

**Year 2 Public Description of Work for
Action Collaborative on Preventing Sexual Harassment in Higher Education**

Yale University

Title IX and Mental Wellness Symposium

Relevant Rubric Area(s):

Trauma-Informed Response and Education Programs

Description of Work:

In the spring of 2021, the Yale Title IX Office planned and hosted a virtual Title IX and Mental Wellness Symposium. The concept for this symposium was developed after students expressed interest in having conversations about the mental health impacts that may result from experiences of sexual misconduct and gender discrimination and, more specifically, how university resources can better support individuals who experience these impacts. To center student perspectives in the symposium planning process, October Mohr and Sydney Muchnik, Graduate Student Fellows in the Title IX Office, assumed leadership roles in the planning of the event.

The broad goals of the symposium were stated as: “This symposium will explore the intersection of experiences of gender-based discrimination and sexual misconduct with mental wellbeing, with a particular focus on the impact of sexual misconduct and gender discrimination on the emotional wellbeing and mental wellness of those who are members of marginalized identities. During this event, we will seek to define important terms and parameters, dive into cutting edge research, and brainstorm how Yale and individual community members can better support underserved populations who experience sexual misconduct and gender discrimination.”

To address these goals, we planned a four-hour symposium, which was held on April 30th, 2021. The symposium was open to all members of the Yale community but publicity was targeted specifically to undergraduate and graduate students. The afternoon was divided into 3 sessions, each with a moderator and three invited speakers. The speakers, who were faculty and staff from Yale and other institutions of higher education, each presented for 10 minutes and then participated in a moderated Q&A with the audience at the end of the session.

The goal of the first session was to lay the groundwork for the afternoon. We sought to define terms (including mental distress and wellness, trauma, sexual misconduct and gender discrimination) and familiarize the audience with existing resources. The invited speakers for this session were Sarah Lowe (Yale School of Public Health), Sarah McMahon (Rutgers School of Social Work), and Maytal Saltiel (Yale Chaplain's Office) and the moderator was Jen Czinicz (Yale Sexual Harassment and Assault Response and Education Center). During this session, we

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learned about non-traditional support systems on campus, and the need for partner offices, like the Chaplain's Office, to be well acquainted with sexual misconduct resources. A key takeaway from this session was the importance of thinking about sexual misconduct response through an intersectional, community-level lens. The speakers discussed the value of creating a network of culturally-relevant, social justice-based resources to meet the needs of the broader community. Additionally, the speakers pointed out that the effectiveness of resources is dependent on how well they're communicated and the need to incorporate references to community culture and student input in communications. Finally, we discussed the importance of including the concepts of post-traumatic growth and resilience into conversations about trauma, and the recognition that positive post-traumatic outcomes can happen on a community as well as on an individual level.

During the second session of the symposium, we delved into the topic of the mental health impacts of sexual misconduct and gender discrimination, with a particular focus on the compounding effects of these experiences on marginalized or minoritized groups. This session was moderated by Angie Makomenaw (Yale College Dean's Office) and the invited speakers were Jennifer M. Gómez (Wayne State University, Dept. of Psychology), Amy Bonomi (Michigan State University, Dept. of Human Development and Family Studies), and Gabe Murchison (Harvard T. H. Chan School of Public Health). During this session, we learned about cultural betrayal trauma theory and the ways that anti-black racism can turn intercultural trust into cultural betrayal in the black community in the wake of violence. This phenomenon can compound PTSD or other impacts of sexual misconduct and is crucial for support resources to understand. Additionally, we discussed the ways that external stressors contribute to negative mental health outcomes for the LGBTQ+ community and learned how bias can play into the dynamics of sexual misconduct or the experience of seeking help for people with disabilities.

The third session focused on looking forward, as we sought to understand what types of resources and supports could be most effective in supporting marginalized community members who experience sexual misconduct or gender discrimination. This session's invited speakers were Thema Bryant-Davis (Pepperdine University, Graduate School of Education and Psychology), Christy Oleski (Yale School of Medicine, Dept. of Psychiatry), and Taylor Parker (New College of Florida, Title IX Office) and the moderator was Freda Grant (Yale SHARE Center). These speakers emphasized the value of using existing research to develop intersectional resources that support and acknowledge the multifaceted nature of student's identities. We discussed the need to acknowledge how racism can impact our overall responsiveness to sexual assault and affect individual responses, for example in levels of sympathy and compassion. We learned about concrete strategies for making spaces safe and inclusive for trans* and LGBTQ+ students on campuses. Finally, we gained some insights into ways in which the Title IX process is not as accessible for all and discussed ways that we can consider the needs of individuals with disabilities in our processes.

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By bringing together internal and external researchers and practitioners, this symposium provided an invaluable forum for members of the Yale community to learn about innovative approaches to supporting the mental wellness of those who have experienced sexual misconduct or sex-based discrimination. This event also provided the opportunity for the University Title IX Office and our campus partners to engage with our community around complex issues like mental wellness and the impacts of compounding discrimination and to use those conversations to drive positive change in our policies and support systems.

During the 2021-22 academic year, the Title IX Office, in collaboration with our Title IX student advisory boards and other campus partners, will pursue a range of initiatives to build on the momentum resulting from the symposium, including:

- implementing enhanced trainings for Title IX coordinators and other campus resources, including mental health first-aid and supporting students with compounding trauma experiences;
- expanding collaborations with campus and non-campus clinical resources to broaden range of options for student support;
- conducting accessibility review of all Title IX materials and processes to identify and eliminate potential barriers to access; and
- exploring opportunities to address challenges of inter-community reporting through restorative practices.

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