

“Supportive Or Corrosive:” Can a University’s Title IX Website Design Impact  
Reporting of Sexual Violence? A Mixed Methods Design

by

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## **ABSTRACT**

Title IX, a federal civil rights law outlawing gender-based discrimination in education, has become a turbulent political subject matter. During each of the past three presidential cabinets, policy surrounding Title IX has been rescinded and amended and amended again (Ali, 2011; Anderson, 2021; Lhamon, 2015; OCR, 2001). Multiple changes to policy, practice, and staffing jeopardize student trust in their institutions' ability to safeguard them during times of trauma (Anderson, 2021). When a student is sexually victimized, a first anticipated stop is their institution's Title IX website, where the student can safely explore supportive resources and next-step options, including ways to report the crime. Although studies have found that website innovation contributes significantly to students' sense of trust in their universities, little research exists on the impact university Title IX websites can make on student victims' sense of trust in the reporting process (Rezaeean et al., 2012). A mixed methods study was utilized to develop a novel instrument that measures a university's Title IX website design based on student-centric elements derived from Title IX expert interviews and intersectional literature on trauma-informed, student-centered success, and technological accessibility approaches. After having established the instrument's face and content validity, as well as interrater reliability, it was applied to a sample of university Title IX websites to compare scores to sex-related crime reports. Statistically significant positive and negative associations were found, suggesting that the student-centricity of a Title IX website has bearing on user responses. Implications of this study for institutions and future research are discussed.

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## LIST OF TERMS/ABBREVIATIONS

*Complainant:* The person who has alleged to be the victim of sexual misconduct in a Title IX investigation, as defined by Title IX guidance (OCR, 2021a; OCR, 2022).

*DCL:* The Dear Colleagues Letters, a series of published guidance by the OCR, intended to issue updates and clarifications about Title IX regulations.

*Mandatory Reporter:* A responsible employee designated by an institution who is obligated to report any known violations of sexual misconduct to the Title IX office

*OCR:* The U.S. Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights, which oversees Title IX compliance.

*Respondent:* Those accused of sexual misconduct in a Title IX investigation, as defined by Title IX guidance (OCR, 2021a).

*Sexual violence:* A non-legal term used for this study to encapsulate all crimes that are of a sexual nature, such as rape or attempted rape, intimate-partner abuse, dating violence, sexual assault, stalking, and other forms of sexual harassment, due to varied legal definitions across states (RAINN, 2021).

*Student-centric:* A term redefined for this study to gauge the Title IX website’s ability to connect or deter a student seeking support. The definition is built from research on the student-centered approach, wherein the institution understands that students learn better when they share in power and feel socially connected to their learning environment (Astin, 1994; Gelisli, 2009; Hannafin & Land, 2000; Haverila & Haverila, 2021; Tinto, 1999). This concept contrasts with the traditional institutional-centric approach, wherein the student is treated as a passive observer and teaching styles are much more didactic (Hannafin & Land, 2000). For this study, the term “student-centric” will be used to

represent how the research relates to a Title IX website’s design, items, access, and language. Based on literature and expert interviews, student-centric language and resources should be trauma-informed, avoid victim-blaming, easily accessible, user friendly, compassionate, and nonjudgmental in nature.

*Survivor*: Someone “who has been sexually assaulted and is dealing with the short-term and long-term effects of the trauma” (Potter et al., 2018, p. 496).

*Survivor-centered*: An approach that puts at the forefront of program decisions the needs and experiences of sexual violence survivors (Hrick, 2021).

*Title IX*: A federal law, regulated through the U.S. Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights, mandating that no federally funded institution can discriminate students based on sex in education. It was later amended to clarify that this protection also includes sexual harassment and transgender issues (OCR, 2021b).

*Trauma*: The overwhelming feelings that occur when someone is “experiencing too much, too fast, too soon” that result in an inability to cope (O’Mailey, 2022).

*Trauma-informed*: An evidence-based framework that recognizes the high probability that people have experienced multiple traumas and will have multiple ways of responding to trauma. This framework focuses on supportive strategies that help to minimize re-traumatization and create a safe environment for the victim (McCauley & Casler, 2015, p. 585).

*Usability*: How well the website’s design enables users’ navigational understanding, which includes the perceived ease of locating items and the speed at which one can do so (Rezaeean et al., 2012, p. 1023).

*Victim*: “Someone in the immediate aftermath of the crime” (Potter et al., 2018, p. 496).

## **CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION**

### **Overview**

Though Title IX was quietly passed in 1972, this federal civil rights law demanding an end to gender-based discrimination in education has since become subject to much political debate. Prior to 2001, federal courts offered limiting interpretations of Title IX's oversight, which victim advocates felt put survivors of sexual assault at a particular disadvantage in the reporting process (Melnick, 2018; Monroe, 2006). The Office for Civil Rights (OCR) sought to amend the disadvantage by publishing new Title IX guidance that, among many other items, added sexual harassment to its purview (OCR, 2001).

According to Everett (2021), "We live in a time that requires attention to trauma" (p. 9). Title IX, through continual interpretations, attempt to address cultural issues thought to incite sexual violence. OCR updates during the Obama administration urged institutions to think beyond sexual violence investigations and towards violence reduction, by way of proactive training and preventative programming (Kadzielski, 1977; Lombardi, 2014; Melnick, 2018). Communication and student care that are trauma-informed actively seek to avoid retraumatization, to empower survivors with resources and choice, and to create trustworthy spaces for students to turn to (Menschner & Maul, 2016). According to McCauley and Casler (2015), the trauma-informed prevention approach is considered best practice for institutions, as it "promotes empowerment and recognizes that sexual assault may impact everything about survivors moving forward, including peer relationships, academic progress, likelihood of engaging in subsequent

risky alcohol use, and poor mental health” (p. 585). Thus, all avenues of Title IX communication benefit from trauma-informed approaches.

