

HEARING FROM STUDENT-ATHLETE PEER EDUCATORS: A
QUALIATATIVE STUDY OF THE IMPACT OF PARTICIPATION IN AN
INTERPERSONAL VIOLENCE PEER EDUCATION GROUP

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Abstract

Peer education offers an empowering strategy for addressing the issues of sexual assault and domestic violence in student-athlete communities. This study explores how student-athlete peer educators serve as social change agents in the student-athlete community in formal and informal ways, and how participation in a peer education group impacts their own knowledge, behaviors and attitudes. Fourteen student-athlete peer educators from a large, public northeastern school were interviewed about their experiences. Results indicate that participation in the group had a positive impact on their own knowledge, attitudes and behaviors as well as their ability to influence others in their community. Implications for administrators working with student-athletes are discussed, as well as directions for future research.

Introduction

The media is filled with reports of student-athletes committing interpersonal violence, including sexual assault and domestic violence. Recent examples include charges of rape filed against Boston College defensive end Brady Smith in 2008; charges of rape, sexual assault and two accounts of aggravated indecent assault made against Penn State running back Austin Scott in 2007; accusations of gang rape made against three Iowa football players in 2007; allegations of gang rape against baseball players at DeAnza University in 2007; the arrest of University of Texas El Paso basketball player Darren Clarke on domestic violence charges in 2006; rape charges filed against the USC quarterback in 2006; allegations of rape committed by the Navy quarterback in 2006; six Tennessee football players charged with gang rape in 2005; and the well-publicized rape allegations about members of Colorado's football team, in Spring 2004. Although the members of the Duke Lacrosse team were cleared of rape charges in 2007, the accusations sparked a national discussion about the connection between student-athletes and violence against women. The association between athletes and violence transcends to the realm of professional athletes as well, as demonstrated by allegations of rape or abuse against Kobe Bryant, Mike Tyson, and O.J. Simpson. In 2004, *USA Today* identified 164 college and professional athletes charged with crimes of sexual violence within the past six years (USA Today.com, 2003). The empirical literature on student-athletes and sexual assault and domestic violence is quite limited; however, a small body of studies has been conducted that conclude that male student-athletes are overrepresented as perpetrators of rape on college campuses. Several researchers indicate that male student-athletes are more likely to be sexually aggressive and commit sexual assault than other students (Crossett, Benedict & McDonald, 1995; Crosset,

Ptacek, McDonald, & Benedict, 1996; Frintner & Rubison, 1993; Koss & Gaines, 1993; Murnen & Kohlman, 2007).

While it is essential to better understand the problem of interpersonal violence in the student-athlete population, it is also important to recognize what aspects of this community may contribute to a solution and ultimately, prevention. Researchers have not adequately assessed the resources and strategies available within the student-athlete community that can be utilized to expand efforts to address the problem of interpersonal violence. Administrators who are responsible for implementing comprehensive prevention programs must not only identify and address the problem of interpersonal violence in student-athlete communities, but must also recognize and build upon its strengths and resources.

One promising social change strategy for addressing interpersonal violence with student-athletes that builds upon community strengths and resources is peer education. In this paper, the potential of peer education as a tool for student-athletes is discussed. An example of an innovative, student-athlete peer education model is presented. Next, the findings from interviews with fourteen student-athletes peer educators about the impact of participation in the program are shared. The research questions focused on exploring the ways in which participation in this program impacted student-athlete peer educators' interaction with other members of their community, as well as how serving as a peer educator influenced their attitudes and behaviors related to interpersonal violence.

Limitations to this study include a small sample size and selection bias. Those student-athletes that participated in the interviews are likely invested in the success of the program. To minimize the impact of this bias, certain steps were taken to insure anonymity and are discussed in the methods section. Despite these limits, this exploratory study provided a forum for student-

athletes to voice their own perspectives about the impact of participating in a peer education program. This case study contributes to our understanding of the ways in which participation in a peer education program can impact student-athletes' interactions with others in their community, their own attitudes and behaviors related to interpersonal violence, and thereby their potential for creating positive social change.

Peer Education

While the definitions of peer education vary, Shiner's (1999) simple explanation is often cited and describes peer education as "education of young people by young people" (p. 555). A key underlying principle of peer education programs is the communication of educational information by individuals belonging to a similar social group. In their review of peer education programs, Parkin and McKeganey (2000) found that "this notion of shared social status, whether relating to age, ethnicity, gender, cultural or sub-cultural membership, has been documented as integral to the application of any peer education project" (p. 295).

