

# “How is a Student to Know Who They Can Talk To?”: University Website Communication about Sexual Assault

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# Outline

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- Why do trauma-informed websites matter?
- What does research say about what survivors need?
- How well do websites meet these needs?

## Why do trauma-informed websites matter?

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- Searching a university website is a form of disclosure
- Responses to disclosures influence healing (Ahrens et al., 2009; Borja et al., 2006; Dworkin et al., 2019; Orchowski & Gidycz 2015 )
- Unsupportive university responses may exacerbate harm and be experienced as “institutional betrayal” (Smith and Freyd, 2013)

# What does research say about what survivors need?

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**Agency:** Options, enough clear information to make decisions, allowing survivors to enact a tailored plan (Brubaker & Mancini, 2017; Frazier et al., 2017; Holland et al., 2020a, 2020b; Kirkner et al., 2021; Munro-Kramer et al., 2017; Orchowski et al., 2013; Orchowski & Gidycz, 2015; Richards et al., 2021)

**Confidentiality:** Detailing who will know what, when (Banyard & Mayhew, 2009; Holland & Cortina, 2017; Krebs et al., 2011; Lindquist et al., 2016; Munro, 2014; Nasta et al., 2005; Porter, 2022; Sable et al., 2006; Walsh et al., 2010)

**Validation:** Help-seeking strategies that may not involve formal reporting (Ahrens, 2006; Holland & Cortina, 2017; Khan et al., 2018; Lorenz et al., 2018; Porter, 2022)

## What do these needs suggest about website design?

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Information should be:

- Accurate
- Easy to find
- Respectful
- Comprehensible – not legalese!
- Validating
- Not overwhelming
- Affirming of multiple options, and clear about their implications

## How well do websites meet these needs?

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- Nationally representative sample of 381 colleges and universities
  - 2017: Undergraduates search and code websites for information on sexual assault resources and reporting (entire sample)
  - 2022: Jared and Elizabeth search and code websites of a random subsample (n = 50)
- Iterative process of content analysis beginning with quantitative approach that moved to qualitative

“This website was a joke and the hardest to follow. There is no way I would be able to successfully understand how to report sexual misconduct if I was a student here. The website does not even mention responsible employees or confidential resources. How is a student to know who they can talk to?”

- Undergrad coder

## Language often complex, confusing, legalistic, with terms not defined, or inconsistently defined

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"Upon receipt of a **report**, the Title IX Coordinator, or designee, will promptly contact the Complainant and provide the following: information on the availability of supportive measures, consider the complainant's wishes with respect to supportive measures, the ability to receive supportive measures **with or without filing a report**, and information about the process for filing a formal complaint."

- Wentworth Institute of Technology (emphasis added)

Note that **report** is used to refer BOTH to disclosure to TIX office AND for the filing of a formal complaint.



# Missing or Confusing Information about Confidentiality

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## MISSING

15% offered NO confidential resource whatsoever  
34% did not mention mandatory reporting policies

## INACCURATE

Police and TIX often identified as confidential

## VAGUE

"Keep in mind [that] the degree in [sic] which confidentiality can be protected depends upon the situation and the role of the person being consulted."

- Video on Cabrini University's website

# Reporting-First versus Survivor-First

## Reporting First

Funnels survivors toward the Title IX office and/or police

## Survivor First

Leads with support, care, and confidential resources

# Sexual and Interpersonal Misconduct / Title IX

## Set the Standard

Baylor University is committed to providing a safe and non-discriminatory learning, living, and working environment for all members of the University community.

EXPLORE 



Reporting



Training



SIM / Title IX Policies



FAQs

## Resources

## Resources

If you or someone you know is experiencing an emergency, call:

- Waco Police Department: 9-1-1
- Baylor Police Department: 254-710-2222

## Sexual Interpersonal Misconduct Brochure

Baylor University is committed to providing a safe and nondiscriminatory environment for our students, staff, and faculty. Learn more about your rights, options and resources.

[DOWNLOAD BROCHURE](#)

## Clery Act

The Jeanne Clery Disclosure of Campus Security Policy and Campus Crime Statistics Act is a federal law that requires all universities that participate in federal aid programs to keep and disclose information about crime on and around their campuses.

[CLERY COMPLIANCE](#)

# FIND THE SUPPORT YOU NEED. YOU CAN START HERE.

URGENT & MEDICAL CARE



HOW UCONN CAN HELP



UConn REGIONAL CAMPUSES  
RESOURCES

SUPPORT SERVICES

INFO FOR THE RESPONDENT

HELP FOR EMPLOYEES



RELATED LINKS

## How UConn Can Help

The University of Connecticut offers several on-campus resources that help support any individual(s) affected by sexual harassment, sexual violence (sexual assault, intimate partner violence, or stalking) or retaliation. You do not have to file a formal report, press charges or wait for an investigation to begin before receiving assistance from UConn. Whether you're looking for medical or counseling services, academic or work support, assistance with transportation or financial aid, or to learn more about investigations, the information below can help you get in direct contact with the resources that best fit your individual situation.

### Support Resources

Regional Campus Students, including UConn Health, [click here](#) to learn more about your campus-specific resources.

Employee support resources can be found [here](#).

MEDICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH CARE (CONFIDENTIAL) – ALL STUDENTS



# Overall Assessment

- Few websites were designed to support survivor agency





# Thank you!

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## Obstacles to better websites?

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- Legal complexity, lawyers, legal language, mandatory reporting obligations
- Websites often designed to achieve university interests:
  - Fulfilling legal requirements
  - Generating reports, over and above survivor need for agency



## Obstacles to better websites?

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- Website creators may not be aware of research on survivor needs or on trauma-informed design more generally
- Lack of resources / low priority
- Organizational complexity and difficulty coordinating across units