Title IX regulations specific to sexual assault investigation and institutional purview have become highly controversial and politicized (Gravely, 2021; Houston, 2017). During Obama’s administration, the OCR published several Dear Colleagues Letters (DCLs) that dictated increased institutional expectations of victim-protections, which led to concern of federal overstepping. Many politicians saw the DCLs masquerading as interpretations of the law when, instead, they were legal revisions intended to instigate a cultural revolution. According to Melnick (2018), “Compelling demands for protection of women from sexual assault collide[d] with compelling demands for due process” (p. 11). Such political divergence has since incited multiple revisions and redactions of Title IX processes (Ali, 2011; Anderson, 2021; Lhamon, 2015; OCR, 2001). This constant fluctuation in the law is alarming because any legal flux will inevitably “result in universities struggling to comply” as well as “mistrust from students in using student conduct systems” (Vail, 2019, p. 2012). Such fluctuation has created another issue among federally funded institutions—how to maintain student trust during transitional periods of Title IX legal revisions.

Sexual violence is the most underreported of all crimes, especially when examining rates among college students (Sinozich & Langton, 2014; Vail, 2019; Wood et al., 2017). According to Vail (2019), “The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) estimates that at least 95% of campus rapes in the United States go unreported” (p. 2086). Though there are many reasons as to why students choose not to report, a common reason is distrust in the process or in how the report will be perceived (RAINN, 2021). Multiple

changes to policy, practice, and staffing jeopardize the impact of the Title IX office and students' trust in the institution's ability to protect them (Anderson, 2021). Constant changes also serve to confuse messaging and supportive strategies for student communication. For example, during the Obama administration, the DCLs mandated public access to each institution's Title IX policy, reporting process, resources, and staff training (Ali, 2011; White House Task Force to Protect Students from Sexual Assault, 2014). Though no design or language guidance was specified, schools were also obligated to create websites and distribute materials to their students (Know Your IX, 2018; U.S. Department of Education, 2020). Title IX policies were again drastically changed during the Trump administration. However, Title IX website requirements were made even murkier (U.S. Department of Education, 2020).

One study (Rezaeean et al., 2012) found that a university's online presence is key to its relationship with students. According to Rezaeean et al. (2012), "website innovation was found to be the most significant factor affecting students' perception[s] of the importance of usefulness, trust and satisfaction" within their universities (p. 1027). A different study (Lund & Thomas, 2015) specific to Title IX websites found that, while most of the websites did include their institution's reporting policy and contact information, few provided holistic, culture-driven resources, like consent and anti-rape myth education.

Title IX websites can and should proactively aim to establish or refine online communication to earn student trust if institutions want to safeguard their students' mental and academic wellbeing. With the increasing reliance of technology in student communication, institutions should ask themselves how their online presence can aid in

establishing student trust. In particular, can a Title IX website design aid in reducing sexual violence by way of promoting utilization of Title IX supportive services, reporting of incidents, and prevention education measures?

### **Statement of the Problem**

Reporting sexual violence increases the likelihood that survivors will receive medical and mental support. It also serves as a deterrent for future crimes in numerous ways, one being that many sexual assaulters are repeat offenders (Boyle et al., 2017; Lisak & Miller, 2002). Reporting is therefore vital to reducing sexual violence. Though politicians, victim advocates, and higher education administrators alike have spent the greater part of the 21<sup>st</sup> century attempting to deter a culture of sexual violence, the prevalence has not subsided, nor have reporting rates significantly improved (AAU, 2020; Melnick, 2018; RAINN, 2021; Sinozich & Langton, 2014; Vail, 2018; Wood et al., 2017). While U.S. college students are seemingly becoming more aware of Title IX's role, this knowledge alone appears insufficient to either encourage reporting or increase student trust in their institutions (AAU, 2020; NSSE, 2021a; Streng & Kamimura, 2015; Vail, 2018). It is imperative, then, to ask why and how institutions should evaluate the impact their online presence has on actions students take after experiencing sexual violence (Hayes-Smith & Levett, 2010).

### **Purpose of Study**

Websites are a commonly used medium to begin researching program services and support (Aziz et al., 2021). When a student is victimized, a first anticipated stop is their institution's Title IX website, where the student can safely explore supportive resources and next-step options, including ways to report the incident. Little research has

been done to help institutions evaluate their Title IX websites' impact on students who are seeking support (Lund & Thomas, 2015). The characteristics and tone of the Title IX website have the potential to empower help-seeking and reporting. However, they can also alienate and confuse students in ways that implicitly discourage reporting and retraumatize the survivor.

Considering the importance of trauma-informed practice and a student's trust in the university, as well as the continued threat of sexual violence on college campuses, the purpose of this study is to develop a Title IX website evaluation instrument and then assess whether, and to what extent, the website design is associated with the site user's likelihood to report sexual violence (Anderson, 2021; McCauley & Casler, 2015; NSSE, 2021a). Research indicates that students can be hesitant to use victim-support services when they are unsure of how a Title IX report will be perceived, which suggests that "language is important across all resource types" (DeLoveh & Cattaneo, 2017, p. 77). It is paramount, then, to understand how online communication decisions can either encourage or deter survivors from seeking institutional help.

### **Significance of Study**

Higher education degree attainment is associated with higher median salaries (Irwin et al., 2021a). Thus, access to a safe education is an issue of equity as well as economic and social mobility. Because young adults ages 18-24 (considered the traditional college-student age range) are most at-risk for sexual violence, it is imperative that institutions evaluate the utility of their Title IX access points (AAU, 2020; RAINN, 2021). Title IX websites can often be the first contact point students have with Title IX supportive services. Though websites have potential to impact student decision-making on reporting

sexual violence, very little research exists on what that website should look like to best support the students in need. By creating a Title IX expert- and literature-derived instrument that can measure a website's impact, this research has the potential to inform student success practices beyond Title IX compliance. Specifically, the instrument established in this study may serve as an evaluation tool for U.S. higher education institutions to assist them in reframing their online student communication in ways that promote anti-rape culture through educational messaging as well as survivor-centered strategies.

