

CHALLENGES IN PREVENTING AND RESPONDING TO SEXUAL VIOLENCE AT AMERICAN COMMUNITY COLLEGES

**Findings From a Critical Issues Forum with
Community College Campus Leaders**

**Sponsored by the
National Center for Campus Public Safety
and the
American Association of Women in Community Colleges**

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Executive Summary

Sexual violence on college campuses is a significant issue for institutions of higher education (IHEs), but one sector — community colleges — is often overlooked in the growing national discussion.

These institutions, which number over a thousand, face challenges regarding prevention and response to sexual violence on their campuses. Due to their open-access, many have special facilities challenges related to maintaining the safety of students and employees. They also struggle to adapt to and implement regulations that are typically designed for traditional four-year colleges and universities. In addition, even though community colleges overwhelmingly support providing safe environments, many have trouble finding the resources and buy-in they need to create momentum around preventing sexual violence, a particularly difficult task given the often considerable demographic differences between student populations at community colleges and traditional IHEs.

In turn, community colleges face tough choices in their efforts to combat sexual violence on campus, and they often must make those choices with few resources.

To identify the areas of critical need for community colleges regarding prevention and response to sexual violence, as well as to elicit recommendations to mitigate those challenges, the National Center for Campus Public Safety (NCCPS) partnered with the American Association for Women in Community Colleges (AAWCC) to facilitate an emerging issues forum on April 12, 2016. The group included 18 safety leaders from 14 community colleges across the nation.

The forum participants convened in response to the NCCPS's effort to be a nationwide resource for addressing critical issues in campus safety. Forum participants discussed four types of challenges community colleges face relating to the prevention of and response to sexual violence on campus: nonstandard physical security; cumbersome compliance; cultural barriers; and lack of resources, education, training, and support services. Participants also discussed personnel management, training, and funding as they relate to the prevention of and response to sexual violence at community colleges. Participants did not evaluate specific compliance efforts or policies at particular institutions.

The group also worked to develop a broad array of recommendations for addressing the challenges community colleges face relating to preventing and responding to sexual violence on their campuses. A series of core principles emerged:

- Community colleges are struggling to comply with sexual violence legislation, in part, because that legislation was originally tailored to traditional IHEs.

- Open-access campuses, prevalent among community colleges, often create conflicts related to the security of facilities, and usually require different security efforts compared to traditional IHEs.
- The demographics of community colleges often differ from those of traditional IHEs; therefore, perceptions about sexual violence are often different, requiring community colleges to take alternative approaches to prevention.
- Community colleges are eager for additional funding, training, and outreach programs that can help bring more robust conversations about sexual violence to their campuses.

Background

Community college students represent nearly 45% of all undergraduate students in the United States. As of fall 2014, there were 7.3 million credit-seeking students at the country's 1,108 community colleges, according to the American Association of Community Colleges. Less than half are full-time students; in fact, about 62% attend on a part-time basis.¹

These are statistics that regulators, the media, and even many advocacy groups may fail to consider in the growing national conversation about sexual violence on America's college campuses. Instead, the focus is on traditional IHEs — particularly those with residential facilities, which only approximately one quarter of community colleges offer.

However, community colleges are grappling with preventing and responding to sexual violence on their campuses, too. According to the Department of Education, in 2010, 503 cases of forcible and non-forcible sex offenses were reported at IHEs that offered less than four-year programs. By 2014, the most recent year for which data was available, that number increased 45% to 731.² These and other crimes threaten the lives and well-being of students, employees, and visitors, and also threaten the livelihood of the community colleges at which they occur.

In turn, even though community colleges are overwhelmingly dedicated to providing safe environments for students, faculty, and staff, they face several unique challenges in doing so largely because their resources, demographics, and infrastructures differ from those of traditional IHEs.

