As campuses and communities learn to function remotely and with social distancing measures in place, many of us are left with questions about how to support one another in a virtual environment. April is designated as Sexual Assault Awareness Month (SAAM). During this month, we would usually see campuses across the country host SlutWalks, “Take Back the Night” marches, clothesline projects, and other programs focused on bringing attention to the issue of sexual violence as well as the needs of survivors of sexual and intimate partner violence. Our fraternal organizations would host speakers, discussions, and seize upon other opportunities to raise awareness and provide support. This April is different. Stay-at-home orders and the flood of information on COVID-19 has shifted the focus and public attention away from SAAM.

The Landscape on Campuses Before the Pandemic Hit
As March drew to a close, most campuses transitioned to online instruction, shuttering with the exception of essential personnel. This move was done to comply with government mandates and protect students and staff from the risk of contracting COVID-19. There is no precedent for the times we now find ourselves navigating, no playbook to consult. We are all doing the best we can — including Title IX and student conduct officers. Let’s not forget there were students in the midst of being notified of pending sexual misconduct charges, investigations into reports of possible Title IX violations, and those whose hearings were scheduled to begin throughout the rest of the semester.

SAAM serves an essential purpose to highlight the ways in which sexual and intimate partner violence continues to be a major issue on college campuses:

- 25.9 percent of undergraduate women and 6.8 percent of undergraduate men experienced non-consensual contact through physical force or because they were unable to give consent (AAU, 2020).
- Sorority women and fraternity men experience higher rates of sexual misconduct in college than do nonmembers, especially related to unwanted sexualized touching (Kingree & Thompson, 2017; Mellins, et al., 2017).
- Sorority women reported consuming more alcohol and with greater frequency, increased risk-taking behavior, delayed assessments of threat and responses to risk, and increased contact with fraternity men — all of which significantly linked to the likelihood for sexual assault (Franklin, 2016).
- Only 20 percent of female student victims, age 18-24, report to law enforcement (DOJ, 2014).
• Scholars suggest that survivors are more prone to seek help if those members in their social networks are supportive (Ahrens & Aldana, 2012; Dworkin & Allen, 2016; Orchowski, Untied, & Gidycz, 2013; Ullman & Peter-Hagene, 2014). This is why it is so important for members to support a survivor coming forward and encouraging them to get help. If the disclosure is met with intense questioning or challenging their experience, that can negatively influence their continued help-seeking and well-being.
• Rates of sexual violence tend to be higher for people of color, particularly black, and indigenous individuals, as well as those who identify as GLBTQIA+ (AAU, 2020).

Higher education administrators, sexual violence survivor support services, other campus stakeholders, and advocacy groups use SAAM programming to increase awareness about the work that still needs to be done. Education efforts have demonstrated a positive impact in reporting and prevention efforts (AAU, 2020). Many of us have not been positioned to provide online education in engaging ways until now.

**Increased Need for SAAM Programming in the Midst of the Pandemic**

Title IX processes are inevitably being delayed and elongated by this global pandemic (Anderson, 2020). Not to mention, the individuals who experienced sexual violence while on break who may have yet to report. The reality is that we do not know the home situations for one another, as colleagues, much less the situation many of our students now face. New research (APA, 2020) shows that “stress and social isolation can raise the risk” of domestic and intimate partner violence. Individuals may find themselves removed from support systems at this time. Getting out of unhealthy, unsafe situations becomes more challenging with shelters closing and the fear of contracting and spreading COVID-19. At a time when many are at an increased risk of sexual violence, our need for the type of consciousness-building derived from SAAM is greater than ever (APA, 2020). Yet, many of us are struggling with how to answer the call. Let’s explore how we might approach SAAM programming during this time.

**Recognize the Impact of Trauma**

Research shows that 81 percent of women survivors report significant short- or long-term impacts such as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (DOJ, 2014). Neuroscience has provided a great deal of guidance regarding the impact of trauma on the brain, especially related to memory. The University of Alberta Sexual Assault Centre (2018) defines a trigger as “something that sets off a memory tape or flashback transporting the person back to the event of their original trauma.” Initially, a survivor may not understand triggers, or what is a trigger for them. Every survivor’s triggers will be different, as they are tied to the sensory experience connected with that event — a sight, smell, sound, touch, or taste connected with what happened, the
perpetrator, and/or other connected circumstances. Survivors “will react to the flashback, trigger[ed] with an emotional intensity similar to that at the time of the trauma” (SAC, 2018).