Peer education is an approach used widely with high school and college students as well as with community groups, and has been recognized as a promising practice by several governmental agencies including the Centers for Disease Control and the U.S. Department of Education (Hunter, 2004). In particular, peer education has gained popularity in higher education over the past few decades to educate students about health behaviors such as alcohol abuse and safe sex practices, and more recently, sexual assault and domestic violence. The format of peer education programs vary widely from peers conducting workshops to presenting theatrical skits. Research on using peer education with students on issues of sexual violence and domestic violence suggests that using this approach is more successful than traditional programs facilitated

by professionals. Studies have demonstrated that students are more likely to pay attention to their peers and are more comfortable discussing issues of interpersonal violence with peer educators than with professionals (Berkowitz, 1992; Earle 1996; Lonsway, 1996; and Simon, 1993).

In peer education programs, students educate other students about issues of sexual assault and domestic violence in both formal and informal settings. The formal settings include the delivery of the actual educational program, and the informal settings include interactions between peer educators and other students outside of the educational program. For example, peer educators may talk about interpersonal violence with other students in classes, in residence halls, or during other activities. Diffusion of Innovation theories are often cited as supporting this type of social change in peer education (see Turner & Shepherd's review, 1999). Based on the work of Rogers (1983), this theory is used to explain how ideas (or "innovations") are accepted by communities. Certain "opinion leaders" in communities can spread knowledge and ideas to others and thereby diffuse the information throughout the community. Key to the theory is that the opinion leaders are well respected and hold status within their community, and that they obtain the appropriate knowledge about the issue. It also supports the possibility of a "ripple effect", whereby peer educators transmit and communicate the information they have learned to others in their community. Diffusion of Innovations theory has been used to explain how peer educators are able to create social change on issues of interpersonal violence within the general college campus community, and the theory holds promise for looking at smaller communities on college campuses such as the student-athlete community. Within the student-athlete community, those athletes who serve as peer educators have the potential to function as opinion leaders who can influence other student-athletes.

In addition to educating other students about interpersonal violence, another potential benefit of peer education is that the peer educators themselves experience positive changes in knowledge, attitudes and behaviors related to sexual assault and domestic violence. In their often-cited book on the rationale for having peer educators on college campuses, Ender & Newton (2000) cite the personal impact on participants as one of the “most significant effects” of serving as a peer educator (p. 6). While research on the impact of peer education on peer educators themselves is severely lacking, a small body of research suggests positive changes in participants’ knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors. The only study found to date that looks specifically at sexual violence peer educators was conducted by Lonsway et al. (1998), who evaluated the outcomes of a program to train peer facilitators for a campus rape education program and they found that both the attitudes and behaviors of peer educators were positively influenced by their participation in the program, including at a two-year follow up. In other related areas, Sawyer & Pinciaro (1997) found that participation in 10 sexuality peer education programs across the United States yielded positive changes in self-esteem, personal development, and sexual behavior. Strange, Forrest, and Oakley (2002) explored the impact of participating as sex education peer educators in England and found positive changes in attitudes and confidence in behaviors related to sexuality. Taylor and Serrano (2000) found improvements in knowledge, skills and behavior for participants in a peer education nutrition program for low-income Hispanics.

Peer Education and Student-Athletes

Over the past few decades, the popularity of student-athlete peer education programs has increased. Peer education programs have been formed on many college campuses to address important issues within the student-athlete community including alcohol and drug use, nutrition, sexual responsibility, and interpersonal violence. National groups such as BACCHUS and GAMMA have even developed a “Student Athletes as Peer Educators Training Program” (The Higher Education Center for Alcohol and Other Drug Prevention, 2002). Groups have been established at several colleges and universities to specifically target the issues of sexual assault and domestic violence among student-athletes.

Conceptually, this approach may be especially useful for the student-athlete community due to its status as a subculture on college campuses. While college athletes are certainly integrated with their non-athlete peers, they still belong to a distinct student-athlete community, often with its own language, experiences, and social norms. Oftentimes, it is difficult to gain access to student-athlete communities due to their busy schedules, as well as a culture that is sometimes regarded as privileged, removed from the regular student-body, loyal to each other first and even secretive (McMahon, 2005). Peer education has been cited as a potentially beneficial method for addressing subcultures (Turner & Shepherd, 1999). In particular, peer education holds promise for subcultures because of the following factors: “peers are a *credible* source of information, it formalizes an *already established* means of sharing information and advice, education by peers may be *acceptable* when other education is not, and peer education can be used to educate those who are *hard to reach* through conventional methods” (Turner & Shepherd, 1999, 242). Lastly, student-athletes interact with one another frequently in situations

outside of sport, such as in social and living situations, and this offers an enhanced opportunity for peer educators to influence their peers outside of the actual program.