Organizations such as the Association for Student Conduct Administration (ASCA) have recently noted this gap and how it affects students, faculty, and staff at community colleges:

“The role of community colleges in sexual assault prevention and response continues to be unexplored so long as the national dialogue primarily focuses on the incidents from four-year campuses that receive widespread media attention. While there is no intent to minimize those incidents, absent from this national dialogue is what sexual

¹ American Association of Community Colleges 2016 Fact Sheet, <http://www.aacc.nche.edu/AboutCC/Documents/AACCFactSheetsR2.pdf>

² U.S. Department of Education, Office of Postsecondary Education, Campus Safety and Security (CSS) survey. The crime data reported by the institutions have not been subjected to independent verification by the U.S. Department of Education. Therefore, the Department cannot vouch for the accuracy of the data reported. Individual statistics for Rape, Fondling, Incest and Statutory Rape were not collected prior to the 2015 data collection. Prior to the 2015 collection, Rape and Fondling statistics were combined under Sex offenses - Forcible, and Incest and Statutory Rape statistics were combined under Sex Offenses - Nonforcible. As of the 2015 data collection, statistics for Sex offenses -Forcible and Sex offenses - Nonforcible were no longer collected.

misconduct prevention and response looks like at institutions that do not have residence halls, NCAA athletic teams, or fraternities and sororities. This has left community college practitioners (who often have less resources and information than their counterparts at four-year institutions) struggling to comply with legislation and mandates that are designed for traditional four-year colleges and universities.”³

The specific challenges community colleges face regarding sexual violence fall across a wide spectrum. Forum participants said their open-access campuses often present special physical infrastructure issues around safety, and certain regulations typically designed for traditional IHEs can be cumbersome and costly. Additionally, many community colleges struggle to get the resources and leadership buy-in they need to create momentum around preventing sexual violence — a particularly difficult task given the often considerable demographic differences between student populations at community colleges and traditional IHEs. These challenges leave community colleges with tough choices about where to spend time and money in preventing and responding to sexual violence on their campuses.

To help address these issues, the National Center for Campus Public Safety (NCCPS) and the American Association for Women in Community Colleges (AAWCC) have taken the lead in identifying the areas of critical need for community colleges regarding prevention and response to sexual violence.

Established in 2013, the NCCPS is a clearinghouse for information, research, training, promising practices, and emerging issues in campus public safety. The NCCPS’s mission is to provide useful resources and information to support safer campus communities. The NCCPS connects all forms of campus public safety, professional associations, advocacy organizations, community leaders, and others to improve and expand services to those who are charged with providing a safe environment on the campuses of the nation's colleges and universities.

The American Association for Women in Community Colleges (AAWCC) was organized in 1973 and became an Affiliate Council of the American Association of Community and Junior Colleges, now the American Association for Community Colleges (AACC). In response to an affirmative vote of the membership, the organization's name was officially changed in 1993 to AAWCC. The AAWCC encourages and rewards educational achievement and professional opportunities and also

³ Association for Student Conduct Administration, “Community Colleges and Sexual Misconduct: Unique Challenges and Opportunities,” April 18, 2015, <http://www.theasca.org/Files/2015%20Community%20Colleges%20%26%20Title%20IX.pdf>

provides information and support to educators serving women attending community colleges.⁴ In 2015, the organization’s platform statement was to “increase the roar” to eliminate a culture of silence surrounding sexual violence against women on community college campuses.⁵

The NCCPS partnered with the AAWCC to facilitate this forum on April 12, 2016. The primary goal of the forum, which included 18 community college safety leaders from 14 colleges, was to identify the areas of critical need for community colleges regarding prevention and response to sexual violence, as well as to draft recommendations to mitigate those challenges. An overview of the group’s discussion follows.

Participants

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Julianna Frisch, Monroe Community College
Jean Goodnow, Delta College
Wade Graves, Grayson County College
Christine Hammond, Mid Michigan Community College
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Maureen Murphy, Brookdale Community College
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⁴ Association for Women in Community Colleges (AAWCC), “Constitution,”

http://www.aawccnatl.org/assets/aawcc%20constitution%20revision%20final%207_%205%202013.pdf

⁵ Association for Women in Community Colleges (AAWCC), <http://www.aawccnatl.org/>

Discussion

The forum participants identified a number of critical needs for community colleges tackling the challenges related to preventing or responding to sexual violence on campus. Generally, those challenges fall into four broad categories:

1. **Nonstandard physical security.** Due to their open-access status, community colleges tend to have wide-open campuses, multiple campuses, and many buildings to oversee.
2. **Cumbersome compliance.** According to the group, legislators created most existing sexual violence regulations with traditional IHEs in mind, leaving community colleges to work around regulations designed for significantly different institutions.
3. **Cultural barriers.** One size does not fit all: community colleges are often dramatically different demographically than traditional IHEs, and in turn sexual violence prevention and response require different strategies and tactics as well.
4. **Lack of resources, education, training, and support services.** Many community colleges face an uphill battle that is steeper than what most IHEs encounter when it comes to obtaining needed resources, buy-in, and momentum to create a climate of preventing and responding to sexual violence on campus.

