gender differences in sexual violence policy awareness. It should be noted, that further research is needed to better understand demographic specific and intersectional findings.

Participants were then asked to rate their awareness from 0 (no awareness) to 5 (well-versed in the policy). When asked to scale themselves, 37% rated themselves at a 0 with no awareness, 18% at 1, 17% at a 2, 20% at a 3, 6% at a 4 and only 2% as well-versed at a 5.

Students Self-Identified Awareness

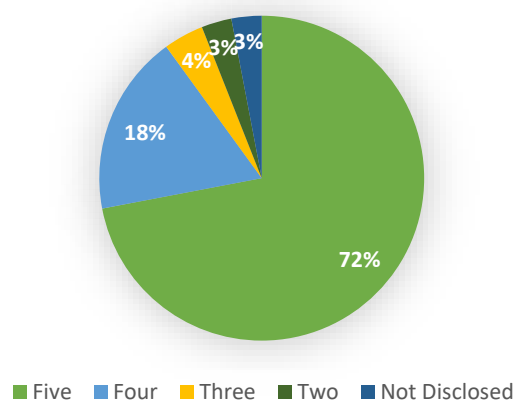


When students were asked which components of the policy they were aware of, many reported that they solely knew that there was a policy in place, while others knew where to receive support and where to report an incident. There were many ways that students indicated that they had become aware of the policy, with posters on campus (13%), orientation (11%) and the TRU website (8%) as the most prominent. Students also reported becoming aware through the TRU Wellness Center, talk among friends, within class and through information sessions put on by the school. When asked if there were any factors that might have impacted their lack of awareness, students reported a lack of advertisement (18%), they were not made aware (8%),

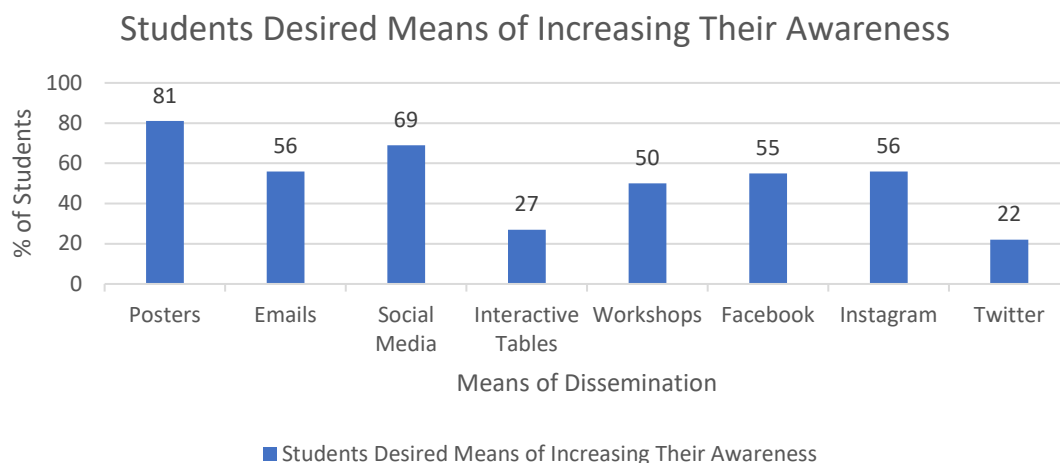
policy is not something they think of/ look into (8%), as well as, a lack of involvement with the school in general (6%).

In contrast, students were asked about their awareness of other policies at TRU. 52% of students reported that they were aware of other TRU policies, while 48% reported they were not aware of any other TRU policies. It should be noted, that the 52% that had some form of awareness about the sexual violence policy were not the same 52% that were aware of other TRU policies. The policies that students were most aware of among those surveyed were TRU's Student Academic Integrity (33%), Pets/ Animals on Campus (12%), and, Alcohol, Cannabis and Tobacco (8%) policies. When asked to scale their opinion of the importance of students being made aware of TRU's sexual violence policy from 1 (not important) to 5 (very important), 72% reported the importance at a 5, 18% at a 4, 4% at a 3, 3% at a 2, with 3% not disclosing.

