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Reflections on R.E.S.P.E.C.T. Internship

Brea Keiser

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During my Sophomore and Junior year at the University of Arkansas, I had the opportunity to work as a peer educator for sexual assault issues on campus. I worked as an intern for Rape Education Services by Peers Encouraging Conscious Thought (R.E.S.P.E.C.T.) and was employed through Support, Training, Advocacy, & Resources (S.T.A.R.) Central. S.T.A.R. Central serves the university community through education programs, professional consultations, and victim advocacy services. They work to educate and bring awareness to sexual assault issues and provide victims with support in navigating through reporting and coping with the trauma. As an intern, my job was to educate my peers on sexual assault topics such as Consent, Rape Culture, and Bystander Intervention through classroom presentations, outreach events, and social media campaigns.

Strengths as an Intern

As a peer educator, I was successful at upholding the mission of S.T.A.R. Central and fulfilling my position as an intern, while growing my skills in public speaking and conflict resolution. This included presenting a predesigned presentation on sexual assault issues to classrooms of my peers ranging from 15 to 300 students. The goal of the presentation was to educate the students by engaging them in a peer-led discussion. We rarely had students willing to engage so it took creativity to get them interested in the conversation and willing to contribute to the discussion. At first, I struggled to obtain participation due to my inexperience and lack of confidence in presenting the material to a classroom of strangers. However, I improved with time. I learned what tactics were unsuccessful when presenting, such as waiting in silence for an answer, which led me to try other tactics that were more successful. I learned that asking people to raise their hands if they agreed with something or using intriguing visual aids were successful

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ways to get students to be more involved in the discussion. I was also successful because I did not lecture at the students, but rather talked to them as a peer. They had a lot of respect for me when I acted like one of them and not like someone lecturing them on right versus wrong. Sexual assault is a very sensitive topic to discuss, therefore, I had to use every tool I could to promote participation with my peers.

I thrived at resolving conflicts that arose when presenting the information to my peers. Students were often combative, due to the topic and our presence; therefore, I was forced to diffuse many conflicts. I became very good at responding to those that argued with me while presenting. Students would argue about a statistic that they did not agree with, an example of rape culture that they found fault in, or anything that could possibly discredit me as a presenter. Sometimes the conflict was understandable, such as the validity of statistics due to the differing of research. However, other conflicts were unnecessary and unwarranted. As a presenter, I would always bring attention to the importance of the topic and redirect arguments to bring attention to the reason I was there. Sometimes redirection worked and other times not, but regardless, I was successful in diffusing most conflicts and preventing them from escalating and ruining the presentation.

As an intern, I was also responsible for planning outreach events on campus to spread the knowledge past the classroom. An example of an event I planned was called “Not All Monsters Wear Masks” and it was a Halloween passive program that took place outside the Union Mall. At the event, we handed out candy, had masks for students to design, and provided information on how not all perpetrators are strangers. I worked with my fellow interns to create passive and active events that spread the knowledge and engaged students in the conversation on sexual

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assault. I excelled at planning these events because I was creative in making program themes and creating programs that were targeted to the audience. College students do not want to spend a lot of time talking about sexual assault issues, so programs that were passive and did not require a large time commitment were the way to go. Overall, I think that I exhibited a lot of strengths during my internship that showed in my success when educating my peers.

Weakness as an Intern

Maintaining organization was a weakness of mine as an intern. We would have several things planned on the same day or week, and I struggled to keep everything organized. Some weeks, I would have 5 presentations at different locations at different times for different professors, and it was easy to get them mixed up when not organized. I never missed a presentation, but I was often confused on where I was going and was not always in the right mindset to present due to my lack of preparation. Organization was also lacking with outreach planning. During outreach planning, things tended to get left to be completed until the day of, creating disorganization prior to an event. I could have done a better job as an intern if I was more organized and was better prepared for events and presentations.

Positive Aspects of the Internship

Being a R.E.S.P.E.C.T. Intern provided me with opportunities to gain confidence on my public speaking, use creativity to plan outreach events, and gain new knowledge on sexual assault issues. Prior to this internship I had little experience with public speaking and that hindered my confidence in doing so. A large portion of this internship was providing hour-long presentations to peers on sexual assault issues – This forced me to know the information and be

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confident in presenting it. Being hesitant when presenting would have caused the audience to doubt me as a presenter, which would have deflected from the intention of my presence. Sexual assault is a difficult subject to talk about due to the sensitivity and controversy that surrounds it. Confidence is key in presenting on this topic to show the audience that you are knowledgeable on the material and comfortable with speaking about it. After speaking on the subject to hundreds of students, I was forced to become more confident in my public speaking abilities, which was a major take-away from the internship.