Forum participants identified key discussion topics, delineated compliance challenges, and determined solutions and recommendations for each of the four categories.

Category One: Complex Physical Security

The forum participants formulated the following statement that reflects the challenge community colleges face related to physical security in terms of prevention and response to sexual violence on their campuses:

Open access/ open campuses create a unique set of challenges for the physical security of community college campuses. Environmental design of the campus creates a funding challenge for resources to mitigate these design issues.

Like many IHEs, community colleges face some common physical security challenges, such as ensuring lighting is adequate and that the use of surveillance and security technology is optimized. Unlike traditional IHEs, which often have admissions criteria and standards, community colleges are open to all members of a community, as are their facilities much of the time.

In addition, according to the AACC, community colleges need roughly \$100 billion for upgrades, major renovations, and new construction. This is because many campuses were built during a major

expansion of the nation's community college system in the 1960s and 1970s and now need renovations and facilities upgrades to incorporate new technologies and be more energy-efficient.⁶

Participants noted that the funding availability for facilities access technology make prevention and response to sexual violence especially challenging. Many community colleges do not have automated or digitally controlled doors, for example, thus providing little restriction on who can enter and exit buildings. Most community college buildings are also not alarmed, according to the group, and many do not have funding for comprehensive security systems. In addition, several participants noted that community colleges with security cameras often do not have the manpower to monitor or maintain those systems.

Category Two: Cumbersome Compliance

The group formulated the following statement that reflects the challenges community colleges face as they relate to compliance with legislation on sexual violence:

A dichotomy exists: protect members and our communities, or comply with multiple, complex, and costly rules and regulations that create a chilling effect on reporting and prevention and were not designed for community colleges.

Like other IHEs, community colleges must comply with federal, state and local laws regarding preventing, responding to, and reporting sexual violence. The group noted, however, that these regulations are almost always written with traditional IHEs in mind, thereby overlooking 45% of the undergraduate population in America. In turn, they often find themselves creating internal policies and procedures that prioritize the needs of regulators over the needs of the IHE.

Heard in the forum:

“The audience you’re writing [policies] for may be your students, your faculty, your staff. But so many times we’re writing for the feds, the state, the system, the locality. Trying to write for both of these audiences, you get these very complex legalese documents that aren’t going to get you where you really want to go.”

Community colleges serve student populations that are frequently more diverse than those at traditional IHEs, according to the National Center for Education Statistics.⁷ They also serve

⁶ American Association of Community Colleges (AACC), “Media Talking Points,”

<http://www.aacc.nche.edu/Advocacy/aginitiative/Pages/talkingpoints.aspx>

⁷ National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), “Characteristics of Postsecondary Students,”

http://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_csb.asp

populations that tend to be older — the average age of a community college student enrolled for credit is 28 — and more diverse in terms of life experience.⁸ The on-campus experience is often dramatically different as well. The vast majority of community colleges — 74% — do not have on-campus housing, and more than 90% offer online programs, which more than two million students enroll in each year.^{9,10} In addition to offering activities to the rest of the community, community colleges also often enroll high school students starting their post-secondary education early, students seeking GEDs, as well as convicted felons and sex offenders under court orders to earn an education to become more productive members of society. According to the ASCA, these and other factors create a potentially high-risk setting for sexual misconduct to occur. Furthermore, student orientation programs are often absent, optional, or brief compared to traditional IHEs, and when they do exist, they are commonly for full-time, credit-seeking students.¹¹ As a result, many community colleges face a unique challenge of determining how to create, offer, encourage, and monitor prevention programs.

According to forum participants, these and other differences leave community colleges struggling to write policies and apply legislation generally meant for younger, full-time, four-year students. Participants noted that this in turn shifts their focus away from comprehensive campus safety and toward navigating a complex set of compliance rules that don't always fit. One of the largest consequences of these challenges, according to the group, is that they force community colleges to write and enforce policies that are overly complex, costly, ineffective, and intended for the wrong audience.