Though research on Title IX websites is minimal, related studies speak to the benefit of "continuous awareness of language choices and perceived judgments throughout service provision," as well as "recommendations for resource utilization when survivors are concerned about consequences" (DeLoveh & Cattaneo, 2017, p. 77). Understanding the relationship between Title IX website design and sex-related crime reporting rates can bring awareness and intentionality to institutional communication decisions. Results of this study can further inform website designers in their ability to improve student institutional trust, thus increasing the likelihood of reporting a crime and deterring future crimes (Lund & Thomas, 2015; Wiersma-Mosley & DiLoreto, 2018).

### **Theoretical Framework**

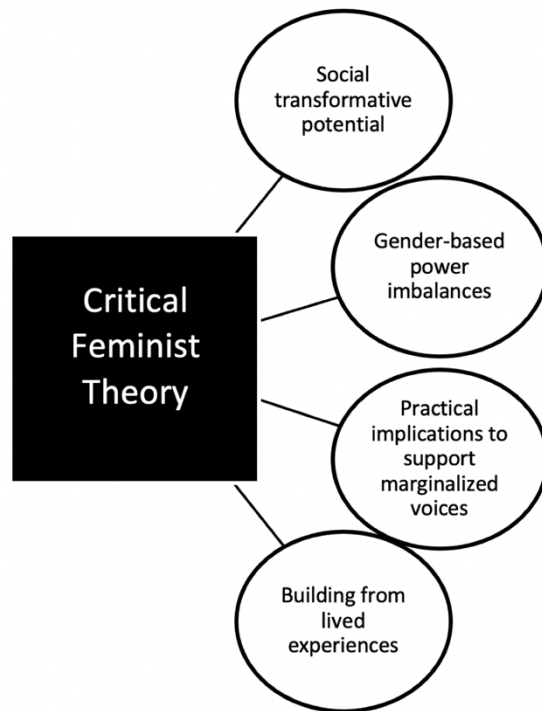
This study utilizes a critical feminist framework. According to Kushner and Morrow (2003), "A critical feminist perspective is proposed as a view that encompasses a focus on gender as well as other sources of social and cultural inequity and an emphasis on transformative potential" (p. 31). The transformative potential for the context of this study pertains to an institution's ability to transform its outreach and support of sexual



violence survivors. Critical theorists use scientific studies to incite transformation of social institutions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Critical feminist theory focuses on gender and sex-based inequalities as they relate to “agency, power relations, shifting positionalities, voice, individual experience, and socially constructed knowledge” (Howell et al., 1999, para. 1). Figure 1 presents a visual of the critical feminist theory key elements that are contributing to the researcher’s overall framework.

**Figure 1**

*Critical Feminist Theory Framework*



This study follows a critical feminist approach in that the intended outcome has practical implications to aid in relational transformation of the institution and student, by way of empowering the students through the refinement of Title IX online communication and utilization of an accessible, trauma-informed approach. According to Hesse-Biber (2012), “the concrete lived experience is a key place from which to build knowledge and foment social change” (p. 2). The researcher is currently an academic advisor in a university who has led trainings for staff and students about Title IX, as well as co-chaired a sexual assault prevention campus committee for several years. She has completed the necessary training to be a Title IX advisor for students who need support during the Trump-mandated live hearings that take place during sexual violence investigations (to be define in Chapter 2). As the researcher of this study, her lived experiences in higher education and Title IX are key in establishing an important foundation of knowledge from which to further exploration. The researcher is a critical educator and student advocate who accepts the “responsibility to work toward social justice and democracy” and is concerned with empowering those historically constrained by social inequalities (e.g., gender discrimination) inherent in sexual violence (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Howell et al., 1999, para. 1).

Critical feminist theory aims to identify and extirpate gender inequalities as they relate to power, whether obvious or subtle (Martin, 2002). This study explores sexual violence through an understanding of two specific concerns: (1) a power imbalance between institution and student, wherein the student’s choice to report may factor into their own perceived value within the institutional communication, and (2) a gender inequity, such that females and nonbinary genders are victimized more than cis-males

due to rape-myth perpetuation in western culture (AAU, 2020; Know Your IX, 2018; White House Task Force to Protect Students from Sexual Assault, 2014).

According to Howell et al. (1999), critical feminist theorists in educational research seek out power inequalities that “affect social justice, marginalization, and contextual links among both students’ and instructors’ social, political, historical, and cultural locations” (para. 2). The feminist framework understands that power dynamics are both “established and maintained through discourse” (Gannon & Davies, 2014, p. 4). The motivation of this study will be to establish the existing institutional discourse (i.e., website content), as well as to offer recommendations for improvement opportunities of online communication. Using the critical feminist theoretical framework, three main research questions will drive this study.

### **Research Questions**

To address the existing power dynamics between institutional communication within Title IX websites and students who are victims of/witness to sexual violence, an instrument is required to measure the student-centeredness of Title IX website designs. The following research questions served as the driving framework of this study:

- Research Question 1 (RQ1): What do Title IX experts perceive as the primary attributes of student-centricity that can relate to an institution’s Title IX website?
- Research Question 2 (RQ2): Does the evaluation instrument informed by Title IX expert opinion accurately assess Title IX website student-centricity?
  - Research Question 2.1 (RQ2.1): Is the website evaluation instrument developed from RQ1 valid?

