

Strategy Summary: Addressing Rape Culture on College Campuses

Atwater Library & Computer Centre

Creating a Community of Practice through Intercollegiate Collaboration

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Context

CEGEPs, and other post-secondary institutions, often function in isolation from one another when addressing significant on-campus issues, such as sexual violence, and rape culture, more generally. Although the composition and needs of institutions' respective communities may differ in important ways, they nonetheless face similar struggles that can be more meaningfully and holistically addressed through collective, inter-institutional action.

In accordance with the Quebec government's Bill 151, all post-secondary institutions in the province must develop and implement a stand-alone sexual violence policy by September 2019. The process of creating and implementing such a policy is complex and challenging in many ways. In order to support our pilot site institutions with this endeavour, the Atwater Library and Computer Centre organised a series of intercollegiate meetings where key administrators, faculty and students from 3 CEGEPs came together to exchange ideas on how to develop and implement a stand-alone sexual violence policy that will address the diverse needs of their respective academic communities.

This strategy summary highlights important considerations and actions that helped facilitate this process. These strategies and reflections can inform future inter-institutional efforts in addressing complex, shared issues, such as rape culture.

Steps & Considerations in Fostering Intercollegiate Collaboration

Acting as a Reference Tool

Having an organisation act as a "reference tool", or central anchor, for any type of collaboration is important. The Atwater Library and Computer Centre functioned in this capacity in the context of our project. The organisation supported members from different academic institutions to connect with key people within, and outside, their institutions. Those working in academic institutions often have limited time and space to connect with people from other institutions who may have certain knowledge and skills sets that can aid them in addressing challenging issues that they are faced with.

In our project, the Atwater Library connected our stakeholders with the coordinator of Concordia University's Sexual Assault Resource Centre (SARC) who has a great deal of experience with, and knowledge of, how to develop and implement a stand-alone sexual violence policy for an academic community. Moreover, in moving forward, our stakeholders can now rely on the Atwater Library as a reference tool that can help them get in touch with key people at other institutions.

Nurturing Interpersonal Relations & Community

Investing energy and time in forging strong interpersonal, working relationships is paramount. Administrators, faculty and students can feel isolated in addressing significant concerns in the context of a large, bureaucratic academic system. Communication is often carried out through emails where there is very little opportunity to see and connect to the humanity of others. In order for any collaboration to be successful, particularly ones that seek to address extremely complex realities like rape culture, it is vital to communicate and relate with others in ways that facilitate the forging of trusting, genuine relationships. This can only be done through in-person

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encounters where people have the space to exchange perspectives, experiences and emotions in reciprocal and dynamic ways. Through face-to-face meetings and interactions, those who are part of a collaborative project are more likely to feel that they are connected to a community of persons with similar experiences of struggle and hope.

Recognising Commonalities & Honouring Differences

Each institution's community has its own unique needs, challenges, opportunities and cultures. In our project, each of our stakeholders were at different points in their policy development making processes. Some had been developing their policy over several years, others had already implemented it, but were now required to re-evaluate it in light of the government's new requirements, while other institutions had yet to form a committee charged with developing the policy. Given these varying positions, one may assume that an intercollegiate collaboration to address rape culture would prove inappropriate, unnecessary or too difficult. Although coming together from different standpoints may appear impractical, it allows those involved to gain important insights into the challenges, strategies and opportunities associated with different steps of the policy making process. Institutions that have yet to develop a policy making committee can benefit from learning of the experiences of other institutions in striking a committee (e.g., ensuring that there is a diversity of student voices involved in the process, rather than only a few students representing certain realities). Moreover, institutions that have already implemented their policies can gain from the experiences of institutions who are beginning to develop their policies, and adapt and improve their policies accordingly (e.g., ensuring that their policies are intersectional and trauma-informed).

Meeting Structure - Restorative Circle Practice

Collaborative meetings and discussions on topics as complex as sexual violence can be difficult to facilitate for a variety of reasons: the issue can be personally triggering; people hold vastly opposing opinions and ideas about the "right" way to address the issue; people may be overwhelmed by the task of understanding and responding to the issue at hand, etc. One approach to collectively navigate complex issues that has proven to be meaningful and practical in various contexts is *Restorative Circle*. Although this practice is usually used to support communities in addressing conflict affecting their members, aspects of the practice can be drawn on to navigate particularly complicated discussions and collaborations.

Restorative Circle is not a new practice. The idea of coming together in a circle to address difficult issues, as a community, has been used throughout history, particularly among Indigenous groups. This way of dealing with conflict and pain differs from contemporary approaches to addressing conflict which are grounded in binary notions of "right vs wrong", "victim vs abuser", and "guilt vs innocence". The majority of dominant systems in place today, such as our criminal justice, education, health care, and youth protection systems are premised on such notions and privilege punitive measures as "the way" to achieve "justice". Punitive measures rarely, if ever, address the root causes of conflict, pain and violence in our society, and often have the consequence of creating more violence, whether it be in the form of exclusion, abandonment, incarceration, trauma, re-traumatization, and the destruction of families and communities.

Alternatively, *Restorative Circle* does away with dichotomous understandings of human behaviour, experience and worth. The goal of the practice is to nurture deep, holistic empathy and understanding in order to restore the cohesiveness and wellbeing of a particular group or community. Conflict is supported and negotiated through a community process that is facilitated by one or more members. Members seek to arrive at actions that benefit all those

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directly involved in the conflict, as well as those that are implicitly affected by it (Restorative Circles, 2014). *Restorative Circle* is a relational response to conflict, not a legal one.

In the context of our project, we used 3 questions that are integral to *Restorative Circle* practice and adapted them to better meet our needs. The following table shows the 3 questions that are typically used in preparing participants for a *Restorative Circle* process (column 1), our adaptation of these questions (column 2), and the general purpose of each question (column 3).

<i>Restorative Circle</i>	<i>Adapted for our Project</i>	<i>Purpose</i>
1) What works well when conflict becomes painful?	1) What has been working in developing the stand-alone sexual violence policy at our institutions?	The first question is meant to highlight participant and community strengths and the skills they already possess in addressing conflict (in our case, in addressing campus sexual violence)
2) What does not work so well when conflict becomes painful?	2) What has not been working so well in developing the stand-alone sexual violence policy at our institutions?	The second question is meant to identify the actions, strategies and behaviours that do not support conflict, and that may lead to escalation and further rupture.
3) What do we dream of?	3) What do we wish for our respective policy development and implementation processes to look like? 4) What does it take to foster a policy development process that is meaningful, effective and that meets each of our communities' unique needs & realities?	The third question is meant to support those involved in envisioning future possibilities and opportunities that can better help support the conflict and heal the community and its members.

These questions have been useful in supporting our stakeholders in understanding where they are, and in imagining where they would like to be. We intend to continue using this framework when engaging our stakeholders in future discussions around campus sexual violence.

References

Restorative Circles. (2014). *Restorative Circles*. Retrieved from <http://www.restorativecircles.org/>