Although student-athlete peer education on interpersonal violence holds conceptual strength, it has yet to be evaluated. As student-athlete peer education on interpersonal violence continues to be implemented on college campuses, the ability to empirically demonstrate its impact is critical. Further information is needed about how student-athlete peer educators transmit information to their community about interpersonal violence, including teammates, coaches, and other student-athletes. Additionally, information is needed about the impact on peer educators' own knowledge, attitudes, and behavior. This case study explores a student-athlete interpersonal violence peer education program on one college campus, with following three research questions guiding the study: What impact do student-athlete peer educators have on their interactions with members of the student-athlete community? How does participation affect the knowledge and attitudes related to interpersonal violence for peer educators? In what ways does participation in the program influence peer educators' own behaviors?

Program Description

The peer education model considered in this study is a student-athlete theater program on interpersonal violence at a large, Northeastern public university. The athletic program is NCAA Division I, includes nineteen varsity teams and involves over 700 student-athletes. The peer education group is open to all student-athletes without any prerequisites. Peer educators are mostly recruited through word-of-mouth, and information is also sent to all coaches to announce

the program to their teams at the beginning of each semester. Participation in the program is voluntary, and not part of an academic requirement.

Student-athletes involved in the program attend regular monthly training meetings to learn more about the issues, including sexual violence, dating violence (physical, emotional and sexual abuse), stalking, harassment, and same-sex violence. Participants work with a coordinator from the university's department that services victims of violence. They provide presentations on campus for their peer student-athletes as well as at local high schools and colleges and at national conferences.

The program explored in this study uses a unique format involving interactive theatrical performances as a method for peer education. Theater used for education has received increasing recognition as a form of "entertainment education", with the underlying premise that it is engaging and entertaining while also delivering educational information to the audience (Singhal & Rogers, 1999). Entertainment education approaches are used to "educate individuals and influence their knowledge, attitudes and behaviors related to specific social problems" (Herman, 2008, 23). In their evaluation of a peer education sexual assault theater program, Black, Weisz, Coats & Patterson (2000) concluded the "format and design of a theatrical performance may be effective in presenting and invoking emotion" about sexual violence (p. 602).

In the peer education model presented in this paper, student-athletes design skits based on real-life scenarios, where they depict a relationship where some form of domestic violence or sexual assault occurs. The skit portrays the reaction of the victim and the perpetrator, as well as their friends. The coordinator of the program introduces the skit, and after it ends, the student-athletes remain "in-character" and answer questions from the audience. This interactive segment

allows audience members to question the characters and their behaviors. This type of interaction is referred to as “parasocial interaction” and is a key construct of entertainment education (Singhal & Rogers, 1999; Herman, 2008). Parasocial interaction suggests that members of the audience form a relationship with the characters who are performing, who then model certain behaviors and attitudes. This can impact the attitudes, emotions, and behaviors of the audience members (Herman, 2008). The in-character piece allows peers to question the actions of the abuser in front of other members of their community, which also serves as a vehicle for modeling positive attitudes and behaviors.

After the in-character segment, peer educators come out of their characters and introduce themselves to the audience. They discuss the purpose of their character, provide an educational message about interpersonal violence, and talk about why they joined the program. This discussion functions as an opportunity for members of the student-athlete community to see their peers and teammates take a public stand against sexual violence and abuse, thereby modeling positive attitudes and behaviors.

At the conclusion of the presentation, resources on sexual violence and domestic violence are shared with audience members. Peer educators highlight the ways in which student-athletes can use their status on campus as a way to take a leadership position on issues of sexual violence and abuse, and challenge audience members to take a stand against violence.

Method

Participants in this study were fourteen peer educators responsible for delivering peer education theater programs designed to challenge student-athletes’ attitudes about sexual assault and domestic violence. Qualitative data regarding the impact of the program on peer educators

and on their interactions with members of the student-athlete community were collected using semi-structured, in-depth interviews with this sample of peer educators.