- Research Question 2.2 (RQ2.2): Is the website evaluation instrument developed from RQ1 reliable?
- Research Question 3 (RQ3): Are institutional Title IX website student-centricity scores, assessed using the instrument developed in RQ1 and validated in RQ2, associated with the number of institutional sex-related crimes reported?

## Hypotheses

The following hypotheses were generated to be addressed in the quantitative phase of this study:

$H_0$  The student-centricity scoring instrument is not valid.

$H_{2.1}$  The student-centricity scoring instrument is found to have face and content validity.

$H_0$  The student-centricity scoring instrument is not reliable.

$H_{2.2}$  The student-centricity scoring instrument is found to have interrater reliability.

$H_0$  There is no relationship between student-centricity website scores and the institutional sex-related crimes report.

$H_3$  There is an association between student-centricity website scores and the institutional sex-related crimes report.

Since this is a new instrument, the researcher did not want to exclude possible negative associations. However, if the researcher were to create a directional hypothesis, it would theorize that higher student-centricity scores would be associated with higher sex-related crime reports. It is important to note that higher report rates do not deduce increased prevalence of violence. Literature has established a high prevalence of violence and a low prevalence of reporting across the country (AAU, 2020; Campbell et al., 2009; Jaffe et al.

2021; Vail, 2019). Rather, this increased number would be hypothetically demonstrative of increased trust in the institution and/or knowledge of the reporting process in a way that encourages reporting of sexual violence. See Table 1 for a clarification of questions and their corresponding hypotheses.

**Table 1**

*Quantitative Research Questions & Hypotheses*

<b>Research Question</b>	<b>Null Hypothesis</b>	<b>Hypothesis</b>
RQ2.1: Is the website evaluation instrument developed from phase I valid?	The student-centricity scoring instrument is not valid.	The instrument is found to have face and content validity.
RQ2.2: Is the website evaluation instrument developed from phase I reliable?	The student-centricity scoring instrument is not reliable.	The instrument is found to have interrater reliability.
RQ3: Are institutional Title IX website student-centricity scores, assessed using the instrument developed in RQ1 and validated in RQ2, associated with the number of institutional sex-related crimes reported?	There is no relationship between student-centricity website scores and the institutional sex-related crimes report.	There is an association between student-centricity website scores and the institutional sex-related crimes report.

## Summary

Ending sexual violence has become a national concern. Rather than treat sexual violence individualistically, victim advocates have identified that it needs to be a cultural discussion, “viewed as part of a much larger pattern” to instigate change (Melnick, 2018, p. 165). With college-age young adults (ages 18-24) considered the most at risk of victimization, it is important for higher education institutions to work actively to protect students through caring responses to reports of violence, in addition to educating

campuses holistically in ways that foster an inclusive culture of care (RAINN, 2021). Federal legislation has been a necessary means to ensure institutions are doing this work. However, repeated changes to Title IX legislation may be creating more roadblocks than they are knocking down. Institutional attention is pulled away from developing long-term, impactful goals because they are concerned with understanding new immediate, legal compliance expectations. As Steiner (2019) put it, “We ‘comply’ but do not prevent or transform” (p. 4). Because such a large population of college students remain at-risk, it is important for institutions to learn how Title IX’s legislative history, student victim post-trauma experiences, and institution cultural factors can influence student help-seeking decisions. This exploratory sequential mixed methods study will attempt to provide the necessary context to institutional website design through the development of a student-centric measurement instrument.

## **CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

Before repairing power inequities that may become apparent within university websites, it is necessary first to understand how sexual violence intersects with student success in higher education. This literature review discusses theories and frameworks that have driven student success models, Title IX legislative oversight, institutional responsibilities of sexual violence prevention, trauma-informed approaches, and ways accessibility of institutional technology can support victim help-seeking (e.g., reporting sexual assault). To understand how Title IX and sexual violence have impacted student success, one must first understand the narrative of student success within the U.S. higher education's history.

### **A Brief History of Student Success in U.S. Higher Education**

The concept of student success has a relatively short timeline in relation to the history of higher education. Harvard, the first U.S. university, opened its doors in the 1600s and set a tone of elitism (Thelin & Gasman, 2010). Before World War II (WWII), the university's liberal studies emphasis and restrictive admission standards catered to more affluent students, demonstrated by small enrollment rates (less than five percent of the adult population aged 18-24, in fact) and a very homogenous population of White, male students (Thelin & Gasman, 2010; Trow, 2005). After WWII, the establishment of the G.I. Bill and other government financial assistance increased and diversified access to higher education to a larger student population. Enrollment of students in the 18-25 age bracket jumped to over 30% by the 1960s and 50% by the 1970s (Thelin & Gasman, 2010). With student diversification came also changes to admission standards. Postsecondary institutions were forced to adjust their practices to meet the needs of this

new student population, eventually changing the very idea of college “first from being a privilege to being a right, and then. . . to being something close to an obligation” (Trow, 2005, p. 5). The evolution of postsecondary education was also pushed forward by government oversight by way of federal funding, leaving institutional stakeholders renegotiating ways of measuring their students’ (and thus institutional) success.

Social movements focused on equitable justice within education paved the way for legal action. The federal government, correspondingly, began increasing its oversight of colleges and universities to enforce the new equity-based laws affecting higher education. According to the Office for Civil Rights (OCR, 1999), the establishment of the federal civil rights acts in late 20th century outlawed discrimination based on race, gender, age, and ability, and contributed to improved educational access. Financial aid and federal equity assurances all strove to improve accessibility of education, further expanding the demographic of students enrolling. No longer was the university just for the White, male, elite students; now it welcomed Latino, African American, and American Indian students, as well as female students and students with disabilities (OCR, 1999). Between 1989 and 1996, the total enrollment of historically marginalized students in postsecondary schools rose 61% (OCR, 1999). Such a change to the student population “profoundly altered” the dynamic between university and student, as well as the university and government (Geiger, 2016, p. 27). Institutional leaders needed to reconstruct their student support theories and, thus, measurement.