This internship required me to plan outreach events to educate students on sexual assault issues. The rules for planning these events were for them to be educational, interactive, and feasible. Otherwise, I was given freedom to use my creativity to create impactful events on campus. I planned simple events, such as a button making station in the Union with sayings like, “Ask the Cutie Before You Touch the Booty”, and elaborate events that included a panel discussion involving other campus or community organizations. As interns, we got the freedom to choose what we wanted to do. Having the opportunity to use creativity to create and execute our own outreach events was a positive aspect of the internship.

Before being an intern, I did not have any knowledge on sexual assault issues. This internship gave me the necessary knowledge through days of training with the campus victim advocate. I felt adequately prepared to share my knowledge, due to the extensive training that was provided in the form of four 8-hour days. The more I learned about sexual assault issues, the more passionate I became about bringing awareness to them. This internship shined light on the subject and inspired me to continue this kind of work in the future.

Improvements for the Internship

Overall the internship was a positive and life-changing experience. However, it could have been improved if my fellow interns were more dedicated to their responsibilities, and if the advisor was accepting to change within the program. A supportive team would have shared the responsibilities of the internship with me. Instead I was often forced to go above my individual responsibilities to ensure that the other interns had completed theirs as well. I gathered materials for outreach events, executed events independently, prepared materials for the classroom presentations, and volunteered for more than my share of presentations. There were also times when I was scheduled to do a classroom presentation with another intern and they did not show up; Therefore, I was be forced to present by myself, which was not how the presentation was intended to be. Having interns that were present and engaged would have made the job easier.

My advisor for the position, Dr. Mary Wyandt-Hiebert, has been the victim advocate on campus for the past 20 years and has been overseeing the R.E.S.P.E.C.T. program since it was created. Although I enjoyed working with Dr. Wyandt-Hiebert, she was difficult to work with at times because she was not accepting of change within the program. The interns would propose changes that the program needed, but she would reject the ideas due to previous success and failure. For example, the interns proposed adding a PowerPoint with visual aids to the classroom presentation. Prior to this, the presentation was intended to be a peer-led discussion without the use of a PowerPoint. Dr. Wyandt-Hiebert saw success with the lack of a PowerPoint, therefore, was not keen on the idea of adding a PowerPoint to the presentation. The internship would have been easier if the interns were able to execute change to the program to modernize the style to appease the college-aged community.

Objective Analysis

Prior to this experience, I felt uncomfortable creating conversations with strangers due to uncertainty with what to say and anxiety for saying the wrong thing. I wanted to use this internship as an opportunity to improve my communication skills, so that I no longer feared uncomfortable interactions. To do this, I sought out every opportunity to talk with my peers about sexual assault issues through volunteering for classroom presentation, attending outreach events, and tabling around campus. Seizing every opportunity allowed me to build my confidence in creating conversations with others. Sexual assault is a hard and sensitive subject to talk about; Therefore, I believe that if I can talk to strangers about sexual assault than I can comfortably talk to anyone about anything.

Upon starting my internship, I discovered that I was extremely naïve on sexual assault issues. I wanted to walk away from my internship feeling knowledgeable on the sexual assault issues that affect our society and ways to combat them. In my two years as an intern, I got 32 hours of classroom training with the campus victim advocate, attended 2 weekend conferences that provided additional knowledge through outbreak sessions, and participated in a 2-day training on becoming a certified peer educator. Due to the extensive education I received and my over 300 hours of work as an intern, I gained extensive knowledge that I did not previously possess. I now know countless statistics that surround sexual assault, can provide unlimited examples of rape culture, and establish a list of ways that one can be an active bystander.

I was also hopeful that I would be able to positively impact my campus. I wanted to spend my time doing something not only beneficial for myself but also my campus community. Sexual assault is a major problem in our society and is often an issue that is overlooked. Being

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an intern for this program allowed me to grow not only my own knowledge on sexual assault issues, but also the knowledge of my peers. When providing presentations on sexual assault, it was clear that many people did not know what consent was, how our culture condones rape, or how to be an active bystander. These topics are all crucial to know yet are rarely taught to students prior to coming to college. I truly feel that my work as an intern not only changed my life, but also many of those that are in my campus community.

Connection to Course Work and Nursing

When completing my internship, I was able to connect my work as an intern to my course work in nursing school. The classes I have taken in nursing school have prepared me to understand the psychological effects of sexual violence on victims. I was lectured on the effects of trauma on the body and mind, leading to disorders such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Those that suffer from PTSD can have severe depression, anxiety, heightened reactions in situations that bring back traumatic memories, along with many other things. Those that are victims of sexual assault often suffer long-term effects from the abuse and may exhibit these symptoms in their day-to-day lives. My knowledge on the effects of trauma was beneficial to my ability to complete my job, because I could adequately share the effect of the trauma on the victim. I felt confident in my ability to educate others on this topic due to my understanding of the internal effects it has on the body and what triggers these effects. A major education point that I emphasized was avoiding triggers and being self-aware. People often make jokes about sexual assault or do not treat sexual assault like the serious crime that it is. I wanted to ensure that the students understood that effects that these actions had on victims that experience post-

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traumatic stress symptoms. Due to my education on the effects of trauma, I was able to understand the effects of triggers on the body and spread that knowledge to my peers.