Interviews were conducted with fourteen former or current members of the program to determine participants' perceived impact on others in their community, knowledge base about interpersonal violence, attitudes about interpersonal violence and victims, and behaviors-including in their own intimate relationships and their willingness to intervene in other abusive situations. The interview guide was created by the researcher in conjunction with the Director of the University's sexual violence and abuse program and the interviewer.

A combination of purposive, criterion-based and convenience sampling was used to gather respondents. All active current and past members were included on a master list and then those with contact information were invited to participate. Active membership was defined as belonging to the program for at least one year, including participating in at least five performances as well as attending regular training meetings. Twenty-five participants were identified as active members, and contact information was available for eighteen members. Of those, fourteen agreed to participate. The final sample included nine women and five men. Description of other demographics including team and current or former status can be found in Table 1.

In order to help minimize the impact of selection bias, interviews were conducted by a trained graduate student who was not affiliated with the program. Interviews were held at a "neutral" place, such as the student centers on campus. Phone interviews were conducted with six participants who had graduated and lived a greater distance from campus. The interviews lasted approximately one and one-half hours and were audio-taped. Informed consent and the purpose of the study were reviewed with participants and they were reassured that their

information would remain confidential. No identifying demographic information was collected or attached to the transcripts. Results were presented only by the gender of participants.

Cross-case analysis was conducted using content analysis to identify the major themes emerging from the data (Patton, 1990). The author first reviewed the transcripts of each interview, using the three research questions as sensitizing concepts. Emerging themes were identified and categories of findings were created based on identified themes. The data were then coded according to theme, and frequencies for each theme were calculated. In order to increase dependability and credibility, the interviewers also reviewed the notes and the researcher engaged in peer debriefing with two experts in the field to gather feedback on interpretation of the data and the analysis process (Mertens, 1998).

Results

The results fall under the following main three categories: interactions with community, impact on knowledge and attitudes, and impact on behavior.

Interaction with community

Respondents discussed their interactions with and reactions from others in the student-athlete community about their participation in the program including their team, coaches, and the greater student-athlete community.

Team

Thirteen respondents felt that their involvement in the program had a positive impact on their team, and that their teammates were supportive of their participation. One man felt that his team was mostly impartial about his involvement, although he noted that his team captain did express support.

One way in which respondents felt that their involvement in the program positively impacted the team is by getting other teammates to join. Eight respondents reported that they convinced other teammates to attend a meeting. Members of Men's Track and Women's Crew all talked about how their teams have historically been involved with the program and that they take pride in having their teams so involved.

Five respondents from three different teams said that because of their involvement in the program, there has been discussion among their teams about the issues of interpersonal violence that may not have otherwise occurred. One male respondent explained that his involvement in the program offered opportunities to challenge the derogatory "locker room talk" that occurred on his team:

We certainly made an impact and they [teammates] recognized that we were serious, and they recognized that we were committed to it, it wasn't a joke anymore. Guys talk, in fact, we base our scenarios around locker room talk, cause that's what happens...I always had the locker room talk with everyone else...folks were challenged. They thought twice about certain things, certain language, certain behaviors.

Members from two different women's teams said that because of their involvement in the program and that of their teammates, they had noticed certain abusive behaviors in other teammates' relationships and had been able to intervene. One woman explained, "We've become more aware, and unfortunately, have noticed things from different people that I don't think any of us would have noticed before without having had the [program name] stuff. Which is kind of eye opening to all of us on the team."

Coaches

Ten of the respondents (representing four different teams) felt that their coaches had been supportive and reacted positively to their participation. Members from one women's team said that their coach talked about the program periodically to the team, and encouraged members to attend the presentations and also to join the program. He also gave the coordinators time during practice to discuss the program and issues with the rest of the team.

A men's team also expressed the unconditional support that they have received from their coach, including that he has excused them from practice to attend a performance. He has also conveyed to the team that he is proud of the team's historical involvement with the program and encourages them to join, as part of their responsibility as an athlete. One member of the team said, "He's real proud about that...He says, 'Look, we've been in this since the get-go and so we want to keep this thing going'. He also talks about how we as athletes in general have a responsibility to do [this]."

Greater student-athlete community

Respondents were asked about whether they believe that program has had any impact on the general student-athlete culture at the university and if so, to provide a description.

