

US Student Affairs: Interpersonal Violence Prevention Efforts in Intercultural Contexts

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US Student Affairs has long since been tasked with educating students on and adjudicating incidents of interpersonal violence. Interpersonal violence encompasses sexual misconduct, dating violence, and stalking. However, since the U.S. Department of Education and Office of Civil Rights issued the “Dear Colleague Letter” of 2011 (U.S. Department of Education, 2011), US Student Affairs has shifted heavily to focus on developing and implementing programmatic functions to comply with Federal requirements. Subsequently, both the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA, 2013), a component of the Higher Education Act reauthorization, and the Campus Sexual Violence Elimination (SaVE) Act (2013), an update to the Jeanne Clery Act, have created additional requirements. As US higher education works tirelessly to comply and to educate domestic students, it also must determine how to deliver this information effectively to international students. The concept of consent for intimate relationships proves to be a critical and culturally-laden component of this education.

Online education modules are being used widely in the US to engage students on the subject of interpersonal violence prevention and education. However, these modules illustrate challenges when designing culturally inclusive programs. Online modules are highly tailored to provide maximum learning and engagement for most students, but language level and cultural assumptions can present barriers to international students’ comprehension and learning. International students may not have yet developed the level of intercultural competence, a person’s ability to think, act, and live in appropriate ways among people of diverse backgrounds (Hammer, Bennett, & Wiseman, 2003) to digest the culturally-laden content of interpersonal violence prevention programs. Therefore, international students may need multiple opportunities to build foundational understanding of US culture to scaffold interpersonal violence prevention information and develop their intercultural competence.

Likewise, Student Affairs practitioners must use intercultural competence in their design to create programs for international students which achieve both compliance with federal mandates as well as effective student learning. Strategies which can facilitate program design appropriate for intercultural contexts may include: soliciting direct input from international students on areas of cultural sensitivity, using simplified language where possible, use of small group discussions to better enable students to safely engage with the material, creating opportunities for international students to discuss culture and program content with student peers from the institution who share aspects of their identities. Campus partnerships between Health Services, International Programs, Student Conduct, student groups, and other relevant departments are crucial to well-designed interpersonal violence prevention programs that are accessible to all students on US campuses.

Therefore, while US higher education increasingly calls for institutions to prepare interculturally competent graduates (ACE, 2012; Altbach, Reisberg, & Rumbley, 2009), the Student Affairs profession must also expand their skill sets to reach students of diverse backgrounds and worldviews. Student Affairs professionals are challenged to not only gain skills in intercultural competence, but also utilize these skills to design effective interpersonal violence prevention programs. These efforts remain ongoing across student affairs in US higher education and can expect to continue to see attention from the government.

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