With the federal government’s financial aid promises came the government’s increased control over university practices. Laws like Title VI, Title II, Section 104 of the Rehabilitation Act, and the Age Discrimination Act “helped bring about profound



changes in American education” by actively monitoring the removal of prejudiced institutional barriers (OCR, 1999, para. 3). One law extremely relevant to this study, Title IX (which will be discussed further in the next section), legally obligated gender-specific anti-discriminatory practices within federally funded institutions (Geiger, 2016). Through the passing of these laws, the government incentivized funding to gain some control over institutional process.

Though institutions have come to rely heavily on funding, funding of higher education has been decreasing for decades. Between 2008 and 2018, state funding of higher education fell 13% per student, a \$6.6 billion decrease (Mitchell et al., 2019). To survive cuts to funding, public institutions began increasing class sizes, reducing staff, and increasing tuition. By the early 2000s, a student’s average cost of attendance had more than doubled compared to just twenty years earlier. For example, in 1986, the average annual cost of attendance (put into today’s dollar value) for public institutions was \$3,571, and it increased to \$18,383 by 2018 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021b). The National Center for Education Statistics (2021) reports that student costs continue to rise to this day. Since federal grants do not cover the increased costs of attendance, the student’s financial burden continues to force them to take out student loans to continue their education. Today’s total student loan debt adds up to \$1.75 trillion, compared to \$520 billion in 2007 (Hanson, 2022). The increased financial burden of higher education has, not surprisingly, led to much more scrutiny from students as to the quality and expediency of their academic program.

At the same time, the 2008 recession exacerbated the cost inflation of higher education. Over subsequent years, states began to modify their funding formula to adjust

their reduced budget, making funding awards even more selective among higher education institutions. According to Miao (2012), the need to adjust funding investments was driven by “[o]ngoing budget cuts, combined with stagnating graduation rates and a rising national demand for highly educated workers” (p. 1). Instead of looking at enrollment numbers to gauge each institution’s success and award funding accordingly, most states began to look at student outcomes. More than half of the country’s local governments now utilize what is called a performance-based funding formula, which collects data pertaining to graduation and job placement rates in addition to retention and enrollment numbers in the determination of funding allotment (Mitchell et al., 2019). Identifying the key factors to student success, thus, became intertwined with monetary, quantifiable outcomes.

### **Significant Lenses Driving Student Success**

Many states began using performance-based funding formulas to incentivize institutional practices, which meant that funding was reallocated to measure institutional outcomes instead of enrollment sizes (Kaikkonen, 2016). This shift has, in many ways, redefined student success. Institutional stakeholders and decision-makers have since developed varied lenses of student success to capture data important for federal funding. One of the most common of these lenses is student persistence, retention, and graduation metrics.

#### ***Persistence, Retention, and Graduation Rates***

Student persistence is generally defined by the student’s continued enrollment at any institution, which may or may not lead to graduation (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2021; Tinto & Pusser, 2006). Retention refers to the

students who continue to enroll at the same institution each year (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2021; Tinto & Pusser, 2006). Because a student's academic pathway can be quite complicated (e.g., transferring schools, taking a break, starting at community college), retention tends to be the one most utilized (Hagedorn, 2005). For example, in 2019, the persistence rate across all institutions for all students (full time and part time) was 73.9%, whereas the retention rate (non-transfer continual enrollment) was 66.2% (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2021). Stakeholders reason that students who are retained at one institution year-to-year are more likely to graduate, which is why both have become common metrics in student success.

According to Ashby (2004), a focus on persistence and retention in student success measurements created "a tendency to associate high dropout rates with poor institutional performance" (p. 66). Thus, an early established measure of a school's success was the percentage of the students it was able to retain. In the beginning of retention research (pre-1970s), persistence was regarded psychologically, assuming the student's individual characteristics led to their ability and/or decision to continue their education (Tinto, 2005). Looking at student success through such a metric, however, does not offer enough information as to the university's role in the student's decision to persist or drop out. Eventually, researchers helped to shift the view of retention away from student psychology and instead towards university responsibility.

A student's decision to drop out of college can be motivated by many reasons and driven by choice or by force. The list of reasons includes (but is not limited to) distance commuting, family obligations, financial issues, failure to connect socially or

academically, academic suspension, health concerns, psychological trauma, disability accommodation challenges, changes in career goals, personal goals achievements, and dissatisfaction in academic programs (Bean, 1982; Brown, 2017; Kahu & Nelson, 2017). A student's perseverance of degree completion is often connected to the student's goals, needs, and level of commitment, in addition to the university's ability to meet those goals and needs. When looking at student attrition (i.e., the lack of retention), Bean (1982) recommends several valuable questions for the university to ask of itself: "What are the reasons students leave school? Which students are likely to leave this institution this year (or semester)? What effect are our programs and services having on attrition? What are the entry-level characteristics of the students most likely to stay in school or to leave?" (p. 31). This line of questioning has led researchers and institutional stakeholders to gather data on their students' pre-college history to look for any characteristic trends in retention among sub-populations (Chang et al 2019; Gore et al., 2019; Kahu & Nelson, 2017).

Research indicates a clear need for institutions to reevaluate and revitalize their recruitment and retention efforts. A study by Caruth (2018) found that retention numbers are consistently and significantly higher than graduation rates, which demonstrates that though students are being retained, they are not in fact graduating at a proportional rate. Retention rates, thus, do not demonstrate the student's ability to graduate, which means retention should not be viewed as the primary indicator of student success. However, student deficit theories have emphasized a link between retention and student pre-enrollment experiences.