Twelve respondents expressed the belief that the program has had at least some positive impact on student-athlete culture. Generally, they felt that it impacted certain individuals more than others. Seven of those respondents felt that minimally, student-athletes in general know what the program is and that it is an accepted part of their experience on campus. Ten of the respondents said that they have been recognized by other student-athletes on campus because of their involvement in the program.

Six respondents felt that because of the program, student-athletes in general gained information about sexual violence and abuse, increased their awareness of the problem, and learned about what to do if something should occur. Three respondents said that they believe the program gives student-athletes a different perspective and way to look at issues of interpersonal violence.

Two respondents felt strongly that the culture of student-athletes was positively changed by the program. One woman commented that the innovative approach to the programming and in particular, the involvement of peer male athletes, had a significant impact on the culture of student-athletes:

The audiences I think were interested in what was going on because it was different than what they had been exposed to before, and I also think again, having the peers involved, having your own teammates involved, that made it personal for other people as well. So um, I think it did change the culture of the athletes in general.

Another man said that he noticed a shift in the student-athlete culture, as he observed a “...change in the nature of the dialogue, you know, change in the seriousness of it, and that’s not to say that the folks were all changed, um, but folks were challenged.”

Impact on participant knowledge and attitudes

Respondents reported that participation in the program impacted their personal knowledge and attitudes about sexual violence and abuse. In particular, their knowledge about the issues increased as did their empathy for victims. Participation in the program also strengthened their identity as a leader on campus.

Impact on knowledge and empathy

Throughout the interview, respondents discussed how participation in the program increased their knowledge about various aspects of interpersonal violence, as well as their empathy for victims. Some of the specific knowledge acquired by respondents that was mentioned throughout the interviews included myths about sexual assault and domestic violence; cycle of violence; dynamics of abusers and victims; victim-blaming behaviors; the importance of providing options to victims of domestic violence and sexual violence; the actual options available to victims; and how to refer an individual needing services.

In addition to gaining knowledge about the issues of sexual violence and abuse, many respondents (n = 11) said that their work with the program had challenged their own victim-blaming attitudes and had increased their empathy with victims. For example, one woman explained:

I would say coming in that I wasn't very tolerant of how people stayed in circumstances like that. I didn't understand how you would keep coming back for more abuse, and by playing that character, and having to say lines like, "Well he didn't break any bones", "He didn't hurt me really bad", and "Look it's just a little bruise, it will heal", that kind of stuff, I believe, I understood much better, how those kind of situations continue and the different factors that contribute to them. And for that reason this was a really, really educational experience for me.

Some respondents talked about their membership in program as a process, and admitted that they first joined because they were interested in acting or it seemed like an interesting activity, but as they became involved they learned more about the issues and felt it was important to educate others. For example, one woman said, "Like at first I think it appealed to me as a way

to do something else...it is fun to act and all that stuff but now at this point I think the issues are really most important and trying to get people involved and stuff like that". Two respondents said that they have become so involved in the program as student coordinators that it is part of their identity, as one man commented that the program "is just part of me now". Another woman said:

It's interesting because I think I progressed. In the beginning it was easier for me to play the victim's blaming friend, cause those were closer to the attitudes I came to the program with. But as I got more involved, I learned more about it...it was a lot easier for me to play a victim.

One of the men talked about how he realizes how pervasive sexual violence is and how it impacts victims. He said:

I think the main thing about sexual violence is it happens everywhere. It's happening now, probably within a mile of here...and there's a chance that nobody will ever find out about it. And there's also probably a chance that the girl or whoever the victim is, I should say, is not going to ever forget about it... And I definitely realize that it goes on a lot more than I originally thought, and I see the big picture now.

Leadership development

Nine of the respondents considered themselves leaders on campus, and thirteen believed that they are leaders on their team. Nine respondents were clear in stating that their involvement in the program was at least part of the reason why they identified themselves as leaders on campus or on their team.

Six respondents talked about the importance of "silent leaders" or "leading by example". They believed that their participation in the program was a vehicle for leading by example, and

that their willingness to take a stand on issues of interpersonal violence provided a leadership example for their teammates and other people on campus. One man explained:

You lead by example, and folks will follow. Cause, I didn't tell my roommates, I didn't tell my family. It was just something I felt needed to be done and I did it. And folks followed. You know, other members of the Track and Field team, other students involved when we did it off and on campus...The Forrest Gump [reference], "stupid is as stupid does", it's leadership is what leadership does...I'm sure folks followed my example, and if that's what they did, that's what I wanted them to do.

