

---

Theses, Dissertations, and Projects

---

2017

## Benefits and challenges of offering peer support to student survivors of campus sexual violence

Zoe Amanda Levenson  
*Smith College*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.smith.edu/theses>



Part of the [Social Work Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Levenson, Zoe Amanda, "Benefits and challenges of offering peer support to student survivors of campus sexual violence" (2017). Masters Thesis, Smith College, Northampton, MA.  
<https://scholarworks.smith.edu/theses/1900>

This Masters Thesis has been accepted for inclusion in Theses, Dissertations, and Projects by an authorized administrator of Smith ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@smith.edu](mailto:scholarworks@smith.edu).

Zoe A. Levenson  
Benefits and Challenges of Offering  
Peer Support to Student Survivors of  
Campus Sexual Violence

### **ABSTRACT**

This study examines the self-perceived benefits and challenges to college students in their role as peer supporters for survivors of campus sexual violence. The study identifies emotional, educational, professional, and social benefits and challenges experienced by peer supporters, as well as strategies used by students to mitigate challenges. The study is based on the perspectives of 11 college students who offer peer support through on-campus programs. Data was gathered through semi-structured telephone interviews.

Major benefits included positive emotions (fulfillment, sense of purpose, empowerment), influence on career paths and opportunities, a sense of community, improved interpersonal skills, and increased social capital. Common challenges included burnout, vicarious trauma, conflict with administrators, intragroup conflict, work-school-life balance, blurred boundaries, and the burden of “knowing too much.” Students showed resilience, creativity, and persistence in developing problem-solving strategies. Social workers who supervise or interact with these programs can benefit from deepening their understanding of students’ experiences.

**BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES OF OFFERING PEER SUPPORT TO STUDENT  
SURVIVORS OF CAMPUS SEXUAL VIOLENCE**

A project based upon an independent investigation,  
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Social Work.

Zoe A. Levenson

Smith College School for Social Work  
Northampton, Massachusetts 01063

2017

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to extend my deepest gratitude to all those who supported me in the process of creating this thesis.

To my thesis advisor, Elaine Kersten: Thank you so much for your dedication, thoughtfulness, and guidance. Your enthusiasm for research and commitment to helping move my ideas forward made this process feel easy and exciting.

A huge thanks to my family for patiently and compassionately supporting me through the School for Social Work program. Thank you especially to my mother, Janet Distelman, Smith College School for Social Work Class of 1979, for leading me to social work and inspiring me to follow in your footsteps.

I want to thank my classmates at the School for Social Work for your friendship, passion, fierce loyalty, and unwavering commitment to seeking justice. I have no doubt that you are preparing to set the world on fire. A special thank you to my pillars of strength in this program: Teresa Musick, Chelsea Davies, Jaime Stepansky, Leah Gold, and Liam Malone.

To my kind and thoughtful participants: You are all incredible advocates for survivors, and so deeply passionate about ending violence. Thank you for sharing your stories with me, and for continuing to engage in this struggle.

Finally, I want to thank CARES at Vassar College, and all that have stood behind it, for leading me to my passion, and for being steadfast advocates no matter what challenges you face. You taught me how to listen, and how to use my voice for change. I will never stop believing in you.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	3
TABLE OF CONTENTS .....	4

### CHAPTER

I	INTRODUCTION .....		
	1		
II	LITERATURE REVIEW .....		
	4		
III	METHODOLOGY .....	25	
IV	FINDINGS .....	32	
V	DISCUSSION .....	44	
	REFERENCES .....	53	

### APPENDICES

Appendix A: Informed Consent Agreement .....	58
Appendix B: Sample Recruitment Email .....	61
Appendix C: Interview Guide .....	62
Appendix D: Human Subjects Review Approval Letter .....	63





## CHAPTER I

### Introduction

Campus sexual violence has become an issue of growing salience in recent years. With increasing media coverage, colleges and universities have been working to develop interventions to prevent and respond to rape, sexual assault, intimate partner violence, and stalking among their student bodies. Peer support interventions, such as peer hotlines, peer counseling, and peer advocacy, have played a longstanding role in campus response to sexual violence. As higher education continues to address the problem of campus sexual violence, it is crucial to understanding how these interventions work, as well as how they impact the students involved. After investigating current literature on campus sexual violence response, help-seeking behavior among survivors of campus sexual violence, and peer support programs, I deepened my interest in understanding how campus peer support programs focused on sexual violence were experienced by the students offering support. Specifically, I explored the following research question: *What are the self-perceived benefits and challenges for student peer supporters serving student survivors of sexual violence?*

There are a few terms used throughout the study that are important to understanding the topic being explored. First and most importantly, “peer supporters” refers to students who provide emotional support, listening, advocacy, and/or resource referrals through formally established on-campus programs under the supervision or advisory support of a campus staff person. “Sexual violence” in this study is defined as unwanted sexual or intimate advances, as

well as violent or controlling behavior perpetrated by current or former intimate partners. This includes rape, sexual assault, unwanted sexual touching, stalking, cyber-stalking, sexual harassment, and intimate partner violence. Finally, a “student survivor of sexual violence” within the context of this study is defined as any person who has experienced sexual violence (as defined above) while enrolled in a college, university, or other post-secondary education program.

Peer supporters on college campuses are in a unique position to reach students survivors who would not otherwise seek support. On the other hand, they face an unusual set of challenges that are often invisible to other students, or even to staff working on the same issues on the same campuses. Social workers and other mental health clinicians who work in college counseling centers, sexual assault prevention and advocacy programs, or community anti-violence resources that interact with college campuses are often in the position of supervising or working alongside student peer supporters. Gaining a better awareness of these students’ roles and paradigms will be beneficial to clinicians who supervise these groups or work alongside them in an integrated campus response to sexual violence. On a broader level, social workers need to have a robust understanding of how students conceptualize campus sexual violence; this will allow for more comprehensive and sensitive policy-making. By beginning to explore the experience of peer supporters as a part of college and university sexual violence response, colleges will be better able to comprehend the risks and value of integrating them into their programs. Further, by developing a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by student peer supporters and the strategies they currently have in place to mitigate these challenges, clinicians can determine how to provide supervisory support and fill gaps where students are unable to provide peer support.

Using an exploratory research design and qualitative methods, I conducted 11 individual interviews over the telephone in order to investigate the benefits and challenges experienced by peer supporters serving student survivors of sexual violence. Open-ended questions were used in semi-structured interviews to inquire about the emotional, educational, professional, and social benefits and challenges of participating in peer support programs. Over the course of the interviews, many participants also shared their strategies for mitigating the challenges that arose in their peer support work. Thematic analysis was used to interpret the data, and limitations and biases of the study are discussed in this report.

The following chapters discuss past and current literature in the field, the methodology used in the study, the findings determined from the interviews using thematic analysis, and a discussion and interpretation of the findings.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **Literature Review**

The purpose of this study is to identify the benefits and challenges to college students in their role as peer supporters for survivors of campus sexual violence. This literature review focuses on research exploring the ongoing problem of sexual violence at colleges and universities, as well as the currently identified benefits and challenges of addressing campus sexual violence through peer support programs. Campus sexual violence response is a rapidly evolving field with a vast literature base; this chapter aims to provide context about the broader field while maintaining a focus on peer support as a proposed solution. The chapter is divided into five sections. Section one provides an overview of the history, prevalence, and unique dynamics of sexual violence on college and universities campuses. Section two describes factors contributing to and shaping help-seeking behavior and reporting among survivors of campus sexual violence. Section three explores the history and present state of higher education's programmatic and policy response to campus sexual violence. Section four discusses some of the benefits and challenges of using peer support as a response to campus sexual violence. Section five describes the benefits and challenges of peer support more broadly in order to provide context for the present research.

#### **Sexual Violence on Campus**

Sexual violence, including rape, sexual assault, intimate partner violence, and sexual harassment, has been an issue of growing focus over the past decade in the field of higher

education. Approximately 20% of women are estimated to be victims of attempted or completed sexual assault or rape during their college years, while between 35% and 43% of women are estimated to experience at least one incident of intimate partner violence during college (Sutherland, Fantasia, & Hutchinson, 2016). Similar statistics about college men are difficult to obtain, as reporting is impacted by the increased shame and embarrassment experienced by male survivors (Sable, Danis, Mauzy, & Gallagher, 2006). In fact, most statistics related to sexual violence on campus are believed to be vastly underreported, leaving administrators unsure of how to develop a comprehensive response for such an undefined problem.

In exploring how sexual violence plays out on college campuses, it is important to understand the unique dynamics and broader context of sexual violence in general. The idea of sexual violence as a form of trauma that manifests distinctively was discussed by Burgess (1983) in her exploration of what she called “Rape Trauma Syndrome.” Burgess examined how Posttraumatic Stress Disorder symptoms following sexual trauma were in line with other forms of trauma, but she also discussed the factors unique to sexual trauma. She described three discrete factors that are salient in treatment of rape victims: “(1) resolution of the threatened sense of safety in the world or confrontation with one's vulnerability and helplessness—one's potential victim status; (2) reworking of body image and body boundaries connected with self-esteem; and (3) confrontation with power relations between men and women” (p. 106). Her theoretical essay on Rape Trauma Syndrome was groundbreaking for the development of the sexual trauma field.

Moscarello (1991) expanded on this idea, describing the feelings of powerlessness, vulnerability, and terror felt by women who have been sexually assaulted. She discussed emerging ideas around how sexual trauma is distinctively experienced as a loss of bodily

boundaries and autonomy. Through case studies and theoretical postulation, Moscarello explored the process necessary to heal following sexual assault, including establishment of safety, reconciliation with men as a group, building autonomy, and reestablishing boundaries. These processes can be supported by clinicians or others as survivors begin their process of healing. These ideas have important implications for the role of peer support in healing from sexual trauma. When students on college campuses experience sexual violence, their sense of safety in the space (mentioned by both Moscarello and Burgess) is shattered. By creating a healing process alongside peers, they may be able to feel safer in the space explicitly because of the role of the community in their healing.

Both Moscarello and Burgess, however, maintain a heteronormative definition of rape and sexual assault, assuming women as victims and men as perpetrators. In translating their work for present use, it is important not only to acknowledge the higher frequency of sexual assault perpetrated on women by men, but also to explore how these dynamics play out in LGBTQ relationships and assaults perpetrated on men by women. Similarly, because sexual violence is so tied to issues of power and safety, the role of other identities, such as race and class, must be considered; survivors of color, poor survivors, transgender survivors, and other marginalized subgroups of survivors have experiences that play out differently due to their identities. Jones, de Heer, and Prior (2016) explored the higher rates of sexual violence faced by LGBTQ and indigenous students in the U.S. In both groups, survivors were more likely to have been targeted based on their race, sexuality, or gender identity. In other words, not only does holding a marginalized identity shift students' ability to access resources after victimization, but the violence itself was experienced differently by LGBTQ and indigenous students.