### ***Student Deficit Theories***

Several theories of student success focus on student deficit, which is the idea that certain personal circumstances make a student more at risk for dropping out. Tinto (2005) describes this view of attrition as follows: “Students failed, not institutions” (p. 1). Deficit theories look at the individual student and their history rather than at the institution’s impact on the student’s ability to persist. Though the drive to understand student history is valuable and valid, it is important to understand that traditional metrics of student success can promote stigmatic views of students, particularly those of students considered outside of dominant cultures (Chang et al., 2019; Kahu & Nelson, 2017). Two popular student success lenses that focus on student deficit in this stigmatic way are First-Year Transitional Theory and Achievement Gaps.

**First-Year Transitional Theory.** According to Gravett et al. (2020), “‘Transition’ is often depicted as a problematic phase that must be ‘smoothed,’ ‘bridged,’ and made ‘successful,’ with the help of staff and institutional initiatives” (p. 1170). Transitional theories posit that first-year students are most at risk of struggling to adapt to the institutional culture and expectations. Research has shown a positive impact of first-year initiatives on student engagement and retention. Transitional theories led many institutions to invest in programming and services targeting first-time students, which explains why 95% of schools have some level of first-year-experience programming, whereas only 46% have any programming targeted to sophomores (Perez, 2020). While transitional theory has largely informed institutional policy and practice, such practices are built upon “unquestioned and normative assumptions” that have yet to dive deeper into what transition actually means (Gravett et al., 2020, p. 1169). Higher education

stakeholders consider a student's ability to persist between their passage from high school into college as a sign of transitional success. Thus, a common assumption is that students retained beyond their first year have conquered this transition and no longer need supplementary support (Kahu & Nelson, 2018).

Transitional theories can operate through two student deficit viewpoints, academic or cultural, both of which believe that students possessing a particular "deficit" will make acclimation to institutional culture more difficult. Schools that ascribe to a student deficit framework will emphasize early training of "university" skills to new students deemed at-risk to transition (Kahu & Nelson, 2017). The academic deficit framework theorizes that students who enter college with lower academic scorecards (e.g., high school GPA or ACT score) will struggle to transition to the university's academic rigor. Schools that support the academic deficit transitional theory target these students and encourage their participation in remedial or supplementary instruction during the first year, which reduces the assumed academic gap for these students.

The cultural deficit framework theorizes that students who enter college with cultural deficits (i.e., students who are not members of the dominant campus culture) will struggle to acclimate. The cultural deficit view often unintentionally targets historically underserved and marginalized students, because traditional campus culture most often aligns with that of the White, male, middle-class, thus creating a sense of "other" in everyone else and treating those "other" students as lacking in culture capital, or power (Kahu & Nelson, 2017; Smit, 2012). When there is significant socio-cultural incongruity between the student and university, the student has an increased risk of academic struggle and attrition. Institutions that support the cultural deficit transitional theory incorporate

cultural skill training into their introductory courses or employ advisors to teach students how to navigate campus culture (Kahu & Nelson, 2017).

Though understanding a student's cultural and academic backgrounds is conducive to student success programming, this focus inherently puts the onus for failure on the student rather than the institution. According to Smit (2012), "Employing a deficit mindset to frame student difficulties perpetuates stereotypes, alienates students from higher education and disregards the role of higher education in perpetuating the barriers to student success" (p. 369). Student deficit views, prompted by politics, have also led to another deficit-minded student success strategy.

**Achievement Gap.** After the Civil Rights Act of 1964, an extensive national survey (later known as the Coleman Report) revealed that the achievement scores and quality of education for BIPOC students was significantly lower when compared to the country's White student scores and educational quality (Coleman, 1966; Kaniuka, 2012). Researchers began searching for reasons that would account for such extreme assessment differences occurring nationally across ethnic backgrounds. These differences became known as the Achievement Gap, a term that referred to the continuous assessment score gap existing between White and BIPOC students. Federal mandates like No Child Left Behind, also known as Improving the Academic Achievement of the Disadvantaged, were enacted to minimize the gap by way of requiring annual student assessments and supplementary instruction in K-12 schools (NCLB, 2002). In response, college admissions began collecting more ethnic and socioeconomic background information on its applicants, wherein a similar Achievement Gap was also found. A lower graduation pattern existed between BIPOC and White students (Anderson et al., 2007; Kaniuka,

2011). Higher education institutions created at-risk programs and support services targeting BIPOC students to develop deemed “student success” skills in them (e.g., teamwork, goal setting, memorization, and literacy) (Miranda et al., 2007). These findings also led to an increased emphasis on degree affordability and financial aid for families with lower socioeconomic statuses.

While this gap-focus view had very humane intentions, it failed to differentiate the cause of the gaps or capture what the data meant. For example, there are two types of gaps to consider: the internal differences between ethnic groups within a specific school, and the external differences between schools for each ethnic group (Anderson et al., 2007). Without understanding the true nature of the data, a closing gap might be seen by stakeholders as an improvement when, in reality, it may actually mean that the White student groups are performing more poorly (Anderson et al., 2007; Kaniuka, 2011). In summation, data related to achievement gaps and other student-deficit theories rarely capture an enriched understanding of student performance.

### ***Job Readiness in Higher Education***

After the recession at the end of 2007, millions of U.S. citizens lost their jobs (Howard et al., 2021). The Obama administration turned to higher education degree attainment as a means of increasing both job opportunity and security, but jarring statistics revealed a weak job market for college graduates. Studies indicated that graduates had equal or lower rates of employment compared to the overall national rate and that an increasing number of graduates were taking on part-time work (Abel et al., 2014; Howard et al. 2021). Underemployment, defined as college graduates who are working part time or in jobs that do not require a college degree, has continued to rise



(Abel et al., 2014). Coined the “permanent detour,” when graduates begin their careers underemployed, research shows that they are more likely to continue experiencing underemployment for up to 10 years, and this phenomenon is even worse for women (Burning Glass Technologies & Strada Institute for the Future of Work, 2018).