**Provide a Webinar about Trauma During SAAM**

Use this time to educate your community about the fact that some individuals respond to sexual and intimate partner violence by blaming themselves for what happened. Survivors can question whether they did something wrong or were unclear about what they wanted. Remind community members that the victim-blaming and slut-shaming can increase the propensity for survivors’ self-blame and shame. You can remind community members this is why some individuals may not define what happened to them as sexual assault, rather they may reference nonconsensual sexual experiences. You should also include available virtual campus-based resources; apps that provide virtual counseling (e.g. TalkSpace); and/or community-based resources available in the area of the institution.

Additionally, take some time to share that individual responses to trauma can include:

- Increasing their use of alcohol, or other drugs
- Engaging in increased/decreased sexual activity
- Being easily startled by unsolicited physical touch — hugs, touching someone on the shoulder, etc.
- Failing to execute their responsibilities, such as a drop in their academic performance or chapter obligations
- Withdrawing from friendships
- Experiencing an eating disorder

Remember, there is not a “one size fits all” model of responding to traumatic events, as evidenced by how everyone is reacting to the pandemic differently. This type of program could serve a dual purpose to help our communities right-size what they may be feeling, as well as increase the opportunity for survivor support.

**Engage in a Digital Coping Skills Campaign SAAM**

Using our digital platforms to share coping skills or host virtual discussions about coping skills can be an excellent way to support survivors from while physically distanced. Every survivor is going to cope in their own way. You can increase your opportunity to be supportive by sharing healthy coping skills that other survivors of sexual and intimate partner violence have found beneficial. These include the following:

- Talking with a trained counselor to increase self-love.
- Exploring eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR) therapy.
• Opening up and sharing the individual’s story with others.
• Journaling about what happened, feelings, triggers, and the path to healing.
• Recognizing the emotion/trigger will pass and pausing for peace.
• Practicing yoga, meditation, and/or prayer.
• Using a mindfulness app.
• Using the arts for expression — dance, painting, writing, etc.
• Helping others in need.
• Engaging in advocacy efforts for reform.
• Practicing self-affirmations.
• Get outside.
• Exercise.
• Listen to uplifting messages.

Share Available Online SAAM Content
Many sexual violence prevention and survivor support speakers are offering virtual programming by going live on social media outlets. You might elect to host an institution-specific debrief of content shared. The National Sexual Violence Resource Center and RAINN have designed digital messaging and content for the purpose of sharing during SAAM. CAMPUSPEAK is making their online SPEAK UP program available. Live Your Oath, a peer-led program created in partnership between Alpha Delta Pi and Sigma Phi Epsilon, remains available and can easily be facilitated in a virtual environment by chapter leaders. Taking advantage of programming and resources that already exist allows you to fill the void created by the absence of being able to physically gather on campus.

Stay Informed and Share Information
The Department of Education is expected to release the new Title IX guidelines this month. As a result, it is imperative we stay on top of announcements and any changes to campus procedures so we can ensure students are aware, especially given the current information overload. A clear expectation already articulated is the need for equitable and fair treatment of reporting and responding parties. Therefore, we may be well-served to partner with the offices for Title IX, student counseling, student conduct, and other stakeholder areas to provide the opportunity to learn more about how cases are being handled at this time. We can also create affinity spaces for those interested in how to support survivors and responding parties (or accused persons).

Our April may look differently than it has ever before, but that means we need to channel our creativity. We need to approach SAAM programming efforts and engagement intentionally. We
must be resourceful as we approach this work. While we are feeling what we are feeling, there is a critical need to ensure we are addressing sexual and intimate partner violence. We cannot shy away from the topic, but instead heed the call to be aware, educate, communicate, and act.

**Additional Resources**

For additional assistance in the U.S., visit the National Sexual Assault Online Hotline operated by [RAINN](http://wwwRAINN). For additional assistance in Canada, visit [Ending Violence Association of Canada](http://wwwEndingViolence). For more resources, visit the [National Sexual Violence Resource Center](http://wwwNationalSexualViolenceResourceCenter)’s website.

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