

February 2010

**Review of on-line courses for college students about sexual assault  
By Staff of the Boston Area Rape Crisis Center (BARCC)**

Many colleges and universities have started using online tools to educate incoming students about sexual assault. Two that are marketed nationally are *nformd about sexual assault* and the sexual assault section of *Alcohol.edu*. BARCC staff has reviewed these courses to assess whether:

1. The information about sexual assault perpetration is consistent with current research;
2. The program provides education on the prevention of perpetration of sexual assault by changing cultural norms and increasing bystander intervention;
3. The format of the program employs effective teaching strategies.

**Review of the *nformd.on.sexual.assault*: college program**

Their description of the program:

“*nformd.on.sexual.assault* is an online program designed to help reduce sexual assault on college campuses by raising student awareness of the issue and by verifying student learning and participation.”

<http://www.studentsuccess.org> formerly: <http://nformd.net/>

This online program presents information using videos with actors who look like students. Two “student educators” talk with two uninformed students. This strategy gives the student viewer different role models, which might be helpful.

The program gives basic information about sexual assault to all students and then has separate sections for men and women students.

Overview:

1. Their use of videos is an effective technique to engage students. The acting can look hokey at times but the messages are communicated through the dialogue.
2. The program makes good use of survivors speaking about their experiences.
3. There is a very strong emphasis on men’s assaults of women. While research indicates that this is the most prevalent kind of sexual assault occurring by far, this program does not address male survivors or female perpetrators at all, which is a serious concern since some people in the audience will have experiences with these kinds of assaults. This could lead them to disregard all of the information in the program.

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4. This program gives the strong message that lack of clear communication between men and women is a major cause of sexual assault. Research does not seem to bear this out. Most women victims are clear that they communicated lack of consent and most male perpetrators understood that they did not have active consent.
5. This program emphasizes training in gaining and giving consent, which is a good discussion for students to have. Having a good understanding of consent might help students talk more easily about non-consensual sexual activity.
6. The pre-test that students are required to take asks students if they have ever been sexually assaulted. This raises concerns about the confidentiality of this information. This question might also be triggering for students—some of whom might be away from their normal support systems.

#### Women's section:

1. Women are provided with good, solid information about sexually aggressive men. The term “sexually aggressive men” is their term for men who research shows commit the most common kind of rape. This information would be good for men as well and would help men to identify friends and acquaintances who are committing this kind of assault.
2. Women are instructed to take evasive action when they encounter this kind of assailant. The tips that they provide for women to create an opening to get away from the assailant such as asking the man to brush his teeth or saying that they need something from their purse are good suggestions for anyone who is able to think clearly. This section is probably unduly lengthy and could be covered in one video scene.
3. The survivor speakers discuss going numb and being unable to act when the assaults are occurring. This program does not help the watcher to make sense of the survivors' experiences of being unable to fend off the attacker with the emphasis in this section on finding wily ways to get out of violent situations.
4. This section does not include information that is in the men's section on challenging the attitudes and beliefs of friends. Women would undoubtedly find this useful.

#### Men's section:

1. This section provides good information about rape myths and good use of metaphors to help men to challenge their thinking. The program works to address the idea that an environment in which people are free to denigrate women encourages sexual violence.
2. It touches on sexist language as a sign that someone holds attitudes and beliefs that encourage sexual violence. This is a complex message that is not clearly articulated; someone watching might think that the program is saying that using sexist language somehow causes people to rape or assault, which might make the watcher dismiss the message.
3. This program uses a male-on-male rape scene to try to build empathy for female victims of assault. Research from John Foubert's program for men called *One in Four*

supports using this kind of imagery to increase empathy but this program has been seriously and continually criticized for building empathy by building on young men's homophobia. The actors in the nformd video make comments like "women are just as disgusted at being raped by a man as men are at being raped by a man." This is a serious consideration for schools thinking about using this program.

4. The training and suggestions for intervening in situations are excellent.

Sections covering dating violence and stalking:

1. These sections provide good information in a lecture format.
2. Audience members are not encouraged to seek out help from local, community resources who are the experts in these kinds of situations. The suggestions are to handle the situations yourself or by involving your friends. Very often, students are not able to handle these situations on their own and need advice in creating safety plans and contacting public safety.