There are many factors contributing to the high rate of sexual assault and other forms of sexual violence on college campuses. Stotzer and MacCartney (2016) examined a range of institutional factors and their impact on reported sexual violence (in this case, rape) on campus. Using routine activities theory juxtaposed with the reported rape statistics at 524 four-year colleges and universities, the researchers found that the presence of fraternities, as well as highly competitive athletics, were positively correlated with higher numbers of rape reports. Residential colleges also showed a higher rate of rapes than commuter schools. However, the only statistically significant factor found to influence rape statistics was the permissiveness of a school's alcohol use policy. Schools with more permissive alcohol policies had a higher rate of rapes than schools with stricter regulations on alcohol use by students. However, the authors discussed the difficulty of collecting accurate data about campus rape statistics, as it is known that rape is extremely underreported.

Stotzer's and MacCartney's findings about alcohol use as a major contributing factor to high rates of campus sexual violence are further supported by a 2010 study by Lawyer, Resnick, Bakanic, Burkett, and Kilpatrick, which examined the use of drugs and alcohol in facilitating campus sexual assault. Their study, which used a web-based survey distributed to students at a Southeastern university, found that the majority of assaults experienced on campus were drug- or alcohol-related rather than forcible, and that the majority of these survivors (84.4%) had consumed alcohol or drugs voluntarily prior to the assault. The researchers also found that the highest risk situation for college women was to be voluntarily using drugs or alcohol at a house party or accompanied by someone they knew. The authors clearly articulated that alcohol and drug use do not shift responsibility for the assault onto the survivor; rather, their primary suggestion is that college sexual violence prevention programs should be focusing on how

women can maintain safety in environments where drugs and alcohol are present among perpetrators of sexual assault.

Another essential factor shaping the prevalence and treatment of rape and other forms of sexual violence on campus is the campus culture. Sanday (1996) used her own cross-cultural research on rape-prone (meaning a high incidence and social tolerance of rape) versus rape-free (meaning a low incidence and social tolerance of rape) to investigate the same phenomena on college campuses. She determined that the central factor shaping a society's or college's prevalence of and attitudes towards sexual violence is the valuing of women and the extent to which gendered equality exists in the culture. While, of course, entirely rape-free colleges do not exist, Sanday described a range of qualities and conditions of this hypothetical "rape-free" campus community. For example, she portrayed a community in which decisions are made by consensus, and in which hateful and oppressive attitudes (racist, sexist, homophobic, etc.) are not tolerated. She describes severe social and administrative consequences for small acts of aggression, such as social exclusion, and for much larger ones, such as sexual violence. While Sanday's theory that campus culture is directly related to rates of sexual violence on campus is likely true, she postulated about these factors without accounting for what the process of dismantling institutionalized sexism might look like. Empirical data on factors related to gendered attitudes on campus would be useful in determining to what extent these attitudes determine rates of sexual violence.

More recently, gendered attitudes on campus have been found to impact students' perception of sexual violence. A recent study on this phenomenon evaluated the responses of male and female college students when reading a hypothetical scenario of intimate partner violence (Sylaska & Walters, 2014). The researchers found that female students were more

likely than male students to hold the perpetrator, rather than the victim, responsible for the violence. Female students were also more likely to encourage the victim in the scenario to seek help. The genders of the victim and perpetrator in the scenario were also significant; both male and female students took scenarios with male perpetrators or female victims more seriously than scenarios with female perpetrators or male victims. Gender was found to be the most common predictor of attitudes and response by the student participants. This is worth noting, as attitudes related to gender are shaped by the broader society and the campus culture, and because the study found the shifts in attitude are correlated with shifts in response. This may impact the response of peers on campus, but most importantly, it may influence the behavior of survivors following experiences of sexual violence.

### **Help Seeking and Reporting Among Survivors**

A central concern in campus response to sexual violence is the mismatch between the high rates of sexual violence found among college students (women in particular) through survey data and the low rates of reporting and help seeking by survivors of sexual violence. Field (2015) postulated that this discrepancy between actual and reported sexual assault is shaped by three factors: students' lack of comfort reporting sexual assault, feelings of shame or trauma symptoms following sexual assault, and sexual assaults being disqualified from reporting because they took place off campus or were reported to someone other than a mandatory reporter. A 2010 study by Amstadter et al., examined the prevalence of reporting and help seeking, as well as correlation to mental health diagnoses, among 228 female rape victims enrolled in undergraduate programs. Through telephone interviews, the researchers found that 52% of women surveyed sought some type of help, most commonly from a mental health professional (93%), followed by a medical doctor (48%) and a religious counsel (14%). The

study also found that female rape victims diagnosed with Posttraumatic Stress Disorder were more likely to seek help. Curiously, the study did not explore the process of seeking help from peers or college administration, an omission that is demonstrative of the informality with which peer response often occurs and the bias of researchers to focus on traditional “crisis response” resources such as hospitals or mental health facilities.

Fisher, Daigle, Cullen, & Turner (2003), used results from a national study, the National College Women Sexual Victimization study (NCVS), to determine whether women who had experienced any type of sexual victimization had reported their experience to police, campus authorities (campus law enforcement, administrators, faculty, or employers), or other people in their lives (friends, family members, intimate partners, or counselors). The research team surveyed a random sample of 4,446 female college students and found that while only 2.1% of victims had reported to police, and only 4.0% had reported to campus authorities, 69.9% of victims had disclosed the incident to someone other than police or campus authorities. Of this 69.9%, 87.9% disclosed to friends. This suggests that friends (peers) are far more likely sources of support following sexual victimization than are police, campus authorities, or even mental health professionals (1.0% of the 69.9% disclosures). These results contradict the findings of Amstadter, et al (2010), which showed a much higher rate of help seeking specifically with mental health professionals.

The idea that survivors of sexual violence are unlikely to report to police or other official channels was further explored by James and Lee (2015) in their study of how students’ perceptions of police impact their likelihood of reporting sexual victimization. James and Lee surveyed 49 students who had been the victims of unwanted sexual intercourse, unwanted sexual acts, and unwanted sexual touching, and had chosen not to report these incidents to the police.

The study found that the most common reasons for choosing not to report included fear of reprisal, feeling that it was a “personal matter” to be taken care of without police involvement, uncertainty that a crime had actually occurred, and fear of getting into trouble in the course of the reporting process. Each of these reasons may shape which alternate sources of support and assistance following sexual victimization would be appropriate, as students are unlikely to report these incidents to police. If survivors are worried about the formality and weight of reporting to police, providing more informal avenues to resources, such as peers, might increase the likelihood of students accessing the support they need. Additionally, there has been little research on how the peers to whom survivors do report experience the disclosures, and how they see their own roles.

Identity factors such as race, gender, and sexual orientation have a substantial influence on reporting and help seeking by survivors of sexual violence. A 2014 study by Weist et al. collected qualitative data through interviews with African American and White women who had survived sexual assault about their experiences of being assaulted and subsequently seeking services. The researchers found that while both African American and White women reported high satisfaction with services they received through mental health professionals or sexual assault centers, African American women were less likely to access these formal counseling services than White women. The researchers suggested a shift in marketing these services is needed in order to fully reach women of color survivors; because formal resources may not be as accessible to women of color, it may be necessary to present these services in a less formal way.

Similarly, a 2016 study by Fujii-Doe and Nadal examined help seeking behavior among Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) women who had experienced physical or psychological violence. The researchers found that despite similar rates of victimization across

racial lines, AAPI women reported lower rates of help-seeking behavior than the general population. Additionally, help seeking and self-identification as a victim of violence were more likely among women who had experienced physical violence (i.e. rape or physical abuse) as opposed to psychological violence (i.e. stalking or emotional abuse). Researchers suggested that developing a culturally competent understanding of AAPI survivors' experiences is crucial to responding appropriately to AAPI-identified students who experience campus sexual assault.

A 2006 study by Sable et al. examined the perceived reporting barriers for men and women survivors of sexual assault by surveying 215 college freshmen. While both men and women identified significant barriers to reporting, such as shame, guilt, self-blame, fear of retaliation, distrust of police, lack of knowledge about services, and several others, these factors seemed to be largely shaped by the gendered experiences of survivors (and of the study's participants). For example, female survivors are more likely than male survivors to know their attackers, thus increasing both shame and fear of retaliation, particularly in the context of prevalent stereotypes about female survivors as manipulative and seductive. Male survivors, on the other hand, are less trusting of police response to their assaults and less likely to be aware of services available to them, possibly due to the stigma and lack of awareness about men's sexual victimization as an issue. Sable et al. suggested more effective response will be possible through a more coordinated campus response to sexual violence, bringing together multiple stakeholders to develop policies and programs together.

### **Programmatic and Policy Response by Colleges and Universities**

Higher education's administrative response to sexual violence has been guided by a variety of factors, including public policy, availability of funding, empirical research on best practices, and student activism. Understanding the policy context of sexual violence in higher

education is critical to exploring the purpose of individual resources within that context. While policy in this area has been developing since the 1990s, the past decade has brought about significant changes in campus sexual violence response.

One major policy impacting campus sexual violence response is the Jeanne Clery Disclosure of Campus Security Policy and Campus Crime Statistics Act of 1990, also known as the Clery Act (Gonzalez & Feder, 2016). The Clery Act requires that colleges and universities publish publicly accessible campus crime statistics, including those about sexual violence, and that each campus develops and makes public certain policies related to campus crime and safety. In making statistics available to the public, the Clery Act both incentivizes lowering rates of violent crimes, as prospective students will have access to the statistics, and increases awareness about risk among current students. Because the law stipulates that policies must be publicly available to students, it also provides students with avenues to support and disciplinary action following victimization. An ongoing challenge with the Clery Act, though, is that it can create misleading optics. Colleges and universities with comprehensive programmatic and policy response, and who are in full compliance with the Clery Act, may appear to have higher rates of sexual violence as compared to schools where reporting and seeking services are more difficult and therefore have lower reported rates of sexual violence.

In 2011, there was a major shift in campus response to sexual violence following the issuance of a Dear Colleague Letter by the Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights (OCR). The letter stated, "the sexual harassment of students, including sexual violence, interferes with students' right to receive an education free from discrimination and, in the case of sexual violence, is a crime" (Ali, 2011, p. 1). In framing sexual harassment as a gender-based interference to the right to an education free from discrimination, the letter invokes Title IX of

the Education Amendments of 1972 in a context to which it had not previously been applied. The letter goes on to dictate guidelines for higher education institutions to respond to sexual violence in order to maintain compliance with Title IX. With the goal of clarifying the expectations for these institutions under Title IX, the Dear Colleague Letter created specific mandates for sexual violence response, including the presence of a designated Title IX coordinator, new procedures for reporting and disciplinary practices, and proactive prevention programming. However, because OCR failed to provide notice or warning about the issuance of the letter, many schools were found to be out of compliance, starting a cascade of legal proceedings (Napolitano, 2015). In 2014, the Obama administration expanded on the 2011 shift in Title IX enforcement, creating a website that makes legal information about campus sexual violence response accessible to students and continuing to increase enforcement and investigations related to Title IX's application to sexual violence.