Along similar lines, respondents also talked about taking initiative and action as an important part of leadership. One woman explained, "I also think it's [leadership] taking what you learned from the skits in [program name] and if you're seeing something happen, it's talking to somebody about it. If you feel that one of your teammates is in trouble, or yourself maybe, it's taking the initiative to approach somebody."

Impact on behavior and taking action

In addition to impacting their knowledge and attitudes about sexual violence and abuse, participation in the program impacted respondents' behaviors. As a result of their involvement in the program, many of the student-athletes reported acting as a resource to others in their community, intervening in abusive or potentially abusive situations, and re-examining their own relationships.

Serving as a resource

As a result of the information they gained, most of the respondents felt that they do or could serve as a resource for their peers on issues of interpersonal violence.

Thirteen respondents felt that they had gained enough basic knowledge about both sexual violence and abuse that they could effectively respond to someone seeking assistance. Seven respondents reported that they had actually used the knowledge they gained in the program to provide someone with information about sexual assault or dating violence. One man explained how surprised he was the first time he was approached, as he said, “I’ve never thought of myself as that person [resource], especially when I first started doing [program name], but then, I think I got the biggest shock when somebody came up to me and started talking to me about it...I basically coached her the best I could.”

Four of the respondents said that they were approached regularly by friends who knew that they were involved in the program and needed assistance. One woman reported that she was approached a few times by friends needing information so she started to carry brochures from the department with her at all times, and said that she gave them out on numerous occasions.

Intervening in peers’ relationships

All fourteen of the respondents reported that after participating in the program, they view their peers’ relationships differently, with increased awareness of potentially abusive situations. Comments included that they “are more observant of abusive behavior”, “notice verbal and emotional abuse more often,” “are more likely to question behavior”, “opened eyes to things going on in people’s relationships”, and “are more likely to recognize abusive patterns.” One woman said, “I don’t think I would probably even notice half the things as problems that I notice now.”

Related to this finding, respondents also expressed they were willing to intervene in their peers’ relationships as a result of their involvement in the program. Nine of the respondents said that they had intervened in peers’ relationships because they observed abusive behavior. Most of

these situations involved approaching the victim, and respondents reported that they knew how to calmly approach their friend, provide information and referral, refrain from victim-blaming statements, and remain patient. Three of the respondents specifically mentioned confronting abusers, including one man who confronted a teammate about stalking, one who confronted a hall mate about emotional abuse, and one woman who has confronted a few emotional and physical abusers. She explained, “I generally try to engage the abuser. In some sort of conversation, I try to underhandedly make him realize what he’s doing, or the way he sounds, at the very least.”

Those who had intervened in their peers’ relationships said it was a difficult and challenging task. One woman said, “It’s so hard, having all this advice to give, and not always having people listen to it. So you just got to try. You’ve gotta say what’s on your mind, but sometimes you have to plant a seed, like ‘What are you getting out of this relationship?’, make them think about it... But you can’t come out and say, “Why are you staying with him?” Another woman talked about the experience of approaching a friend who was in an abusive relationship:

I became more aware, but then it happens to you, right in front of you, and it took awhile to be like, wait, this really is happening, this is a serious issue, and now everything that you ever said to anyone else about this issue...now you have to start taking the action with it. I guess when it hits close to home it and it was really involving somebody, it was like, wow, almost wipe all that off and this is the time where everything you’ve told everyone else to do, you have to start holding to those measures too.

Three respondents reported that they would be willing to intervene but have not had the opportunity. One woman said, “Like if there was a situation where a person was experiencing

violence, I would definitely be more apt to intervene...I could act as a starting point of you know, 'You know I'm in the [program name], so here's what I see and just to let you know' kind of thing. But that opportunity never did come up." One woman said she was still feeling unsure of the best way to approach a friend in an emotionally abusive relationship.

Impact on own relationship

One hundred percent of the respondents reported their participation in the program made them more aware of how to treat their intimate partners respectfully. Five respondents indicated they were already comfortable with how they treated their partners and participating in the program just confirmed or enhanced such for them.

Five respondents commented that the program has taught them to be more conscious of the language they use and the impact of words. For example, one man said that especially when he is angry, he is more aware of being careful of the way he expresses himself and that he tries not to be disrespectful to his partner during arguments.

