Within a matter of a few days, institutions across the country faced the unprecedented challenge of shifting from primarily in-person learning towards entirely online processes for not just classes but all functions. During this time, it can be challenging to think of the need, or the desire, to host any initiatives around Sexual Violence Awareness Month.

The adage that life does not stop, however, applies here. Whether it is repurposing existing plans to fit the needs of remote campus populations or creating new initiatives to focus on the unique issues presented by the current situation, there are both capabilities and responsibilities in preparing for Sexual Assault Awareness Month (SAAM).

Although the general thought behind this article is how to successfully move a Sexual Violence Awareness Month campaign into more virtual realms, it would be a failure to write this without the current context of COVID-19. With that said, the following are considerations to make while engaging audiences virtually.

First, be aware of trauma. This edict should apply to all sexual violence prevention (SVP) education, but especially at this time. Right now, due to the unique circumstances of the world, things are extremely volatile, with a significant degree of uncertainty. The fear and uncertainty around COVID-19 can further compound existing trauma and can make it hard for some to engage with programs on an already difficult topic. Prevention efforts must adapt to this.

Any messaging, programming, or communications going out about SAAM should include information for survivor support and other essential mental health resources. Existing education must be balanced with a strong mandate of care for participants. This leads to the second crucial topic.

Right now is a time to pivot prevention work. As things are unfolding, new issues are becoming more prevalent. For example, current information shows incidents of domestic and intimate partner violence are on the rise due to shelter-in-place orders (Gearheart et al., 2018; Jeltsen, 2020). While prevention efforts can still focus on the root of the issue, there are emerging fires that must be addressed.

An example of how to combat this could include offering education on how to identify potential warning signs of intimate partner violence (IPV), what IPV can look like electronically, and
information for those experiencing these actions on how to seek out safety. Education must be timely and applicable.

As the content for education shifts, so too should the expectations for engagement. During this time, prevention should aim for reaching smaller groups and focusing on the communities that want to be engaged.

A perennial point of prevention is all prevention can have an impact. Furthermore, prevention takes time. With virtual efforts, it is okay to focus smaller. Smaller doesn’t limit the impact. Shifting the size of training does allow a focus on different types of engagement.

Generation Z students in particular prefer learning environments, both in person and online especially, where they are empowered to be active in the learning process and learn more by the act of doing. (Barnes & Noble College, 2018; Kozinsky, 2017) These principles can already be seen on campuses in effective peer-to-peer education programs.

Right now, it might be impossible to get an entire community to sign up for an educational webinar. However, it might be possible to get a handful of driven leaders to sign up to learn material they can teach back to their chapters at a later date. Education can still be productive by shifting to impacting fewer people but taking a deeper dive.

When designing programs, get creative with the events. Programming does not have to be someone talking over slides. In fact, to hold precious attention, it must be more than that. Ideas for effective prevention programs could include a town hall where a panel of experts answer audience questions submitted and prescreened. Alternatively, maybe a video conference call where students practice skills like bystander engagement. Or have community groups read a book and have a virtual book club. There are many options on the topic that might be effective but require a bit of innovation.

Any shifts should include a mix of active and passive programming. Active programs require audience interaction or commitment where passive allows students to engage with the material without requiring a lot of their time. Active falls into the area of more traditional learning. Passive might mean producing videos of evergreen content and sending out the link, trusting populations to engage on their own time.

Another hallmark of this time might mean relying on and using student-driven connections.
Many members of campus communities are receiving their information from social media. If a campus office has a strong social media presence, this can be an effective way of engaging with students. If an office does not, though, it is time to look to council and chapter accounts. Can an office partner with these existing outlets to spread information?

This can include the production of information and graphics, logos, or infographics that students can easily repost. Use the reach where it already exists but make it easy for these accounts to engage. Provide students with the information and also provide them with guides around how to discuss this information.

Lastly, prevention is multifaceted. Students have an abundance of information coming their way. This is an overwhelming time, and some prevention efforts will get lost in the mix. Engage those who are willing but also understand a part of prevention is planning. While the world focuses on one critical issue, it is okay to use this time to better plan for the future.

Planning is an essential part of prevention and can be a variety of things. It can be conducting a short survey amongst the community to learn what issues matter to them most. It can be interviews with student leaders or brainstorming sessions. It can be laying out a calendar of future events. Also, part of this might be figuring out how to salvage education that was prepared for the month.

The reality of sexual violence prevention is this issue is not going to get solved in one month, and prevention efforts should not only last one month. Where virtual education might be something that focuses more on reaching the few than the many, and it might require stepping back for more planning, these actions are still meaningful. Now is the perfect time to take a step back, refocus on smaller pockets of the population who will be impacted the most, and prepare for the future.

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