Adapting programmatic response to address sexual violence within diverse communities on college campuses is an additional challenge. Students of color, LGBTQ students, students with disabilities, first-generation college students, and other marginalized student populations face unique challenges when reporting sexual violence. For example, Edwards, Littleton, Sylaska, Crossman, and Craig (2016) explored colleges' ability to address intimate partner violence (IPV) within LGBTQ populations on their campuses. Surveying students in 119 United States colleges, the researchers found that students generally imagined their schools were ill equipped to address IPV, particularly IPV within LGBTQ relationships. However, survivors of IPV saw their campuses as more ready to address these issues than students who had never experienced IPV. They also found that schools with better climates for LGBTQ students, as well as colleges with a stronger sense of community, were rated as "more ready" to address IPV.

This supports earlier research (Sanday, 1996; Sylaska & Walters, 2014) that campus climate, particularly around issues of gender and sexuality, impact attitudes about sexual violence and schools' ability to address sexual violence.

Since 2011, colleges and universities have been developing comprehensive programs in response to sexual violence; however, while peer-facilitated support often occurs in an official or unofficial capacity (Fisher et al., 2003), it is less often a formal part of the campus response. Many colleges are beginning to invest heavily in prevention and education programs, with the goal of significantly reducing prevalence rates of sexual violence (Napolitano, 2015). Individual support responses tend to be housed in campus mental health services, with many colleges beginning to hire dedicated advocates housed within administrations as well. Simultaneously, survivor-led organizations such as Know Your IX, End Rape on Campus, and Students Active For Ending Rape on Campus (SAFER) are pushing forward a national movement focused on sexual violence prevention, fair adjudication within campus disciplinary processes, building resources for survivors, and ensuring colleges are in compliance with these national laws.

### **Peer Support as a Programmatic Response to Campus Sexual Violence**

Peer support programs on college campuses have slowly developed over the course of many years, and vary widely in terms of structure, area of focus, training, supervision, and role. While the development of peer support programs specific to campus sexual violence seems to be Several of these college-based programs began to develop in the 1970s, with the goal of incorporating concepts of the increasingly popular community mental health movement while acknowledging that many students were not accessing support through traditional mental health services (Ward, 1978). One case study of an early peer counseling program at the University of

Miami called the Open Door details the development and function of the program since its inception in the early 1970s (Kahn, Brucker, Oudry, Zwibelman, & Bonner, 1977). The authors identified several benefits for those in the role of peer supporters, including enhancing their ability to seek related jobs in the future, building community with other volunteers, building relationships with faculty members in supervisory roles, and altruistically helping peers. Benefits to the broader student community included easier access to support and a greater likelihood of seeking support from peers than from mental health professionals. Challenges for peer supporters identified in the case study included adjusting to the nonjudgmental peer counseling model, navigating the power structures of the program's hierarchy, and consistent underrepresentation of racial and ethnic minorities among volunteers (specifically Black and Latinx volunteers). The authors also explored the ways in which the program and its approach were shaped by the counterculture of the campus community. When the program began and was staffed by "radical" psychology students, many more volunteers considered themselves part of the drug culture that was a source of need for support among students; however, as the program became more structured and official, the students involved conformed more to mainstream expectations around behavior and traditional definitions of success. A similar case study based in a British university in the mid-1970s found similar benefits, challenges, and patterns, identifying their program, Campus Community, as somewhat of a trailblazer among British university programs (Ward, 1978). These programs began to lay the groundwork for the emergence of peer support as an established campus resource for a variety of issues.

Colleges and universities continued to develop peer support programs throughout the 1980s and 1990s, focusing on structures for training and supervision that would ensure consistent quality of support (Buck & Pineda, 1985; Frisz, 1986; Curran, 1995). Each of these three studies

examined an individual university-based peer support program, exploring the training and supervision that was developed as part of establishing the program. Patterns consistent across studies included requiring an extended time commitment to the program to ensure adequate time for training, providing “classes” or lecture-based trainings, focusing on particular issues common to students seeking support (i.e. sexual issues, assault, rape, and eating disorders in Curran’s 1995 study), using role plays or “mock calls” to practice peer support scenarios, and having a hierarchy of peer supporters and supervisors in place for when difficult situations arose. These supervisors ranged from facilitators of monthly supervision meetings (Frisz, 1986) to the primary supporters in the case of any difficult material (Buck & Pineda, 1985).

Issues around training, resource allocation, and supervision remain areas of focus for current research on college peer support programs. A 2011 study by de Jager and Ntlokwana examined the benefits and challenges faced by peer helping programs in South African universities from the perspectives of the managers. The researchers conducted a survey of 30 managers from a variety of higher education settings. From the perspective that students are more likely to access peers as a source of support than professional support resources, they found that these programs were most often successful if institutionally aligned, valued by administrators, and properly resourced. These factors would allow the programs to focus properly on the training and support needed to run effectively. Major challenges included lack of resources (financial, human, and physical), recruitment and retention of student peer helpers, the uncertain role of managers and supervisors, and quality assurance. Benefits and achievements included being better able to reach the student body, fostering the self-growth and employability of helpers, and strengthening relationships between peer helpers and managers. The researchers also suggested that further research exploring the topic from the perspective of students involved

(“helpers” and “helpees”) would be beneficial to understanding what makes these programs work well or fail.

An additional study of a training course for peer counselors at a large Midwestern university discussed the lasting impact of the training students receive in becoming peer supporters (Hatcher, Shields, Wierba, Hatcher-Ross, & Hanley, 2014). In surveying college graduates who had participated in two peer counseling courses during their college years, the researchers found that this training enhanced feelings of connectedness among graduates, bolstered lasting relationships between classmates, helped participants clarify their own career goals (a benefit echoed from Kahn et al., 1977), and provided participants with interpersonal skills that they continued to use following graduation from college. This study, along with the evidence from the others examining training models for peer supporters, suggests that the training and supervision acquired by peer supporters may have lasting benefits beyond the impact on participants’ ability to support peers while in college.

Studies from the 1980s and 1990s, as hotlines, peer counseling, and other forms of peer support became more common, began to identify issues around relationships and sex as a primary focus of those seeking support. For example, an early 1990s study of patterns of usage of a peer support hotline at a large, urban, Northeastern university identified sexual relationships as the most common (22.5% of calls) reason for calling (Stewart & Glenwick, 1992). The most common psychological state of callers (23.5%) was anxious/fearful. While this study did not specifically identify which calls dealt with sexual violence or intimate partner violence, some of these calls may have been focused on these issues. Another study from 1998 investigated the role of peer educators in shifting attitudes regarding campus sexual violence (Lonsway et al.,

1998). The study found that both men and women benefitted from the peer education model, both improving their ability to express themselves assertively in sexual situations and decreasing their acceptance of cultural rape myths.

More recent research has continued to observe the benefits and challenges of addressing relationships, sex, and violence through peer support models. A 2011 study by Butler and Black explored the prevalence and duties of “peer helping programs” (including peer education and peer support) focused on issues of sexuality on 358 college campuses across the United States. The study looked only at programs run out of student health centers on these campuses, excluding programs linked to student affairs, academic programs, LGBTQ and women’s centers, and those run independently by students. The researchers found that more than half of student health centers use peers for at least one sexuality-related program. The most common duties of peers in this context were event planning and educational outreach, with peer counseling as a far less prevalent duty. Because peer counseling (peer support) programs are so much less common than other peer roles, they may be under-resourced and overlooked when it comes to providing adequate support and supervision.

### **Benefits and Challenges of Peer Support**

In exploring the benefits and challenges of peer support for campus sexual violence, it is essential to examine the ways in which peer support has both been effective and faced barriers as a programmatic intervention in other contexts. Peer support has been used in a broad range of contexts, most often targeting stigmatized issues like mental health, substance abuse, and medical issues such as HIV/AIDS. The benefits of peer support that have been found in these contexts, such as reaching marginalized populations, a unique ability to empower the target population, and professional development for the supporters, have direct applications for the issue of campus

sexual violence. Likewise, the challenges facing those in a peer support role, such as limited resources, inadequate supervision, and questionable boundaries, are crucial to consider when establishing campus sexual violence peer support programs.

Sokol and Fisher (2016) conducted a systematic review of the use of peer support interventions to serve “hardly reached” populations. Through meta-analysis, the researchers identified interventions used with populations facing a variety of health issues, including several chronic diseases, substance use, and mental illness. They found several strategies common to successful interventions, including frequent contact between peer supporters and their organizations, contact initiated by peer supporters to participants, monitoring of programs during the intervention, support for supporters, tailored content, implicit support (support gained from the simple presence of a peer supporter), and ready availability of peer supporters. While some of these strategies would be applicable to sexual violence response (i.e. implicit support and ready availability), others would not apply (i.e. contact initiated by supporters). Qualities of successful peer support programs included trust and respect, flexibility, user involvement, and community partnerships, all of which are applicable to sexual violence resources. According to the researchers, peer support seems to be an effective strategy for reaching “hardly reached” populations, a conclusion that bodes well for sexual violence peer support resources. This supports the idea that peer support could be a more effective way to reach students in marginalized populations (i.e. students of color and LGBTQ students) than traditional outreach through college administrators or law enforcement.

Another recent study compared unique and common elements of peer supporters in the mental health field as compared to case managers, examining the function, role, and distinguishing qualities of peer support (Crane, Lepicki, & Knudsen, 2016). Through analysis

panels of providers in both peer support and case management roles, researchers collected and analyzed data regarding these unique and common elements. Two key findings regarding unique elements of peer support were both focused on the function of peer supporters. First, the study found that a central function of peer support is empowerment, which the researchers describe as providing the client with “a sense of confidence through normalization and modeling of important life skills” (Crane et al., 2016, p. 286). This seems particularly germane in the case of sexual violence, given the critical role of power in these violent acts. Peer supporters, then, have the opportunity to restore some sense of power and agency to the survivor. Second, the researchers highlighted the personal and professional development gained by the peer supporters through this role. Because peer supporters in the mental health context are working towards their own recovery, these personal and professional benefits are of great importance. Though campus sexual violence peer supporters may or may not have their own histories with sexual violence, they are likely to be seeking personal, professional, and educational growth during their college years. These benefits to their growth may be a driving force of participation in the college context, similar to their role in participation for mental health peer supporters.