I was also educated on how to deescalate situations, which was useful in diffusing combative students in the classroom. In Therapeutic Communications, Management, and Mental Health, I was lectured on the importance of deescalating situations through the use of therapeutic communication, redirection, and compromise. I was faced with many combative students while educating my peers, and this forced me to recall my knowledge on how to deescalate the situation. I can recall a time when a student argued with me on how the song *'Baby It's Cold Outside'* is an example of rape culture. He googled the historic significance of the song and disputed the message that it portrays. This song is about a girl trying to leave and a guy not letting her. It also says, "What's in this drink?", which can be interpreted as something being slipped into her drink. I agree that the purpose of the song was not intended to encourage sexual assault or the lack of consent. However, the point I was trying to make was that as a society, we overlook questionable things in relation to sexual assault issues. We ignore songs, movies, jokes, and many other things that say questionable things about sexual assault, leading to the normalization of rape culture. In this situation, I remained calm and spoke therapeutically to prevent the student from remaining combative. I attempted to redirect the conversation back onto the importance of the information, while still validating the student's concern. Having the knowledge from my previous course work allowed me to know how to best handle a situation with a combative student.

Public health was also a discussion in my Community lecture. Public health nursing promotes physical and mental health, while preventing disease, injury, and disability. This

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includes providing the community with education to improve their health or prevent harm. I was a peer educator for sexual assault issues that our campus community faces. By providing this education, I helped my peers understand the impact of sexual violence on one's physical and mental health. Although you cannot directly prevent sexual assault through education, one can be educated on the Rape Culture Pyramid. The Rape Culture Pyramid demonstrates how the normalization behaviors at the bottom of the pyramid support the higher, more severe behaviors that include assault. Providing the campus community with sexual assault education will inadvertently lower assault rates, therefore, improving the health and safety of the community.

Impact on Future Career

After completing this internship, I have a new passion for sexual assault awareness and helping victims of sexual violence. I hope to bring this new passion into my career by becoming a certified sexual assault nurse examiner (SANE). Becoming SANE certified would mean that I have undergone the education and training to complete forensic exams on victims of sexual assault. After people are sexually assaulted, they have 96 hours if they are an adult/adolescent and 72 hours if they are a child to complete a forensic exam to collect DNA evidence. Once this time has passed it is unlikely that viable evidence is present, therefore, there is a time constraint on when the test must be completed. DNA collected in the exam can help the victim identify the perpetrator if they are unknown or build a case against a known perpetrator. By being able to perform these exams, I will help victims of sexual assault by finding them justice through forensic data collection. After two years of working as a registered nurse, completion of a SANE didactic course, and completion of 300 clinical hours with a preceptor, I will be eligible to obtain the SANE certification. My plan is to work in a hospital that has a SANE program or to work

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part-time at an advocacy center as a SANE nurse. If being a sexual assault nurse examiner is something that I enjoy and become passionate about, then my career plans may change further so that sexual assault work is my main career – Whether this is by running a SANE program, being a director of an advocacy center, or just working full-time as a sexual assault examiner.

Regardless of where life takes me in nursing, I know that I will always be passionate about spreading awareness for sexual assault issues and will always support victims of sexual violence.

Recommendations

I would recommend the R.E.S.P.E.C.T. internship to others if they have the time needed for the responsibilities of the position and if they have an interest in sexual assault awareness. This position is a big time commitment and requires that the interns are available to present to classrooms, plan and execute outreach events, attend meetings, and complete preparations for all obligations. I believe that to succeed in this position, one must also have an interest in sexual assault awareness and understand its importance. You must understand the problems that exist in our society regarding sexual assault and be willing to use your voice to speak out against them. R.E.S.P.E.C.T. allows the interns to create their own outreach events and use their creativity to bring attention to sexual assault issues – Anyone that wants freedom to develop their own events and to impact the campus community would enjoy this internship. This internship also provides opportunities for self-growth in public speaking, conflict resolution, and collaboration within a team. For the future, I would recommend that R.E.S.P.E.C.T. continues to choose interns based on their interest in the subject and their abilities to speak to others. Interns that are not interested or invested in the subject, struggle to effectively teach the materials to others. Also, you can have

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a passionate intern with the best intentions, but if they have poor communication skills, then they will not be able to relay the organization's message effectively.

Being a R.E.S.P.E.C.T. intern changed my life tremendously. It improved my skills in public speaking, conflict resolution, and team collaboration. Sexual assault issues were brought to my attention, allowing me to become well-informed on the issues in our society. I was able to provide my peers with the necessary knowledge on sexual assault that they have yet to be taught. Above all, I gained a passion for bringing awareness to sexual assault and helping those that have been victims of sexual abuse. For all these reasons I highly recommend this internship because it can change someone's life forever.