The Importance of Sexual Violence Policy Awareness



Participants were also asked how they would like to become aware of sexual violence policy and were welcome to choose all that applied to them. The most desired means were through posters on campus (81%) and social media in general (69%). Other means for dissemination included, through emails (56%), workshops (50%), specifically Instagram (56%), specifically Facebook (55%), specifically Twitter (22%), and interactive tables on campus (27%).



Participants also brought forth their own suggestions, including through group discussions, information in classrooms, student orientation, and more on TRU's public televisions and website. Lastly, students were asked if they believed that the awareness of this policy could currently, or in the past have benefited themselves or a friend. Students reported 73% believed that this awareness could have benefited them in the past, with 27% indicating that it would not have. They also reported that 77% believed that this awareness could currently benefit them, with 20% indicating that it would not, and 3% not disclosing.

Discussion

Though this research used a relatively small sample size, it reveals the importance of further research into student awareness of policies that impact their education and safety. This research echoes the findings of other researchers, such as Love-Quick (2016) and Brown et al. (2016) as they explored substance use policies, where they found low levels of awareness among students. This research reported higher levels of awareness than theirs; however, many students reported gaining awareness from campaigns that already exist on Thompson Rivers University's campus, such as through workshops and posters. Potter et al. (2016) report that students learned best about sexual misconduct policies through engaged lessons, and this is supported through the findings of this research that students experienced within workshops. In this case, such as the Consent Tea and orientation that were important in increasing student

awareness. In addition, TRU students asked for continued discussion beyond student orientation sessions to increase awareness. Potter et al. (2016) also noted that there were significant improvements to students' awareness of supports through increase policy awareness. This has implications for both policy and services.

In this research, 77% of TRU students surveyed believe that an awareness of TRU's sexual violence policy could currently benefit themselves or a friend. A participant urged the importance of increasing awareness stating, "I have had friends at TRU that have been victimized and didn't know what to do about it" (Male, 30, Electrical). Another stated "I just feel that being well-versed in policy is important. I have a friend who was sexually harassed on Res. two years ago. Should we been aware of the policy, we could have done more about it" (Female, 23, Communications). Another spoke more generally stating that sexual violence policy is a "very important topic to discuss and become aware" of (Undisclosed, 18, Arts). Conversely, some students did not see the relevance of this policy to their lives and rated it as less important. Overall, the majority of students found this awareness important to protect themselves, support others and in general a benefit to TRU students.

Conclusion

Of those surveyed, the majority of students demonstrated minimal awareness of TRU's sexual violence policy. Conversely, they indicated that the need for policy awareness is important and that they could benefit from increased awareness. Of those who are aware of the policy, many became aware through posters on campus, orientation and the TRU website. Students also identified social media, emails, and posters as important ways to continue increasing awareness. When the awareness of other TRU policies was explored, students indicated that they also had limited knowledge regarding these policies. Overall, continued campaigning is needed to increase the awareness of Thompson Rivers University's sexual violence policy, as well as, supports for students.

Recommendations

Based upon the data collected, it is recommended that there is a continuation of the poster campaign, an increase in the utilization of social media to promote awareness and finally, a continuation of interactive workshops, such as the Consent Tea. When asked if students would like to become aware of policies through poster campaigns, 81% stated that they would- this is the highest consensus among the dissemination means surveyed. Furthermore, many students expressed that they were solely aware of the policy through the poster campaign on campus. This is a strong indication that this method is working. When asked if students would like to become aware through social media, 69% said they would in general, while 55% specifically identified Facebook, 56% specifically identified Instagram, and 22% specifically identified Twitter; making it the second most desired means of increasing awareness. Both of these means speak to meeting the students where they are at. In other words, if they are in the hall, inform them in the hall, if they are on their devices, inform them on their devices. It is extremely important to make this information, and information like it, available where it is most likely to be accessed. Finally, some students identified workshops, including the Consent Tea as their means for becoming informed. This was not among the highest stated; however, those who attended the brief workshops, were strongly impacted by them and could relay their learning during the survey. It should be noted that the primary topic of the tea was consent, although, students noted discussing a wide range of topics, including sexual violence. This demonstrates a more thorough means for relaying awareness and supports to students. Students would benefit from either continuing on the topic of consent and sexual violence or with it expanded to incorporate other elements of sexual violence policy and resources. Based upon this research, it can be concluded that three means of relaying information stated above can effectively increase the awareness of sexual violence policy within Thompson Rivers University students.

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