There has been little research examining peer support programs from the perspectives of the peer supporters themselves, but the limited research in this area has highlighted the unique challenges of the role. A qualitative study by Mourra, Sledge, Sells, Lawless, and Davidson (2014) examined relationships between peer supporters and individuals with seriously mental illness (“participants”) whom they supported in a community-based mental health context. While the peer supporters reported strong relationships and a unique ability to connect nonjudgmentally with participants, the researchers also discovered several common challenges among peer supporters. The peer supporters expressed frustration and uncertainty around the

line between “pushing” and “patience”; that is, they struggled to navigate when to encourage their participants to move forward despite challenges, and when to be supports for the participants while they overcame challenges at their own pace. Another significant challenge for peer supporters was negotiating boundaries and roles appropriately. Because their role is not as clearly defined as that of clinicians, peer supporters were left to determine their own boundaries, a challenge for many who began to feel responsible for their participants’ decisions. Finally, while the researchers found that peer supporters gained a sense of purpose from their work, many also developed feelings of guilt, self-blame, and anxiety in providing peer support.

A similar study explored the experience of providing peer support from the perspective of women with HIV/AIDS engaged in peer support programs in the rural Southeast (Messias, Moneyham, Vyavaharkar, Murdaugh, & Phillips, 2009). The study had similar findings to those of Mourra et al. (2014), finding that benefits included strong relationships based on shared experiences, close knowledge of the issues at hand, and ability to dismantle stigma experienced outside the peer relationship. Challenges were also similar, though focused on particular areas that were complicated to navigate: tailoring peer support based on the diverse population with whom supporters were working, and discovering the complexities of termination in a peer relationship.

Each of these challenges identified in the studies is quite pertinent to college-based peer support programs. Because the “peer” status in college comes from being fellow students and community members, college peer supporters must negotiate these boundaries within their own academic, social, and often residential communities. When the shared experience is being enrolled in the same college, the definition of “peer” only applies to an extent; training on diversity and understanding when shared experiences diverge becomes crucial. Similarly, the

line between “pushing” and “patience” is even more salient when addressing issues of sexual violence, because the goal is to return agency to the survivors, who may be unwilling to report or go forward with administrative or legal action.

## **Summary**

Though literature on campus sexual violence response is extensive, implementing peer support as a programmatic response to campus sexual violence is a relatively unexplored strategy. Furthermore, there is a dearth of research examining peer support programs, particularly those on college campuses, from the perspectives of the peer supporters. Campus sexual violence has been a longstanding problem in higher education, but policy changes implemented during the Obama administration have increased the responsibility of schools to address this issue. Government agencies and student activists have contributed to this growing pressure on schools, who are beginning to reflect on the effectiveness of their policies and programs in preventing and responding to sexual violence. Peer support programs focused on campus sexual violence are a component of this response that has gone largely unstudied. However, these programs have been studied in other contexts, and researchers have identified several patterns of benefits and challenges. Common benefits include reaching marginalized populations, having a unique connection to and understanding of the target population, bolstering the skills and goals of the peer supporters, strengthening the community, and focusing on empowerment. Common challenges include difficulty maintaining appropriate boundaries and roles, continuous under-resourcing, navigating supervision structures, and ensuring the peer supporters have sufficient support. On college campuses, where peer supporters are generally volunteers and supervision is inconsistent, these issues seem to become greater challenges. Additional research is needed to understand how these dynamics unfold in the campus sexual

violence context. As colleges and universities attempt to provide comprehensive programming within their budgets to address campus sexual violence, peer support may become an essential component. With this in mind, we must gain further understanding of how peer support for survivors of campus sexual violence impacts all stakeholders.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **Methodology**

This qualitative, exploratory study was designed to learn about the challenges and benefits to students in their role as peer supporters for college student survivors of sexual violence. Qualitative, exploratory methods were used in order to understand the mostly unexplored phenomenon of peer support implemented as a response to campus sexual violence (Steinberg, 2004). Specifically, the study aimed to explore the subjective meanings peer supporters attached to their work while accounting for their social context (Engel and Schutt, 2012). Additionally, because peer support in response to campus sexual violence has rarely been examined from the perspective of the peer supporters themselves, exploratory methods were an appropriate fit. In this study, semi-structured individual interviews were conducted with student peer supporters, and data was analyzed for common themes following collection.

### **Sample**

Participants in this study were currently enrolled students in four-year higher educational institutions who offered peer support to student survivors of campus sexual violence. For the purpose of my study, the term “peer support” was defined as students who provide emotional support, listening, advocacy, and/or resource referrals through formally established on-campus programs under the supervision or advisory support of a campus staff person. Though peer support programs offer a range of supports, the specific focus of my study sought participants of peer support programs that included a focus on sexual violence. The term “sexual violence” was

defined within the study as unwanted sexual or intimate advances, as well as violent or controlling behavior perpetrated by current or former intimate partners. This includes rape, sexual assault, unwanted sexual touching, stalking, cyber-stalking, sexual harassment, and intimate partner violence. A final inclusion criterion for the study was that potential participants had some kind of formal supervision or administrative support for their peer support role. I aimed to recruit at least twelve participants for the study.

The recruitment process began by reaching out to personal contacts; posting recruitment information on several social media sites; as well as by posting recruitment information on several organizational email lists. For the personal contacts, I reached out to individuals currently involved in the organization with which I worked in my previous experience as a peer supporter at Vassar College, my own alma mater. I asked my contacts to identify and provide emails for individuals in this role at their school and other schools who meet the inclusion criteria. Once I had email addresses of prospective participants, I followed up and contacted these prospective participants directly. In addition to the “snowball sampling” method noted above, I posted recruitment messages on Facebook and LinkedIn, both on my own pages and in Facebook groups of which I am a member, including “Building Solidarity: A Forum On Student Efforts to End Personal Violation,” “Wellness Professionals of Connecticut,” “Sexual Violence Focused SA Pros,” and “Smith College School for Social Work Speakeasy.” For groups of which I am a member, no additional permission was needed in order to post recruitment messages. Finally, I reached out to some prospective participants directly, whose names and contact information were posted on their schools’ websites.

As noted in the recruitment postings, potential participants were asked to contact me via email. When they contacted me, I asked each of the potential participants for further contact

information, and I followed up with a brief call to review the study, assured that they meet inclusion criteria, reviewed the informed consent process, and asked them if they agreed to participate. If they expressed interest in continuing, I told them that I would send them the Informed Consent, and asked them to read it, and provided my contact information if any questions arose prior to their interview. In follow up calls, I answered any questions they may have had related to the Informed Consent or the study in general. If they wished to continue, I instructed them on how to return the consent, and we scheduled the interview. I clearly informed them that no interview would occur until I received the consent (which they could send me via through email), and that we would schedule the interview following receipt of the consent form. Following the interview, I reminded participants that they could pass along information about the study to fellow peer supporters.

### **Ethics and Safeguards**

**Avoiding conflict of interest.** I ensured that there was no personal or professional relationship between myself and the participants. Though I did recruit students currently involved in the peer support program at my alma mater (a group with which I was formerly involved), there was no overlap between students currently involved in the group and students were involved in the group during my tenure in the group. I disclosed my former role in the group to participants but did not share specifics of my own experiences as a peer supporter.

**Protection of confidentiality.** I conducted the interviews over the telephone from my private residence. I ensured that I was in a private space with a door that closed during these interviews, and I encouraged participants to be in a private space as well during the interviews. Prior to interviews, participants were advised not to say their names or any other identifying information during the interview. Identifying information was redacted from interviews following

transcription. During interviews, the phone was set to speakerphone setting, and interviews were recorded using the app Voice Recorder. Voice Recorder stored recorded interviews on the researcher's iPhone, which is password protected. Recordings were then transferred to a password protected external hard drive and deleted from the iPhone. Written notes were also taken during the interview as a tool for tracking themes and patterns among interviews and stored separately from audio recordings. Consents were maintained in a separate file from other materials. Each participant was assigned an ID number, which was used to label all materials. Audio recordings stored digitally were password protected, and the devices on which they are stored (mobile phone and laptop computer) were also password protected. All research materials including recordings, transcriptions, analyses and consent documents were stored in a secure location, where they will remain for three years according to federal regulations. In the event that materials are needed beyond this period, they will be kept secured until no longer needed, and then destroyed. All electronically stored data are password protected during the storage period.

**Risks and benefits of participation.** The primary risk of the study was the possibility of participants feeling discomfort or distress during reflection on their experiences as a peer supporter. To protect against this risk, participants were discouraged from discussing details of their specific peer support cases, particularly cases that caused them discomfort or distress at the time they offered support. I informed all participants at the beginning of the interview that they could decline to answer any question or choose to end the interview at any time. If participants became distressed during the interview, they were encouraged to contact their advisor, supervisor, or other members of their own support network. All participants were part of established programs with administrative support or supervision. Participants were also

informed following the interview that they could withdraw from the study at any time until April 29, 2017.

Potential benefits to participants included the opportunity to discuss and reflect on their own experiences as peer supporters. Participants may have gained insight into the benefits of being a resource for their fellow students and may be better able to advocate for resources for their programs as a result. They may have also developed a deeper understanding of the challenges they face as peer supporters, which could create opportunities for problem solving and seeking support from advisors or supervisors. Benefits to the researcher included partial fulfillment of degree requirements for my Smith College School for Social Work Master's in Social Work (MSW) program. Additionally, I gained insight that will be useful in future work as a clinician or supervisor with college students, survivors of trauma, or peer supporters. Finally, gaining a better understanding of these students' roles and paradigms is beneficial to clinicians who supervise these groups or work alongside them in an integrated campus response to sexual violence. It will help inform the way we as clinicians conceptualize campus sexual violence, allowing for more comprehensive and sensitive policy-making. By beginning to explore the experience of peer supporters as a part of college and university sexual violence response, colleges may have a better understanding of the risks and value of integrating them into their programs.

### **Data Collection**

Data was collected through 20 to 30 minute semi-structured interviews conducted over the telephone. The interview guide was designed with the goal of understanding the nature of the peer support being offered by student peer supporters, as well as the various risks and benefits to peer supporters from their own perspectives. The interviews also aimed to collect demographic

information in order to understand how identity and positionality might shape the perspectives of participants. With the goal of maintaining validity by focusing interviews closely on the research question, the majority of questions and interview time were dedicated to inquiring about the risks and benefits of offering peer support. Though semi-structured interviews have a compromised potential for high levels of reliability due to their variability from one participant to another (Steinberg, 2004), the consistency of the basic structure of the interview maintained reasonable reliability.