To address both unemployment and underemployment concerns, Obama created a “blueprint” that intended to improve higher education, both in quality and access. This blueprint planned to increase financial aid opportunities as well as the transparency of school cost and job placement, with one major goal being for the U.S. to have the “highest share of college graduates in the world by 2020” (Obama White House Archives, 2013, p. 3). Transparency tools included the College Scorecard website, which publishes key information meant to help students and their families compare institutions (Obama Whitehouse Archives, 2013; U.S. Department of Education, 2021). Key comparison indicators, according to the site, are graduation rates, salaries of post-graduates, and average annual cost of attendance (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021b). While this push for institutions to produce more job- and career-ready students did create opportunity and access, it also led to many stakeholders to question majors and other academic programs that were not directly linked to career training, like those within the liberal arts (Koerner, 2018).

Many student success theories begin with the assumption that it is the student who needs to adjust. However, researchers of student success have in more recent years begun to argue the opposite. According to Gravett et al. (2020), student deficit theories “may not fully acknowledge the complexity, and multiplicity, of students’ lived realities” (p. 1171). Instead of focusing on ways to change the students to better fit the institution’s

culture, the institution should be asking itself how better to meet the students where they are and support them where they want to go (Bloch et al., 2020; Caruth, 2018; Gravett et al., 2020).

### **Complicating a Narrow Definition of Student Success**

Postsecondary leadership, federal and local governments, and education researchers have for decades attempted to solve the complex equation of student success. Data collection on its students instigated equity-based support strategies (e.g., closing the gaps between the “traditional” and historically underserved student groups), which called public attention to easily quantifiable metrics like graduation rates, retention, and post-graduation earnings. However, because of the increasing competition for enrollment and resources among higher educational institutions, many stakeholders have been forced to make decisions that keep themselves marketable rather than decisions that are focused on their specific students’ needs (Bloch et al., 2019; Caruth, 2018; Chang et al., 2019)

The higher education industry is slowly realizing the ever-changing student demographics do not bode well for universal student success metrics. According to Chang et al. (2019), today’s students view success on a much “more individualistic and entrepreneurial” scale (p. 493). Student success interventions are being reevaluated as institution’s realize that their traditional measures may not be capturing today’s student values (Caruth, 2018; Chang et al., 2019). While there are predetermined factors that can serve as at-risk predictors of dropping out (e.g., socioeconomic background and admission test scores), the relationship between those factors and the student’s success is not directly causal, and therefore a richer understanding of student experience as it relates to student engagement is necessary (Kahu & Nelson, 2017). To understand the

complexity of student success, it is important first to demonstrate the limitations and misconceptions that plague formerly (or currently) narrow definitions.

### ***Diversification of Institutional Stakeholders***

In comparison with other industries, higher education has the unique complication of answering to a diverse range of stakeholders. Within higher education, stakeholders can be “internal and external, individual and partner, academic and not academic” (Kuzu et al., 2013, p. 383). Historically, institutions have settled on a student success theory that makes quantitative sense to their stakeholders. Since the stakeholders themselves are constantly changing, how institutional leaders are expected to communicate with them must also change (McNaughtan et al., 2019). In the past, legislators, donors, and university leaders have been the main decision-makers in student success visions, with the student community expected to follow as directed. Due in large part to the establishment of institutional transparency tools, the rise of student out-of-pocket costs, and the power of social media, parents and students have begun to find a seat at the table (Jongbloed et al., 2018). The increased competition for students means that students have more choices in where they attend. The increased cost of attendance means that parents are getting more involved to ensure their investments are worthwhile (Labanauskis & Ginevičius, 2017). This means that institutions are becoming more and more socially situated within their communities (Kuzu et al., 2013). With the varying demands, values, and expectations of each stakeholder, institutional leadership benefits from learning how to negotiate and diversify student success messaging across the community (Labanauskis & Ginevičius, 2017).

### ***Traditional Views Promoting Stigma***

While few would argue for a one-size-fits-all approach to student success, schools often turn to quantifiable measurements to stay marketable. According to Chang et al. (2019), “In a moment of intensifying accountability, easily quantifiable metrics too frequently take precedence in shaping what counts as student success” (p. 482). College ranking articles and websites, as well as federal and state government funding formulas, all put the pressure on schools to enumerate their effectiveness at graduating students. For example, it has become common practice for an institution’s stakeholders to reference metrics like starting salaries as markers of success.

Federal law now mandates public access to federally funded institutional data related to enrollment, graduation rates, cost of attendance, and financial aid packages through survey-gathered databases like Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). Attempts to simplify institutional success by way of numeric data analysis, however, often ignores important information. For example, IPEDS surveys do not capture information of nontraditional students like transfers or those attending part-time (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). Due to the selective nature of the data, student success metrics often resort to highlighting “a variety of interests that may not actually reflect the expressed needs, hopes, or aspirations of students attending institutions of higher education and/or the faculty and staff who aim to serve them” (Chang et al., 2019, p. 482). Traditional metrics of student success can also enable stigmatic views of students, particularly of those with memberships outside dominant cultures (Chang et al., 2019; Kahu & Nelson,

2017). Both the disconnect and misrepresentation of student experiences has created a call for a more holistic, representative approach to student success.

### ***Diversification of Student Body***

Higher education's student population continues to diversify each year. Students who are BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and people of color) form an ever-increasing percentage of the overall student body. For example, between 1971 and 2015, college enrollment saw an increase of 33% among BIPOC students (Chang et al., 2019). Such significant changes to the type of student enrolling have necessarily changed the way institutions define measurements of success, as well as institutional designs to support success (Bloch et al., 2020). The pressure to make such significant changes to historic institutional traditions surfaced a new roadblock—academic capitalism. According to Bloch et al. (2020), academic capitalism refers to the business-like behavior many institutions adopt to “offset declining enrollments” as well as declining federal and state budgets (p. 16). When those changes (e.g., outsourcing to lower-quality services for cost-cutting) do not align with student success, definitions of student success inevitably adjust accordingly.