Two men said that their participation in the program has dramatically impacted the way they conduct themselves in their relationships. One man explained,

I don't say a lot of things anymore. I was pretty bad with some of the stuff I would say. But like, I would say it jokingly. Like I would say things to be funny, but then I look back at it now, and I realize, that's not funny...So I mean, I've definitely cut out a lot of stuff I've said. I'm more aware of you know, how, well I don't know how girls think, but I mean I am more sensitive.

Another man talked about his own violent upbringing and how being in the program is helping him break the cycle of violence by changing his own behavior. He said,

Because of my family upbringing I have a little bit of a temper, like everybody else in my family, and it helps me realize when my temper is about to go, when I'm with my girlfriend it's like just make sure you're not going to do something that you're really going to regret. You know, like violate her personal space. I'm actually really grateful that I was in [program name] for two or three years before I actually got into a serious relationship, and now I am already aware when the situation can happen, to just stop.

Discussion

This study provides a starting point for examining the impact on peer educators of participating in a student-athlete sexual violence prevention peer education program. The first research question guiding this study was exploring the impact that student-athlete peer educators have on their interactions with members of the student-athlete community on issues of sexual violence and abuse. Peer educators clearly felt that they had an impact on others in their community, beyond the formal mechanism of the actual theater presentation. They confirmed their role as “opinion leaders” who were transmitting information about interpersonal violence through more informal methods to teammates, coaches, and other student athletes. Peer educators reported a variety of ways in which they conveyed information to others about interpersonal violence, including initiating dialogue with teammates about the issues, challenging other athletes who used derogatory language, or distributing brochures. Other members of the student-athlete community clearly associated them with their role as peer educators and treated them as a resource.

The second research question was whether participation in the program impacted peer educators' own knowledge, attitudes, and behavior. Overwhelmingly, an increase in knowledge about interpersonal violence was reported, as well as shifts in attitudes such as an increase in empathy towards victims. Lastly, they were able to translate their change in attitudes into action by intervening in abusive situations as well as examining their own intimate relationships.

Another important theme that emerged from the data is the connection among leadership, peer education, and student-athletes. Within the athlete community, this combination of factors offers a unique and empowering framework for engaging student-athletes to address issues of interpersonal violence. Due to our culture's admiration for sports and athletes in general, student-athletes are natural leaders on campus and in the greater community, whether or not they wish to be labeled that way. Peer education presents an opportunity to empower student-athletes and challenge them to address the issue as potential leaders, rather than as potential perpetrators. Select respondents previously self-reported themselves as "leading by example" or "silent leaders." Due to their elevated status as athletes, student-athletes offer the powerful potential to serve as influential peer educators for other groups on campus or even for high school athletes. Perhaps the idea of peer education can be expanded to encourage all student-athletes- not just those belonging to a program- to view their potential as leaders as an opportunity to take a positive stand against sexual assault and domestic violence. Involving student-athletes as peer educators also provides a positive, community-based approach that frames interpersonal violence as a community issue.

This study provides a starting point for exploring the impact of student-athlete peer education programs, but the results are particular to this sample, are exploratory, and are not generalizable. Replication of the study with additional student-athlete samples would provide an

opportunity to test whether results are similar. Further research could explore whether peer education programs have an impact on the greater student-athlete community. Information gathered from other members of the student-athlete community could confirm or challenge the perceptions of the student-athlete peer educators.

Although exploratory, this study suggests that peer education may be a particularly useful strategy for addressing issues of interpersonal violence in the student-athlete community. The impact described by this sample of peer educators was quite powerful, and one that could not have been created by administrators delivering a more formal program. The ability of administrators or practitioners to deliver educational messages may be challenging due to the demanding schedules of student-athletes, and may be more easily transmitted and better received by members within the culture. Peer education may also reach members of the community who are otherwise difficult to access, such as high-profile athletes, team captains, and coaches. Lastly, the tight bond experienced by many student-athletes may facilitate the transmission of information about interpersonal violence, because of the regular and frequent interaction that occurs among student-athletes.

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Table 1*Participant Sport and Graduation Status*

Sport	Number of Participants
Women's Crew	
Current	3
Graduate	2
Women's Gymnastics	
Graduate	1
Women's Soccer	
Graduate	2
Women's Volleyball	
Graduate	1
Men's Track	
Current	3
Graduate	1
Wrestling	
Current	1
Total	
Current	7
Graduate	7
TOTAL	14

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