Each interview began by collecting this demographic information, including age, class year, gender, and race. Participants were asked to self-identify within these categories. Next, participants were asked to describe the nature of the peer support they provided, or how they specifically offered support to student survivors of sexual violence. This was included in the interview for the purpose of providing context for the risks and benefits perceived by the students; for example, students providing in-person advocacy might have a different experience than those providing peer counseling via hotline, so this would shape their perceptions of the risks and benefits of the work. Participants were then asked to discuss, one at a time, the emotional, educational, professional, and social benefits and risks of participating in their peer support programs. Occasionally, participants were asked follow-up questions or to elaborate on particular risks and benefits raised in the interview. The interview concluded by asking participants to discuss any risks and benefits of peer support they had not covered earlier in the interview.

### **Data Analysis**

As is common with qualitative studies, analysis of the data began during the collection process, through progressive focusing (Engel and Schutt, 2012); that is, I continued refining the

focus of the study as I collected and interpreted the data through interviews and transcription. Following data collection, data was coded based on themes, specific language, and unexpected findings. It was then analyzed for commonalities in themes, divergent themes, and nuances of particular programs or participants. Data was examined for themes that are consistent with existing literature, while some data also provided a new understanding of the research question from the perspective of student peer supporters.

A reflexive approach considering my own biases as a researcher was necessary in this research (Engel and Schutt, 2012), given my personal history participating in college-level peer support for student survivors of sexual violence. However, the literal and interpreted content of offered by participants in the study provided the most salient data for analysis. It was also important to consider the historical and cultural context of the data. All participants were current students in four-year colleges and universities, and their experiences were also shaped by their own racialized and gendered experiences in this context.

## **Discussion**

The study results are fully presented in the Findings chapter. Results are fully discussed in the Discussion chapter.

## **CHAPTER IV**

## **Findings**

The purpose of this study is to explore the benefits and challenges to students in their role as peer supporters to student survivors of sexual violence. This chapter contains findings based on interviews with 11 students who provide peer support to student survivors of sexual violence at their colleges and universities through formally established on-campus programs under the supervision or advisory support of a staff member. Interviews were conducted over the phone, recorded, transcribed in full, and coded using thematic analysis. The interviews began with collection of demographic information (age, class year, gender, and race). Participants were then asked to describe the nature of the peer support they provided to student survivors of sexual violence. Following this introductory portion of the interview, participants were asked to describe the emotional, educational, professional, and social benefits and challenges of offering peer support. The findings in this chapter are presented in the same order in which the interviews were conducted.

### **Demographic Data**

A total of 11 individuals from seven different colleges or universities participated in the study. All participants were current college students in the United States. Seven out of the 11 participants (63.64%) attend college in the Northeast region of the United States, two participants (18.18%) attend college in the Midwest region, one participant (9.09%) attends college in the West Coast region, and one participant (9.09%) attends college in the Southeast region.

The individuals in the study ranged in age from 19 to 22, with the median age being 21. Class years of participants included two sophomores (18.18%), two juniors (18.18%), and seven seniors (63.64%). Nine of the 11 participants (81.82%) identified their gender as “female” or “woman.” The remaining two identified as “male” and “non-binary,” respectively. Nine

participants (81.82%) identified as White, while two participants (18.18%) identified as Hispanic or Latina. The lack of racial and gender diversity is a significant limitation of the study, as the data cannot be generalized to students providing peer support who do not identify as White or female.

### **Nature of Peer Support Provided**

Participants offered a range of peer support options to their campuses through formalized programs. The overwhelming majority of participants offered peer support only to fellow students, but two participants served the broader community in which their schools were located. The most common type of support, which all participants offered, was one-on-one listening or peer counseling, provided in-person or over the phone. More than half of participants currently or in the past provided this support through a hotline or warmline. A small number of participants specifically stated that their groups were not mandated reporters under the Clery Act or Title IX, which made them a unique resource on campus for survivors of violence. About half of participants identified resource referrals as a primary function of the peer support. Advocacy was another significant pattern among peer support programs; participants described providing academic, medical, and legal advocacy to students. Less common avenues reported by participants for providing support were survivor support groups or off-campus survivor trips. The majority of participants also provided some sort of peer education, outreach, or training to the broader campus community focused on prevention and community response. A few participants identified themselves as leaders of their peer support programs, which carried additional responsibilities. Finally, some participants described their groups as providing miscellaneous other functions, including bystander intervention, open meetings for students to

voice concerns, and providing listening and support at events with the potential to trigger survivors, such as plays or film screenings.

### **Benefits of Being in a Peer Support Role**

**Emotional benefits.** The most commonly described emotional benefit identified by participants was a sense of fulfillment and purpose. Most participants described the peer support work as “meaningful,” “humbling,” or congruent with their personal values. The majority of participants also identified building self-knowledge, self-awareness, and an understanding of their own experiences as a significant benefit. They described using this self-knowledge to improve their self-care skills, and well as to engage in personal growth. One participant discussed how the specific content of the work helped her know herself better, saying: I think another benefit for me has been through hearing about a lot of other people’s relationships with their bodies and with sex, being able to really reflect deeply on my relationship with my body and with sex, and having a much healthier lens for understanding my relationship with sex. Several participants described engaging in peer support work as a strategy to find empowerment after their own experiences with sexual violence or abusive relationships. They discussed feeling connected to others, being able to reflect on their own experiences, and being able to provide support to those who had similar experiences as ways that peer support work benefitted them as survivors or people with adverse experiences with sex or relationships. One self-identified survivor in a peer support role said, “I’m a survivor of sexual violence. And for me...the effects of my experiences have been so much less bad because I’ve channeled that energy into helping other people and to work towards fighting interpersonal violence.”

More than half of participants described a sense of community and belonging gained through participation in peer support programs. One participant described this sense of community by talking about her peer support cohort:

All of the people that I was training with or that I get supervision from, or that also do this work, are people that I can really trust and really find support in, and are just like genuinely good people who are drawn to this work because they want to give back in similar ways.

A few participants also described personal growth or meaning making gained from their participation in peer support programs. One participant commented, “I guess it’s a way of examining the good and the bad in the world and trying to evaluate what that means to me, and what it means to be a helper.” Additional but less commonly reported emotional benefits identified by participants included feeling safer on campus due to an awareness of resources available to them, learning new skills such as listening and supporting without giving advice, feeling gratitude from survivors and others in the campus community, and enjoying the sense of structure and routine provided by participation in their groups.

**Educational and professional benefits.** The most common educational or professional benefit identified was that participating in peer support influenced students’ choice of career paths in some way. Participants discussed how their involvement led them to aspire to careers in law, social work, clinical psychology, public health, or general anti-violence work. More than half of participants described the direct practice skills they gained as educational and professional benefits. One participant described how the skills gained through providing peer support had helped him in a summer internship, saying, “I think [empathic listening] is such an essential skill that is kind of glossed over in a lot of settings and so to learn that so early on I

think is really, really beneficial.” Another significant theme was gaining other career skills, such as teamwork, professional communication, running a group, learning on the job, and understanding the “inner workings” of an organization. Participants were able to generalize these skills even to unrelated fields, such as engineering. Almost half of participants discussed knowledge they had gained through trainings, primarily related to trauma, and several participants described advocacy skills they had gained by navigating the many systems involved in this work. A few participants discussed their participation as something they could list on a resume, though none of these participants described this as a contributing factor to their decision to participate. Less common but also present was the idea that participants could utilize resources on campus (such as deans’ offices or accommodations) about which they had learned through their peer support work for their own educational benefit

**Social benefits.** Almost all participants discussed access to a strong community within their peer support program as a primary social benefit of participation. One participant remarked, “I definitely think that the space is super supportive, and...I definitely feel like I can turn to a lot of other members of my cohort for when I need support, and I have, too.” A few participants who identified the supportive community as a benefit also described “lasting friendships” as a benefit; each described becoming close with individuals in the group, and these friendships often continued when one or both of the members graduated. More than half of participants also discussed the positive impacts on their relationships outside the group, including friendships, family relationships, and intimate relationships. Several participants discussed how being a peer supporter strengthened their ability to be a support to others, as well as improving their listening and communication skills. Another, less common benefit was an

improved understanding of consent, which positively impacted intimate relationships. One participant described how this transpired in her own relationship:

Even in my relationship with my girlfriend – we’re long distance – and we pretty much always...have a time when we check in and communicate about things. Definitely things like consent and building healthy habits are really big parts of those. So I think being able to talk about these topics...and just not shying away from having the harder, heavier conversations has really helped me build healthier relationships in my life. A few participants also described gaining social capital from being a part of their campuses’ peer support programs. One participant discussed this as a positive experience with professors and fellow students, reporting, “People have a lot of respect for [our peer support program] and the work that we do, both from peers and also administration.” However, other participants who discussed social capital noted personal discomfort with this benefit. One participant described how his group had “an ethos on campus of being...a group who is selective with who we accept, kind of secretive, which I think kind of has a mysterious air,” and noted, “I think some people kind of approach [applying to our peer support program] for the wrong reason because they know being in that position might make them look good or something like that.” The other participant who described discomfort with this social benefit discussed how the founders of her program had been a “friend group who also had a lot of social capital and was largely White, cis women who were all straight.” She reported that being associated with this group may have increased her social power.

### **Challenges of Being in a Peer Support Role**

**Emotional challenges.** Participants discussed a wide range of emotional challenges associated with their role as peer supporters. The two most common challenges, each articulated by a significant majority of participants, were feeling the impacts of vicarious trauma or feeling

“emotionally drained” by one-on-one work with peers, and feeling a general sense of burnout and exhaustion. They described feeling like issues of sexual violence and relationship abuse were always around them; one participant remarked, “I joked with other people that last semester I didn’t ever have a day that I was not talking about sexual violence.” Participants who self-identified as survivors discussed feeling triggered or activated by engaging in peer support work, though they continued to provide it. Participants whose groups had a strained relationship with campus administration identified this issue as a primary source of their burnout and exhaustion. One such participant, whose group had recently been prohibited by the administration from providing hotline or one-on-one support, reported:

The challenge right now is staying hopeful that [our peer support program] could someday be something it was in the past or offer...resources that it did in the past, while also realizing that the administration are very much against the existence of [our program] in any capacity that isn’t very basic, very program-centered. Similarly, a small number of participants identified feeling undervalued by the campus community or administration, reporting that they often only heard feedback when it was negative.