Category Three: Cultural Barriers

The group formulated the following statement that reflects the cultural challenges community colleges face related to preventing and responding to sexual violence on their campuses:

As open-access institutions, community colleges mirror the communities they serve, and the values of these communities vary greatly regarding healthy relationships, gender roles, and violence against people.

⁸ American Association of Community Colleges (AACC), “2016 Fact Sheet,”

<http://www.aacc.nche.edu/AboutCC/Documents/AACCFactSheetsR2.pdf>

⁹ <http://www.aacc.nche.edu/AboutCC/Documents/AACCFactSheetsR2.pdf>

¹⁰ American Association of Community Colleges (AACC), “Media Talking Points,”

<http://www.aacc.nche.edu/Advocacy/aginitiative/Pages/talkingpoints.aspx>

¹¹ Association for Student Conduct Administration (ASCA), “Community Colleges and Sexual Misconduct: Unique Challenges and Opportunities,” April 18, 2015,

<http://www.theasca.org/Files/2015%20Community%20Colleges%20%26%20Title%20IX.pdf>

From the forum:

“We aren’t trying to check the box; we’re trying to change people’s lives by teaching them about culture and issues surrounding sexual violence.”

As noted, students on community college campuses often differ from those at traditional IHEs and their students tend to have much different life experiences. According to the Community College Research Center, over 50% of students at community colleges take remedial courses. Additionally, more students with disabilities enroll at two-year institutions than at four-year colleges and universities. Community colleges also serve many low-income, first generation and non-native English speakers as well, and, as previously mentioned, the vast majority do not offer on-campus housing. All of these factors suggest some community college students may be less likely to report sexual violence to campus authorities, leaving community colleges with no indication a crime occurred.¹² Participants also noted that community colleges in urban areas may sometimes struggle with a reluctance to engage with the police. In turn, the activism exhibited by some survivors at traditional institutions has not yet appeared at many community colleges.

Category Four: Lack of Resources, Education, Training, and Support Services

The group formulated the following statement that reflects the resource challenges community colleges face in preventing and responding to sexual violence on their campuses:

The problem that many community colleges face is obtaining needed resources, buy-in, and momentum to create a climate for preventing and responding to sexual violence against people.

Forum participants reported that it is often difficult to get community college leaders to buy into the need to create a climate of preventing and responding to sexual violence, and among those that do achieve buy-in, it is often hard to keep the momentum going due to lack of funding and personnel. Some participants noted that staff members sometimes consider prevention and response activities as finite tasks rather than ongoing, comprehensive efforts tied to student success.

From the forum:

“Keeping that attention is difficult.”

In addition, many community colleges utilize volunteer staff members and are required to train those individuals for compliance purposes, even if they are not full-time employees and only teach

¹²Association for Student Conduct Administration (ASCA), “Community Colleges and Sexual Misconduct: Unique Challenges and Opportunities,” April 18, 2015,

<http://www.theasca.org/Files/2015%20Community%20Colleges%20%26%20Title%20IX.pdf>

online or at other venues off campus.¹³ Nonetheless, well-trained staff is in high demand at community colleges seeking to prevent and respond to sexual violence.

Many participants also reported not having the funds for prevention training, and those that do often report low attendance. Furthermore, due to resource constraints, some community colleges are considering outsourcing or using investigation-based resolution methods instead of traditional hearing panels in cases of sexual violence. Some may involve human resources staff or similar employees to help adjudicate student misconduct, according to the ASCA.¹⁴

In turn, some participants felt that community colleges often trail their traditional counterparts regarding policies and procedures that employ best practices and comprehensive preventive education, including bystander intervention and

“When allocating the limited funds available at community colleges, student services and preventative education are likely to be less of an institutional priority than academic programs.”

—Association for Student Conduct Administration, “Community Colleges and Sexual Misconduct: Unique Challenges and Opportunities,” April 18, 2015.

institutional support from senior leadership. As a result, a lack of access to training and best practices for the staff may inhibit prevention and response to sexual violence at community colleges. Forum participants noted that even community resources are limited for some campuses, impeding partnership efforts.

