

Empowering trans and nonbinary students against sexual assault

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Sarah Peitzmeier, Micah Hopkins and Charlene Y. Senn describe how an effective sexual assault resistance program for women is being adapted for trans and nonbinary students

Transgender and nonbinary college students face a staggering rate of sexual violence, with national estimates suggesting that 40% of trans and nonbinary undergraduates are sexually assaulted during their four-year enrollment. ⁽¹⁾ Even so, no sexual assault prevention programs for trans and nonbinary students have been designed, tested, and widely implemented.

Effective solutions are desperately needed. With a new generation of transgender and nonbinary students arriving on campus, universities need effective ways to reduce sexual violence against them. How can colleges empower their trans and nonbinary students?

The adaptation process

We began with a highly effective 12-hour sexual assault resistance program for university women, *Flip the Script with EAAA*[™]. It is a theory- and evidence-based program that includes the teaching of effective sexual assault self-defence and resistance strategies in a peer-facilitated, in-person group. The program demonstrated a 50% reduction in victimization for women who take the program during their first year in university. ⁽²⁾ The Zoom-based version of *Flip the Script*, named Internet-Delivered EAAATM (IDEA³), showed promise in a pilot trial, moving key mediators of reductions in sexual assault while allowing participants to join a group from the comfort of their dorm room. It is currently being evaluated with cisgender women in a [CIHR](#)-funded RCT. Although many universities do not have sufficient numbers of trans students to support trans-only in-person groups of *Flip the Script*, an online intervention like IDEA³ opens up the ability to offer this powerful intervention to groups of trans and nonbinary students, as students from various colleges could attend one class online, together.

How did we adapt IDEA³ for trans undergraduates while retaining efficacy? To make a new version of the program, we made systematic revisions based on what existing research says about the differences between trans undergraduates' and cisgender women undergraduates' experiences of sexual assault. Each change was documented along with the research evidence that motivated the revision. This process retained the core elements of IDEA³ while modifying the activities and content to reflect trans and nonbinary students' experiences of campus sexual violence.

The revisions fell into two categories: 1) centering trans and nonbinary students and 2) addressing types and characteristics of violence that are uniquely or disproportionately experienced by trans students.

Centering trans and nonbinary students

1. Power and joy: Fatalism – the idea that resisting violence is pointless or impossible – inhibits quick action in a dangerous situation. We include gender-affirming activities, such as a ‘gender-affirming toolkit,’ to empower participants against feelings of futility.
2. Personal relevance: while the original intervention focuses on woman-blaming and tactics used by heterosexual cisgender men, the adapted intervention includes diverse gender identities, discusses transphobia in addition to women-blaming, and reflects a broader range of potential perpetrators while still informing participants that men perpetrate the majority of assaults. Scenarios used as learning examples were tweaked to be more LGBTQ+ relevant.
3. Inclusivity: since trans people are more diverse than cisgender women in terms of gender identification, the language of the adaptation is more gender inclusive. Additionally, the program accounts for accessibility concerns that trans people are likely to bring up, such as voice dysphoria during verbal self-defense practice.

Addressing characteristics of violence against trans people

1. Connecting violence to transphobia: violence against trans people is driven by transphobia. ⁽⁴⁾ By making the connection between transphobia and sexual violence explicit, participants can better anticipate and counter coercive scripts used by perpetrators. They can also tap into anger over injustice – an emotion that fuels forceful resistance – to empower themselves.
2. Addressing trans-specific barriers to resistance: cis women and trans people share many fears related to resisting sexual assault, like not wanting to ‘make a scene’. However, trans people have unique concerns, like a fear of being accused of assault, due to negative stereotypes about trans people. This program acknowledges those fears while providing practice in tough situations.
3. Profiles of violence often experienced by trans people: there are three ‘types’ of sexual coercion and violence that the adaptation gives special attention to. While cis women can experience these forms of violence, they are disproportionately experienced by trans people:
 - a. Transphobic tactics: perpetrators of violence against a trans or nonbinary person can, for example, tell them that a ‘real man/woman’ would agree to certain sex acts. ⁽⁴⁾ Since trans students are likely to be early in their gender transition, these tactics are especially pernicious.
 - b. Fetishization: a form of sexual objectification done to marginalized groups, wherein the trait that makes them a minority (i.e., skin color, body size) is sexualized. Trans and nonbinary people frequently experience fetishization as a form of sexual harassment that can lead to violence. ⁽⁵⁾

- c. Intimate partner violence: this refers to sexual violence in the context of an intimate relationship, which trans people are twice as likely to experience. ⁽⁶⁾

The Trans-EAAA (TEA³) program

Our adapted intervention – tentatively titled Trans-EAAA (TEA³) – is now drafted. An additional session was added to allow time for new material that affirms gender or addresses trans-specific forms of violence, bringing the total intervention time to 15 hours or five three-hour sessions.

The next phase of this program is to recruit peer facilitators and participants for pilot testing in early 2025. We hope this intervention will prove to be the first campus sexual assault prevention intervention for trans and nonbinary undergraduates shown to be effective and implementable across the globe.

References

1. [https://www.aau.edu/sites/default/files/AAU-Files/Key-Issues/Campus-Safety/Revised%20Aggregate%20report%20%20and%20appendices%201-7_\(01-16-2020_FINAL\).pdf](https://www.aau.edu/sites/default/files/AAU-Files/Key-Issues/Campus-Safety/Revised%20Aggregate%20report%20%20and%20appendices%201-7_(01-16-2020_FINAL).pdf)
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