**Educational and professional challenges.** Participants described facing professional challenges with the functioning of their programs, as well as challenges in their own education as it related to their peer support work. Regarding group functioning, the majority of participants discussed challenges with systems or logistics related to the group’s functioning. Staffing problems or confusion related to roles was a common challenge, and ensuring groups ran smoothly was occasionally difficult. Programs that experienced tension with administrators listed the challenges to their programs’ functioning as a result, describing incidents of administrators “saying we can do something and then revoking it, saying, ‘you actually can’t do

that,' or getting overly concerned about language, labels, and branding – all sorts of stuff we don't necessarily think of as a non-hierarchical, student-led support group.” Several participants discussed conflicting roles as a professional difficulty, including focusing on both supporting survivors and combating rape culture, navigating reporting responsibilities to the government versus confidentiality responsibility to students, and maintaining a peer role when the institution was undergoing a Title IX investigation managed by the office supervising the group. Less common but also articulated by participants were legal challenges faced by these peer support groups, including liability issues in crisis situations and a situation in which a peer supporter had received a subpoena for a student's case. Finally, a small number of participants raised questions about the demographic makeup of their group as a professional challenge, one discussing their group as overwhelmingly female, and the other describing their group as primarily White, straight, cisgender women. Both acknowledged this created challenges.

On the educational side, nearly all participants discussed how the time and emotional commitment of the program impacted their ability to complete schoolwork. A few of these participants felt that other students or professors did not fully understand the gravity of their work, and thus did not always grasp the enormity of the time commitment. One participant commented, “The time commitment is kind of challenging...it is time consuming, and it's very easy to just kind of lose track of that and forget you have other things to do, and so it's kind of important to set boundaries.”

**Social challenges.** Participants reported facing social challenges both within their peer support groups and in their broader social circles. Within their groups, almost half of participants described maintaining group dynamics through difficult situations as a major

challenge. One participant described how group dynamics within her program were similar to those in any group facing challenges:

I think in any sort of group, there's going to be competition; there's going to be comparisons being made; there's going to be egos and insecurities...and just because we're supposed to be supporting others, doesn't mean we don't all need to be supported as well.

These group dynamics were particularly challenging for several peer supporters whose groups had experienced incidents in which a member was suspected of perpetrating violence or had “perpetuated rape culture.” One group member discussed this as a challenge their program had faced repeatedly, saying that one of the group’s most significant challenges had been “noticing incidents where [peer supporters] are possibly perpetuating violence, and taking that very seriously, making sure we’re not excusing behavior within the group because for whatever reason we think [peer supporters] might be holier than students outside the group.” The most common social challenge more than half of participants faced as part of the broader campus community, especially on small campuses, was the difficulty of knowing information that needed to remain confidential. These participants highlighted the particular difficulty of knowing perpetrators’ identities but being unable to divulge this information, even to friends who were becoming intimately involved with these alleged perpetrators. One participant described this dilemma in detail:

Like if you know that someone is a perpetrator, and you cannot change your behavior towards them because it will very clearly reveal that...you know that information, and therefore break confidentiality inadvertently. So it's just really challenging to know things and kind of pretend that everything is normal.

These blurred boundaries also became challenging for almost half of participants, who felt like they were constantly “on the clock” as a peer supporter. Several mentioned being approached at parties or other social events, or feeling uncomfortable becoming inebriated in case their peer support skills were needed. One participant discussed how she changed her entire social approach on campus:

The way it changed my lifestyle was in very small increments and small habits, but just ways that – I’m never off, I’m always on. When I’m on campus, I say hi to every single person I walk past, and I make eye contact with them, because there might be a time they need to talk to me...And...if anyone wants to add me on Facebook, I’ll add them, because they might message me at some point. Same thing on Instagram. Just these little habits where I’m thinking of everyone as someone I could potentially need to support. Some participants also discussed challenges in their friendships outside the group. A few participants described feeling like prioritizing their relationships inside and outside the group was a challenge, while a couple others talked about the difficulty of seeking personal support from friends outside their peer support programs while maintaining confidentiality. A small number of participants explained that they often felt like a “moral authority” among friends, needing to speak up when they heard something that made them feel uncomfortable.

### **Strategies for Mitigating Challenges**

Though participants faced many challenges, they also often discussed strategies they had discovered or developed to mitigate these challenges. The two most common strategies, each used by almost half of participants, were turning to the other members of their peer support cohort for support, debriefing, and validation, and using training to address common challenges. For example, one participant who brought up vicarious traumatization as a challenge also

remarked, “We have a lot of trainings on self-care and boundary-setting, so it’s definitely something we talk a lot about...and we talk about how many advocates feel these secondary survivor feelings.” Other sources of social support came from talking with individual group members, turning to friends outside the peer support group, and utilizing supervisors. One participant who had an especially strong relationship with the group’s supervisor described how her supervisor set up one-on-one meetings with her when she was facing a difficult peer support situation, and had been the primary emotional support to this participant at that time. A less common but reportedly effective strategy described by participants was the development of formal systems and processes to address common challenges, such as a dismissal protocol for addressing members of the group perpetrating violence.

Finally, participants discussed being aware of the need for boundaries and self-care as strategies to address challenges. Several participants discussed establishing clear boundaries, from taking breaks from peer support work to moving off campus. A significant number of participants described engaging in specific self-care activities. One participant described their process of making recuperation a part of their routine: “I have a peer support team...I have close friends, I have a lot of books, I can go outside, I can play piano-these are all things that I make sure I’m doing when I’m in the more draining situations.” By engaging in these intentional strategies, both personally and institutionally within their programs, students offering peer support have the ability to build resilience and work through incredible challenges.

## **Summary**

This chapter summarizes the findings of 11 interviews with college students who offer peer support to student survivors of sexual violence. The interview questions, as well as followup questions used in the semi-structured interviews, were designed to explore the benefits

and challenges experienced by students in these peer support roles. Participants provided important information on subject matter that has been largely unexplored by prior research. Through these interviews, participants were able to discuss the emotional, educational, professional, and social benefits and challenges they face. The next chapter discusses these findings and their implications for the field in the context of existing research.

## **CHAPTER V**

### **Discussion and Conclusions**

The purpose of this study is to build an understanding of the self-perceived benefits and challenges experienced by students in their role as peer supporters to student survivors of sexual violence. Students who provided peer support through formal on-campus programs participated in telephone interviews in which they were asked to reflect on the emotional, educational, professional, and social benefits and challenges of their peer support work. This study's findings begin to explore peer support as a response to campus sexual violence, an area of research that has been largely untouched thus far. The discussion section considers the implications of the findings, as well as contextualizing the findings within the current research landscape. The discussion offers a summary and examination of the nature of peer support offered by student peer supporters; emotional, educational, professional, and social benefits and challenges of offering peer support; as well as an exploration of strategies participants reported using to mitigate challenges they faced in their peer support work. The section concludes with a discussion of the study's limitations, as well as a brief summary of conclusions, implications, and suggestions for further research.

### **Discussion**

#### **Nature of Peer Support Offered**

The nature of support offered by this study's participants was in some ways consistent with current prior research, but in other ways diverged from previous patterns. The one-on-one

listening, counseling, and advocacy were fairly common both among participants and among the peer supporters explored in prior research. Student participants described this work as survivorcentered, which is consistent with the themes of empowerment and non-judgment articulated in prior research as a unique factor of peer support across settings (Crane et al., 2016; Mourra et al. 2014). However, recent research on peer helping focused on campus sexual assault has examined programs that primarily provide education and outreach (Butler & Black, 2011; Lonsway et al., 1998); while the participants in this study reported providing some education and outreach as part of their work, their primary duties were more focused on providing direct support. Peer support in this study was more similar to peer support programs focused on chronic health conditions, mental health, or substance abuse in the general (non-college) population.

The nature of support described by students in this study was indicative of the creativity and passion with which they approached the work. Even when facing challenges to reaching students, such as conflict with administration or barriers to reaching different social groups, peer support programs developed alternative strategies, such as student-facilitated support groups, offcampus trips for survivors to escape a triggering environment, open meetings for students to voice concerns, and “how to support a friend” trainings to allow the general student body to fill peer support roles for students unable to be reached by the formal program. This resourcefulness and adaptability allowed peer supporters to serve the “hardly reached” (Sokol & Fisher, 2016) in a way that programs facilitated by staff may not be able to do.

### **Benefits of Being in a Peer Support Role**

**Emotional benefits.** The sense of fulfillment and purpose described by participants, as well as the shared empowerment gained by both the supporters and the supported, echo findings

from previous studies (Kahn et al., 1977; de Jager & Ntlokwana, 2011; Crane et al., 2016). These benefits were discussed by almost all participants in this study, who perceived these experiences as intrinsic emotional benefits. The other most common benefit was the feeling of community or belonging strengthened by participating in peer support work. This too has been described in prior research; several studies have found that students who participate in peer support programs gain a strong sense of campus community and improved relationships with other supporters and supervisors (Kahn et al., 1977; de Jager & Ntlokwana, 2011; Hatcher et al., 2014). These emotional benefits to students may cause significant positive impacts to their experiences of higher education.

**Educational and professional benefits.** Professional and educational benefits to peer supporters have been a major theme in prior research, particularly for those offering peer support in a college or university context. Several prior studies (Kahn et al., 1977; Hatcher et al., 2014) have discussed the most common professional benefit found in this study, the impact on or clarification of career goals. In a fields like psychology, social work, and counseling, it can be difficult to gain concrete experience prior to graduate-level education; student peer support programs offer unique opportunities to explore these fields before students have made major career decisions.

Similarly, participants' asserted that participating in peer support work provided them with training, concrete skills development, and resume-building experiences. Research has reflected that peer support programs, including student programs and those in the general population, generally make peer supporters more skilled and employable through participation (Kahn et al., 1977; Hatcher et al., 2014; de Jager & Ntlokwana, 2011; Crane et al., 2016).

Participants in this study were clear that these skills and benefits applied not only to related fields, but also to broader employment. One participant discussed how her participation had benefitted her education and career as an engineer due to the field's emphasis on teamwork; others described learning how to navigate complex administrative systems and how it would apply to almost any field. One benefit present in previous research but not named by participants in this study is the ability of peer support programs to reach marginalized populations (Sokol & Fisher, 2016). This divergence may have occurred because participants were asked only to reflect on benefits to themselves, rather than benefits to the broader campus population. **Social benefits.** As discussed in the findings, developing a strong community within peer support programs was a common benefit. This is a benefit that was found both in early college peer support research (Kahn et al., 1977) and in more recent studies (Hatcher et al., 2014). Similarly, participants' discussion of the positive impacts on their own relationships was consistent with prior findings that the interpersonal skills gained through peer support were longlasting, far beyond the end of participation in these programs (Hatcher et al., 2014). The concept of gaining substantial social capital through offering peer support had not been explored in previous studies. Though some students named this increase in power as a benefit that also caused them discomfort, it is worth considering the implications of empathy and support being linked to social capital. It may be interesting to explore how bolstering the interpersonal skills and empathy, as well as knowledge about consent and healthy relationships, of students who hold social power might impact the campus community at large.

