

# **2023 Public Description of Work for Action Collaborative on Preventing Sexual Harassment in Higher Education**

## **Utah State University**

### **Student Feedback Focus Groups about Prevention Efforts**

#### **Relevant Rubric Area(s):**

1. Evaluation: Evaluating prevention programs
2. Evaluation: Other methods for monitoring climate on an ongoing basis

#### **Description of Work:**

As part of Sexual Assault Awareness Month in April 2022, Utah State University's Office of Equity and Sexual Assault and Anti-Violence Information (SAAVI) office conducted four feedback focus group sessions with students. The purpose of the focus groups was to understand student perceptions of USU's response to sexual harassment incidents, priorities in responding to sexual harassment, and what is missing in USU's sexual harassment response and prevention/education efforts.

The last time focus groups were conducted about USU's sexual harassment prevention efforts was in April 2018. At that time, USU did not have a robust prevention program, and so the focus groups were used to assess the university's first-year student and bystander intervention programming and generate ideas for future efforts. Focus groups were also previously conducted in April 2017 to assess two of the university's sexual harassment education/marketing campaigns ("Consent Is" and "I Will") that had recently been implemented.

USU currently implements a sexual harassment campus climate survey for students every other year and gathers feedback from participants after all sexual harassment trainings, including trainings for individuals who have been reported to the Title IX Coordinator. The main goal of the feedback focus groups was to collect additional data that may not be represented in the university's other evaluation efforts, which tend to be quantitative and not qualitative. Data from the focus groups would then be used to improve the university's current sexual harassment prevention and response efforts.

The focus groups were conducted on four dates and times in late March and early April. All sessions took place via Zoom and were not recorded to ensure participants felt comfortable sharing their honest feedback. The focus group facilitators were the senior prevention specialist from the Office of Equity and the outreach and prevention coordinator in SAAVI, both of whom have prior training and experience in conducting focus groups. Each session was scheduled for 60 minutes and was limited to 10 participants. Both undergraduate and graduate students from all of USU's campuses were eligible to participate.

Participants were recruited through emails sent to key campus stakeholders (such as Residence Life, Student Involvement, Inclusion Center, Statewide Campuses, and Student Orientation), social media posts on the SAAVI accounts, SAAVI's events webpage, and word of mouth. Individuals signed up for a focus group by completing the RSVP form built into Zoom for each session. All participants received an electronic \$25 Amazon.com gift card for their time.

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The focus group facilitators developed an interview guide in advance and used it during the sessions. The format of the interview guide included introductions of the facilitators; opening statements about the purpose of the focus group, the logistics of the session, and participant expectations; an opportunity to ask clarifying questions; participant introductions; five discussion questions; and closing statements about how the data from the focus groups would be used and when to expect the gift card incentive.

As part of the opening statements, the facilitators acknowledged their respective roles at USU and how those roles could impact a participant's willingness to share negative feedback about each of the facilitator's offices. The facilitators emphasized the purpose of the focus groups was to collect all feedback and they would not attempt to filter or respond to negative feedback during the course of the discussion. This clarification was important to the facilitators to ensure that the focus group participants would be able to speak freely during the sessions.

The five discussion questions were:

1. What have been your interactions with Utah State's sexual misconduct prevention and education efforts?
2. What are your impressions of sexual misconduct at Utah State?
3. What does Utah State prioritize in its sexual misconduct prevention and response work? (Examples: specific populations, certain methods, content)
4. What is missing from Utah State's sexual misconduct prevention and response work?
5. What is the most important thing that you want Utah State to know about student experiences with USU's sexual misconduct prevention and response work?
  - a. What else would you like to share about this topic before we close the focus group?

All participants were encouraged to contribute to each question, but they were not required to speak every time. As appropriate throughout each session, the facilitators would ask clarifying and follow-up questions and seek input from participants who had not yet spoken. The facilitators took notes about participant comments during the sessions.

After all of the focus group sessions were complete, the facilitators compiled the notes into a single document for basic analysis. Analysis focused on identifying trends and themes among participant comments, and determining key quotes for each of the questions. Once analysis was complete, a summary report was created by the facilitators. The report included an overview of the focus group process, the summary of participant comments and key quotes, and recommendations for next steps based on the main findings. The summary report was shared with the focus group participants and relevant campus stakeholders, such as the Title IX Coordinator, general counsel, and university marketing and communications.

Since the focus groups were conducted, some of the proposed next steps have been implemented (such as making grievance process information easier to access on the Office of Equity's website and adding climate survey data to trainings) and others are still in progress

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(such as implementing more university messages of support for targets). A main finding from the focus groups was a gap in student awareness of USU's prevention and response efforts outside of mandatory trainings and investigations, respectively. So, more work remains to better address participant concerns that the university is just "checking the box" with its prevention and response efforts. Going forward, USU intends to conduct the student feedback focus groups on alternating years of the campus climate surveys.

The student feedback focus groups are consistent with the recommendations in the "evaluation" section of the 2022 Rubric on Areas of Work for Preventing Sexual Harassment in Higher Education because they were a method for indicating what elements of USU's sexual harassment prevention efforts need to be changed and improved. The sessions did not focus on assessing participant knowledge of policies and behaviors, but rather sought information related to whether participants feel like the current efforts are deterring harassing conduct and changing people's behaviors and beliefs.

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