Community colleges often lack compliance officers, according to the group, and they are less likely to have full-time legal counsel, health educators, or robust student affairs divisions, which are more common at four-year institutions. Participants also said few community colleges have dedicated Title IX coordinators because budgets require assigning those duties to employees with other responsibilities. In addition, many community colleges combine academic advising and personal counseling into the same position, which often creates conflicts between being campus security authorities, who must report sexual violence, and private counselors.¹⁵

¹³ Association for Student Conduct Administration (ASCA), “Community Colleges and Sexual Misconduct: Unique Challenges and Opportunities,” April 18, 2015,

<http://www.theasca.org/Files/2015%20Community%20Colleges%20%26%20Title%20IX.pdf>

¹⁴ <http://www.theasca.org/Files/2015%20Community%20Colleges%20%26%20Title%20IX.pdf>

¹⁵ <http://www.theasca.org/Files/2015%20Community%20Colleges%20%26%20Title%20IX.pdf>

Recommendations

Forum participants identified a broad range of recommendations that could help community colleges prevent and respond to sexual violence on their campuses.

Category One: Complex Physical Security

- **Develop best practices for community college facilities.** Forum participants recommended hosting a summit for rural and urban community colleges to discuss physical safety and the differences in needs for rural and urban settings.
- **Encourage third-party facilities evaluations.** Many community colleges may be unaware of the vulnerabilities in their buildings and other infrastructure. The group recommended creating a best practice of hiring third parties to evaluate campus buildings regularly for dark parking lots, isolated rooms, concealing landscaping, and other safety issues.
- **Ask more questions.** Participants agreed that students know their campuses best. Regular safety surveys could highlight dark places, unsafe locations, hot spots for criminal activity.

Category Two: Cumbersome Compliance

- **Write policies that focus more on people.** Forum participants said a team of community college leaders should draft model policies that are written in plain English so that students, faculty, and staff can understand them and follow them more effectively.
- **Create a policy repository.** Participants said that having a collection of policies available that are just for community colleges could considerably help other community colleges develop and refine their own policies related to preventing and responding to sexual violence.
- **Conduct a best practices survey.** Community college leaders should develop a survey to find out what the most effective sexual violence prevention and response practices are at community colleges. Those results should be broken out by demographic, geographic, residential, and other factors to provide more specific insights for the variety of community colleges that exist.

Category Three: Cultural Barriers

- **Ask what works.** Community colleges should survey or do other forms of outreach to campus stakeholders (students, community resources leaders, law enforcement, etc.) to get feedback about which sexual violence prevention and response efforts are working for their campuses.
- **Create a student-forum program.** This could provide an opportunity for students and community college presidents or other leaders to have a conversation about healthy relationships, campus culture, and other pertinent topics that lead to the prevention of and improved response to sexual violence.

- **Create a common language.** Community colleges don't all define certain kinds of sexual violence the same way. Community college safety leaders should meet and discuss ways to bring uniformity to these definitions so that data is comparable and to ensure that victims receive the same levels of response and support.

Category Four: Lack of Resources, Education, Training, and Support Services

- **Adopt a common logo.** Creating a logo signifying that a training or outreach program is part of a uniform, national program for community colleges could lend legitimacy to those efforts and ensure that community colleges are covering all the bases in terms of education, training, and support. It could also help students by denoting safe place locations, overcoming language barriers, and creating a visible representation of the community college's efforts to prevent and respond to sexual violence.
- **Leverage resources better.** Community colleges should tap into their own student affairs and marketing departments for help with crafting messages, creating campaigns, designing logos, and spreading the word about prevention and response efforts.
- **Create a sexual violence prevention and response community just for community college leaders.** Participants recommended that they, as well as other interested parties, talk more often about the issues and challenges they face in preventing and responding to sexual violence. Creating a listserv or a network could help them communicate more effectively on these issues, evaluate survey results, develop new programming, and develop national best-practice models more quickly.
- **Reconvene the forum participants.** Participants said this might be optimal at the American Association of Community Colleges annual convention.
- **Invest more in employee training.** Community colleges often give students a lot of information about preventing and responding to sexual violence, but they invest less in providing information to the staff and faculty. Often, however, faculty members are the first to hear of sexual violence from a student and they frequently aren't sure what to do.

Conclusion

The forum was a productive event that helped illuminate the unique challenges community colleges are facing in their efforts to combat sexual violence. Community colleges will require additional assistance in finding promising practices to successfully address their constraints, both from a federal and state regulatory perspective and through funding for appropriate programming for their diverse populations and campus structures.