### **Challenges of Being in a Peer Support Role**

**Emotional challenges.** Though participants in this study were able to articulate many emotional challenges to offering peer support, these emotional challenges have remained largely

underexplored in the current body of research. This may be due to the dearth of studies exploring peer support from the perspectives of the peer supporters, especially in the student context. However, a few emotional challenges raised by participants do reflect findings from prior studies. The most present theme of burnout and negative emotions triggered by offering peer support has been addressed through some limited research; Mourra et al. (2014) discussed the guilt, anxiety, and self-blame that often arose among peer supporters in a mental health context. Other research has explored the emotional complexity of peer support work across various challenging situations (Messias et al., 2009). Past research has not explored the emotional challenges of working within an unsupportive administration; though this challenge could come up in situations other than higher education (for example, if agency leadership is unsupportive of peer support work), campus environments provide distinctive power relationships between peer support programs and administrators. It may be valuable to explore how administrators can develop support that will augment, rather than drain, student peer supporters' emotional resources.

**Educational and professional challenges.** Among studies on campus peer support programs, group functioning has been broadly studied. Most prior findings, such as challenges with training and resources (de Jager & Ntlokwana, 2011), navigating university systems (Kahn et al., 1977), and staffing problems (de Jager & Ntlokwana, 2011), were reflected in this study's findings. These challenges were very present in participants' minds; because they dedicated so much time and energy to their peer support work, they reported finding themselves preoccupied with challenges related to group functioning. The homogeneity of campus peer support programs, raised as a concern by multiple participants, has been a present concern since the inception of these programs (Kahn et al., 1977). Difficulties with balancing peer support work

with schoolwork, work-study jobs, and personal life has also long been discussed as a primary challenge of student peer support programs (Buck & Pineda, 1985; Frisz, 1986; Curran, 1995). Interestingly, the idea of dual roles brought up by several participants as a primary challenge has also been explored in prior research. The study by Mourra et al. (2014) that identified the line between “pushing and patience” as a challenge is reflective of this study’s participants’ struggles with navigating the balance of supporting survivors and combating rape culture. These philosophical challenges often led to concrete difficulties with group functioning.

**Social challenges.** The uncertainty around boundaries and roles was heavily present both in this study’s findings and prior research. Participants discussed feeling uncertain about when they were “on or off the clock” for being a peer supporter, and reported struggling to draw boundaries between friendships and support relationships. Research has found that because peer supporters are in a distinctly different role from clinicians, who have more rigid roles and concrete guidelines for establishing boundaries, they often struggle to find boundaries that feel comfortable to supporters and those they are supporting (Mourra et al., 2014).

However, the other two major social challenges raised in this study, navigating difficult group dynamics and maintaining confidentiality within small communities, have not been widely explored in research. Because these challenges are especially sensitive, they may be more difficult areas for students to seek support from advisors or supervisors. The sensitivity of these issues also may prevent students from utilizing their primary support networks. For example, if peer supporters often seek support from the other members of their groups, challenging group dynamics might be a barrier to establishing trust and reciprocity. This is particularly true in scenarios in which group members are accused of perpetrating violence. Regarding confidentiality and the burden of knowing perpetrators’ identities, peer supporters are often

unable to turn to friends and family members for fear of violating this confidentiality. Additional research is needed to understand factors or strategies that could mitigate these concerns.

### **Strategies for Mitigating Challenges**

Strategies for mitigating challenges were not an initial part of the research question, nor of the semi-structured interviews. However, throughout the interview, many participants shared strategies that had been useful or effective within their groups. Because students tended to be the primary drivers of their programs, they were adept at creatively solving problems that arose throughout their work. Many of the strategies that participants discussed, such as training, turning to other group members for support, and having formal systems in place for problemsolving, have been supported by prior research (Buck & Pineda, 1985; Frisz, 1986; Curran, 1995; Sokol & Fisher, 2016). Just as participants discussed the burnout they felt when they were not supported by their campus administrators, previous studies have shown that peer support programs are most successful when they are institutionally aligned, valued by administrators, and properly resourced (de Jager & Ntlokwana, 2011). Based upon previous studies and this study, it seems that supervisors of these groups are most effective when they build trust with student peer supporters, acting as an empathic presence who can provide support and guidance when necessary.

### **Conclusions**

#### **Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research**

This study had several limitations. Due to a small sample size of only 11 participants, the findings of this study cannot be generalized to all peer support programs. Additionally, the programs at each college or university operated differently, providing different types of peer support through different modalities. A more diverse sample would also have provided a

broader range of experiences. Two of the 11 participants identified as Hispanic or Latina, and the rest identified as White. Similarly, all participants but two identified as female or woman, and the majority of participants attended college in the Northeast United States.

Because this was an exploratory study, qualitative methods were used. In future studies, it would be useful to develop a survey to collect quantitative data examining a broader range of experiences. Another possible direction for future research would be to explore these benefits and challenges from the perspectives of a variety of stakeholders, perhaps including supervisors, administrators, and students who sought support from these programs.

### **Implications for Social Work Practice and Conclusions**

Using peer support programs as a strategy to respond to campus sexual violence can present significant challenges, but these programs can also be incredibly rewarding and beneficial to survivors, peer supporters, and the broader campus community. Providing survivors with opportunities to heal within the communities that caused them harm is essential to addressing sexual violence, and peer support programs can be instrumental in this process. As higher education strives to end sexual violence and support survivors, a collaborative approach will be essential.

When peer support programs focused on sexual violence exist in higher education, social workers are often in the position of supervising or otherwise interacting with these groups. Even on campuses with no formal peer support programs, students are most likely to turn to friends or classmates after experiencing sexual violence. Whether they are clinicians in campus counseling centers, advocates, Title IX coordinators, or staff at outside agencies in partnership with colleges, social workers must be equipped to support students in these roles. By developing a comprehensive understanding of students' motivations, benefits, challenges, and problem-

solving strategies, social workers can prepare to provide emotional support, advocate within college or universities administrations, and solve problems alongside these students. This study provides a deeper understanding of the experiences of college students offering peer support to student survivors of sexual violence. These students benefit deeply from participating and face a range of challenges for which they often need to seek their own support. The benefits students gain from offering peer support are considerable; participation often influences their interpersonal relationships, career paths, and passion for social change work. While students have been creative and resourceful in addressing challenges, they benefit most when their programs exist in a reciprocal and trusting partnership with administrators and supervisors. When these challenges can be solved collaboratively, all stakeholders are rewarded: administrators, supervisors, peer supporters, and, perhaps most importantly, student survivors of sexual violence.

## REFERENCES

- Ali, R. (2011). *Dear Colleague Letter*. Washington, D.C. Retrieved from <http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/letters/colleague-201104.html>
- Amstadter, A.B., Zinzow, H.M., McCauley, J.L., Strachan, M., Ruggiero, K.J., Resnick, H.S., & Kilpatrick, D.G. (2010). Prevalence and correlates of service utilization and help seeking in a national college sample of female rape victims. *Journal of Anxiety Disorders, 24*(8), pp. 900-902.
- Buck, C.B., & Pineda, C. (1985, February 15-17). *A peer counseling training module for campus outreach and support services*. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the California Association for Counseling and Development, San Diego, CA.
- Burgess, A.W. (1983). Rape trauma syndrome. *Behavioral Sciences and the Law, 1*(3), pp. 97-

- Butler, S.M., & Black, D.R. (2011). Prevalence and duties of collegiate human sexuality peer helpers: results of a national study. *Perspectives in Peer Programs*, 23(1), pp. 24-33.
- Crane, D.A., Lepicki, T., & Knudsen, K. (2016). Unique and common elements of the role of peer support in the context of traditional mental health services. *Psychiatric Rehabilitation Journal*, 39(3), pp. 282-288.
- Curran, J. (1995, August 11-15). *Assessment—service—training: The many faces of a university peer hotline*. Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the American Psychological Association, New York, NY.
- de Jager, M., & Ntlokwana, N. (2011). The prevalence and characteristics of higher education peer helping programmes: Managerial perspectives. *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 25(4), pp. 680-695.
- Edwards, K.M., Littleton, H.L., Sylaska, K.M., Crossman, A.L., & Craig, M. (2016). College campus community readiness to address intimate partner violence among LGBTQ+ young adults: A conceptual and empirical examination. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 58(1-2), pp. 16-26.
- Engel, R.J., & Schutt, R.K. (2012). *The practice of research in social work* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Field, K. (2015). How much can campus crime reports tell us about sexual assault? *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 62(15), pp. A12.
- Fisher, B.S., Daigle, L.E., Cullen, F.T., & Turner, M.G. (2003). Reporting sexual victimization to the police and others: Results from a national-level study of college women. *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, 30(1), pp. 6-38.
- Frisz, R.H. (1986). Peer counseling: Establishing a network in training and supervision.

- Journal of Counseling and Development*, 64, pp. 457-459.
- Fujii-Doe, W., & Nadal, K.L. (2016). Trauma, victimization, and help seeking among Asian American and Pacific Islander women. In M.A. Paludi (Ed.), *Campus action against sexual assault: Needs, policies, procedures, and training programs* (pp. 188-206). Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger.
- Gonzalez, H.B., & Feder, J. (2016). Sexual violence at institutions of higher education (CRS Report No. R43764). Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service.
- Hatcher, S.L., Shields, C.C., Wierba, E.E., Hatcher-Ross, J.L., & Hanley, S.J. (2014). College peer counselor teaching modalities: Sequelae in the life and work of graduates. *Teaching of Psychology*, 41(4), pp. 345-348.
- James, V.J., & Lee, D.R. (2015). Through the looking glass: Exploring how college students' perceptions of the police influence sexual assault victimization reporting. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 30(14), pp. 2447-2469.
- Jones, L., de Heer, B., & Prior, S. (2016). Campus sexual assault: Conceptualizing vulnerable groups in an unfolding legal context. In M.A. Paludi (Ed.), *Campus action against sexual assault: Needs, policies, procedures, and training programs* (pp. 25-47). Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger.
- Kahn, M., Brucker, A., Oudry, Y., Zwibelman, B., & Bonner, T. (1977, May 4-7). *The Open Door: A campus peer counseling center*. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Southeastern Psychological Association, Hollywood, CA.
- Lawyer, S., Resnick, H., Bakanic, V., Burkett, T., & Kilpatrick, D. (2010). Forcible, drugfacilitated, and incapacitated rape and sexual assault among undergraduate women. *Journal of American College Health*, 58(5), pp. 453-460.

- Lonsway, K.A., Klaw, E.L., Berg, D.R., Waldo, C.R., Kothari, C., Mazurek, C.J., et al. (1998). Beyond no means no: Outcomes of an intensive program to train peer facilitators for campus acquaintance rape education. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 13*(1), pp. 73-92.
- Messias, D.K.H., Moneyham, L., Vyavaharkar, M., Murdaugh, C., & Phillips, K.D. (2009). Embodied work: insider perspectives on the work of HIV/AIDS peer counselors. *Health Care for Women International, 30*(7), pp. 572-594.
- Moscarello, R. (1991). Posttraumatic stress disorder after sexual assault: Its psychodynamics and treatment. *Journal of the American Academy of Psychoanalysis, 19*(2), pp. 235-253.
- Mourra, S., Sledge, W., Sells, D., Lawless, M., & Davidson, L. (2014). Pushing, patience, and persistence: Peer providers' perspectives on supportive relationships. *American Journal of Psychiatric Rehabilitation, 17*(4), pp. 307-328.
- Napolitano, J. (2015). "Only yes means yes": An essay on university policies regarding sexual violence and sexual assault. *Yale Law and Policy Review, 33*, pp. 387-402.
- Sable, M.R., Danis, F., Mauzy, D.L., & Gallagher, S.K. (2006). Barriers to reporting sexual assault for women and men: Perspectives of college students. *Journal of American College Health, 55*(3), pp. 157-162.
- Sanday, P.R. (1996). Rape-prone versus rape-free campus cultures. *Violence Against Women, 2*(2), pp. 191-208.
- Sokol, R., & Fisher, E. (2016). Peer support for the hardly reached: A systematic review. *American Journal of Public Health, 106*(7), pp. e1-e8.
- Steinberg, D.M. (2004). *The social work student's research handbook*. New York, NY: Routledge.

- Stewart, A.M., & Glenwick, D.S. (1992). Patterns of usage of a university-based, peer-operated hotline. *Journal of College Student Development, 33*(6), pp. 547-554.
- Stotzer, R.L., & MacCartney, D. (2016). The role of institutional factors on on-campus reported rape prevalence. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 31*(16), pp. 2687-2707.
- Sutherland, M.A., Fantasia, H.C., & Hutchinson, M.K. (2016). Screening for intimate partner and sexual violence in college women: Missed opportunities. *Women's Health Issues, 26*(2), pp. 217-224.
- Sylaska, K.M., & Walters, A.S. (2014). Testing the extent of the gender trap: college students' perceptions of and reactions to intimate partner violence. *Sex Roles, 70*(3-4), pp. 134-145.
- Ward, R. (1978). Towards community self-help in higher education. *British Journal of Guidance and Counselling, 6*(1), pp. 95-101.
- Weist, M.D., Kinney, L., Taylor, L.K., Pollitt-Hill, J., Bryant, Y., Anthony, L., et al. (2014). African American and White women's experience of sexual assault and services for sexual assault. *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma, 23*(9), pp. 901-916.

**Appendix A: Informed Consent Agreement**

**2016-2017**

**Consent to Participate in a Research Study  
Smith College School for Social Work • Northampton, MA**

.....

**Title of Study: The Perceived Benefits and Challenges of Offering Peer Support to Student**

**Survivors of Campus Sexual Violence Investigator(s):**

Levenson, Zoe (zlevenson@smith.edu)

.....

**Introduction**

- You are being asked to be in a research study of the perceived benefits and challenges to peer supporters for student survivors of sexual violence.
- You were selected as a possible participant because you:
- Are a current student at a four-year college or university
- Are a current peer supporter in a formally established campus peer support program (i.e. peer hotline, peer advocacy group, peer counseling/listening service) specifically focused on sexual violence or related issues
- Have administrative support or supervision in your role as a peer supporter
- Willing to participate in an audio recorded 20 to 30 minute telephone interview
- We ask that you read this form and ask any questions that you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

**Purpose of Study**

- The purpose of the study is to learn how peer supporters understand the benefits and challenges of offering support to student survivors of sexual violence.
- This study is being conducted as a research requirement for *my Smith College School for Social Work master's in social work degree*.
- Ultimately, this research may be published or presented at professional conferences.

**Description of the Study Procedures**

- If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to do the following things:
- Provide contact information (email address and telephone number) to the researcher. This contact information will be kept confidential and will not be shared with anyone.
- Participate in a brief introductory call to explain the purpose of the study.
- Participate in a 20 to 30 minute telephone interview discussing your experiences and thoughts about facilitating peer support to student survivors of campus sexual violence, which will be audio recorded.

### **Risks/Discomforts of Being in this Study**

- The study has the following risks. You may experience some discomfort or distress during reflection upon your experiences as a peer supporter. The researcher will not ask about details of specific peer support cases, and you may decline to answer any question or choose to end the interview at any time.
- If you do experience discomfort or distress, you will be encouraged to consult with the supervisor or advisor of your peer support program, or to reach out to other members of your support network.

### **Benefits of Being in the Study**

- The benefits of participation are: Participants will have the opportunity to discuss and reflect on their own experiences as peer supporters. Participants may gain insight into the benefits of being a resource for their fellow students and may be better able to advocate for resources for their programs as a result. They may also develop a deeper understanding of the challenges they face as peer supporters, which could create opportunities for problem solving and seeking support from advisors or supervisors.
- The benefits to social work/society are: Gaining a better understanding of these students' roles and paradigms will be beneficial to clinicians who supervise these groups or work alongside them in an integrated campus response to sexual violence. It will help inform the way clinicians conceptualize campus sexual violence, allowing for more comprehensive and sensitive policy-making. By beginning to explore the experience of peer supporters as a part of college and university sexual violence response, colleges will have a better understanding of the risks and value of integrating them into their programs.

### **Confidentiality**

- Your participation will be kept confidential. The researcher will conduct phone interviews in a private location, and participants will be encouraged to seek a private location from which to participate in the interview. Identifying information, including this consent form, will be stored separately from data. In addition, the records of this study will be kept strictly confidential. Only the researcher and academic advisor will have access to audio recordings.
- All research materials including recordings, transcriptions, analyses and consent/assent documents will be stored in a secure location for three years according to federal regulations. In the event that materials are needed beyond this period, they will be kept secured until no longer needed, and then destroyed. All electronically stored data will be password protected during the storage period. We will not include any information in any report we may publish that would make it possible to identify you.

### **Payments/gift**

- You will not receive any financial payment for your participation.

### **Right to Refuse or Withdraw**

- The decision to participate in this study is entirely up to you. You may refuse to answer any question or withdraw from the study *at any time* (up to the date noted below) without affecting your relationship with the researchers of this study or Smith College. Your decision to refuse will not result in any loss of benefits (including access to services) to which you are otherwise entitled. If this is an interview and you choose to withdraw, I will not use any of your information collected for this study. You must notify me of your decision to withdraw by email or phone by April 29, 2017. After that date, your information will be part of the thesis, dissertation or final report.

**Right to Ask Questions and Report Concerns**

- You have the right to ask questions about this research study and to have those questions answered by me before, during or after the research. If you have any further questions about the study, at any time feel free to contact me, Zoe Levenson at zlevenson@smith.edu or by telephone at xxx-xxx-xxxx. If you would like a summary of the study results, one will be sent to you once the study is completed. If you have any other concerns about your rights as a research participant, or if you have any problems as a result of your participation, you may contact the Chair of the Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Committee at (413) 585-7974.

**Consent**

- Your signature below indicates that you have decided to volunteer as a research participant for this study, and that you have read and understood the information provided above. You will be given a signed and dated copy of this form to keep.

.....

Name of Participant (print): \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Participant: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Researcher(s): \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

.....

**1. I agree to be audio taped for this interview:**

Name of Participant (print): \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Participant: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Researcher(s): \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**2. I agree to be interviewed, but I do not want the interview to be taped:**

Name of Participant (print): \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Participant: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Researcher(s): \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## **Appendix B: Sample Recruitment Email**

Dear [Name],

In order to complete my Master's thesis at Smith College School for Social Work, I am conducting a study seeking to answer the following question: What are the perceived benefits and challenges to peer supporters for student survivors of campus sexual violence?

This research is particularly important to me as a former peer supporter during my undergrad years, and it has the potential to impact campus sexual violence policy, supervision of student peer support groups, and program development in response to sexual violence.

To be eligible you must:

- Be a current student at a four-year higher education institution (college or university)
- Be a current peer supporter in a formally established campus peer support program (i.e. peer hotline, peer advocacy group, peer counseling/listening service) specifically focused on sexual violence or related issues
- Have administrative support or supervision in your role as a peer supporter
- Be willing to participate in a brief (20 to 30 minute) telephone interview

I am currently recruiting participants, and I would greatly appreciate it if you would forward this email to anyone you think would be interested and/or eligible to participate!

To participate, or with any questions, email [zlevenson@smith.edu](mailto:zlevenson@smith.edu). This study protocol has been reviewed and approved by the Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Review Committee (HSRC).

Many thanks,  
Zoe Levenson  
MSW Candidate  
Smith College School for Social Work

## **Appendix C: Interview Guide**

The following questions are the general topics of focus for the 20 to 30 minute interviews I will conduct with current peer supporters for student survivors of sexual violence. These are intended to be broad questions that will lead to further discussion regarding the benefits and challenges of

peer support for student survivors of sexual violence. The focus on three primary areas: description of the peer support being offered, benefits, and challenges.

**Demographic Information:**

What is your age?

What is your class year?

What is your gender?

What is your race?

**Description of peer support:**

What is the nature of the support you offer? In other words, how do you specifically offer support to student survivors of sexual violence as a part of your peer support organization?

**Benefits:**

What do you feel like you get from offering peer support?

What emotional benefits have you experienced?

What educational/professional benefits have you experienced?

What social benefits have you experienced?

**Challenges:**

What are some of the challenges you have faced as a student doing peer support work?

What emotional challenges have you experienced?

What educational/professional challenges have you experienced? What social challenges have you experienced?

## Appendix D: Human Subjects Review Approval Letter



---

School for Social Work  
Smith College  
Northampton, Massachusetts 01063  
T (413) 585-7950 F (413) 585-7994

November 17, 2016

Zoe Levenson

Dear Zoe,

You did a very nice job on your revisions. Your project is now approved by the Human Subjects Review Committee.

*Please note the following requirements:*

**Consent Forms:** All subjects should be given a copy of the consent form.

**Maintaining Data:** You must retain all data and other documents for at least three (3) years past completion of the research activity.

*In addition, these requirements may also be applicable:*

**Amendments:** If you wish to change any aspect of the study (such as design, procedures, consent forms or subject population), please submit these changes to the Committee.

**Renewal:** You are required to apply for renewal of approval every year for as long as the study is active.

**Completion:** You are required to notify the Chair of the Human Subjects Review Committee when your study is completed (data collection finished). This requirement is met by completion of the thesis project during the Third Summer.

Congratulations and our best wishes on your interesting study.

Sincerely,  
Michael Murphy, PhD  
Member, Human Subjects Review Committee

CC: Elaine Kersten, Research Advisor