As an example of this misalignment, one study (Chang et al., 2019) found that many faculty believed the traditional student success understanding to be antiquated, in that measures like time-to-degree and retention do not “adequately represent the range of different meanings success might encompass” (p. 486). Universal indicators of success, just like any one-size-fits-all attempt within diverse populations, do not take into consideration the multiple interests and responsibilities of its students, especially those of students who have been historically underserved. Broadly defined measures do not

consider the students' unique cultural contexts, and some foci can even distract from actual learning (Aelenei et al., 2020).

### **Academic Measures Related to Mental Health**

Focusing on academic markers (e.g., GPA and time-to-degree) can sometimes damagingly place greater value on academic achievement over the student's mental, physical, and social wellbeing (Aelenei et al., 2020; Chang et al., 2019). Multiple studies have shown that lower mental health is strongly associated with lower academic performance (Bruffaerts et al., 2018; Eisenberg et al., 2009). One study (Bruffaerts et al., 2018) found that a third of first-year college students reported suffering from mental health problems, and as many as half of all college students meet the criteria for one or more mental disorders. Because academic rigor is a presumed cause of mental disorders like anxiety and depression, it also becomes important to factor into student success the student's ability to engage with and feel satisfied in their institution (Bruffaerts et al., 2018; Chang et al., 2019).

### **Student Engagement and Satisfaction**

Student engagement has become a popular component in student success strategies. Engagement is defined as a student's "behavioural, emotional and cognitive connection to their learning" and thus their learning environment (Kahu & Nelson, 2017, p. 59). Studies have shown that students who are engaged in their studies and school are more likely to be academically successful (Kahu & Nelson, 2017). When students are engaged, they grow both academically and personally. Engagement can only occur, however, when there is alignment between what/how they are learning and their identities, values, and self-perceived skills (Kahu & Nelson, 2017).

Related to engagement, studies have found that a student's academic satisfaction contributes to persistence in their major (Valadas et al., 2017). An institution's programs are only effective if students are motivated to participate, which means that institutional effort put into a student's college experiences beyond the classroom will impact their academic effort within the classroom (Kuhl et al., 2010). According to Kuh et al. (2010), exposure to demographic diversity and a supportive campus environment correlate with better student performance and satisfaction within their institution. It can improve a student's sense of trust, feelings of belonging, and perceptions of safety within their institution.

### **Student Perceptions of Trust and Belonging**

Institutions are seeing the benefits of creating a student-centric campus culture that promotes peer, staff, and faculty connections, both inside and outside of the classrooms (NSSE, 2021b; Schuck, 2016). According to Kahu and Nelson (2017), a student's feelings of belonging or "connectedness" to their institution has been correlated with student success (p. 65). When students feel connected to their institution, they are more likely to feel positively towards their university, which can lead to deepened interest and enthusiasm in their education. When students feel alienated by or disconnected from their institution, it can lead to anxiety and frustration towards their academics, which can increase their chances of dropping out (Kahu & Nelson, 2017; Kuh et al., 2010). One recent study (NSSE, 2021b) found that U.S. students who scored higher in their sense of institutional belonging were more likely to be retained the following year. Thus, in evaluating an institution's success, data should include student "perceptions of being part of the university community," which requires a sense of

belonging as well as a sense of trust that the institution will both respect and keep them safe (Chang et al., 2019, p. 491).

According to NSSE (2021a), trust has become another important factor in the student's decision or ability to persist. A 2020 survey of U.S. college students found that "trust is highly contextual and inequitably experienced on college campuses" (NSSE, 2021a, para. 8). Those who identify as BIPOC, LGBTQ, or with disabilities, consistently report significantly lower levels of trust and perceived value within their institutions (NSSE, 2021a). As these are students within populations who have been historically underserved or harmed by institutions, it appears that trust and belonging are interconnected. The same study found that students with higher levels of reported trust also had higher levels of reported sense of belonging to their institution, which makes this a crucial area for student success improvement strategizing (NSSE, 2021a).

### **Cultural Inclusivity on Campuses**

Cultural competence refers to an organization's ability to promote empathy and respect for differences across a community's cultures (University of Colorado Boulder, 2020). A strategy that institutions can undertake is to promote acceptance of cross-cultural identities and positive socialization habits. One example of this is biculturalism, referring to a student's ability to "be simultaneously socialised into two different ways of life" on its campus (Kahu & Nelson, 2017, p. 62). Campuses that emphasize the importance and acceptance of diverse cultures can help their students navigate between personal and academic cultural identities instead of having to sacrifice one for the other. Students who feel alienated by their campus's culture often feel increased stress, which in turn is associated with decreased academic enjoyment (Kahu & Nelson, 2017). Students



are deemed more at risk of lower academic performance when they have a higher stigma consciousness associated with their identity, because experiencing stigma tends to reinforce psychological inflexibility and thus lower self-efficacy (Jeffords et al., 2020).

When students are alienated and perceived as culturally less valuable (by themselves or by others), they are more often targets of violence and victimization (AAU, 2020; ACHA, 2016). Campuses that promote inclusive community through biculturalism and other cultural competencies are better able to counter unhealthy stereotypes and messaging among students. In doing so, those institutions demonstrate a public appreciation for multiple experiences. Cultural inclusivity can increase student trust in their institution, sense of belonging, physical and emotional safety, and thus improve their overall academic persistence (Jeffords et al., 2020; Kahu & Nelson, 2018; Perez, 2020; Schuck, 2016).

### **Student-Centered Learning**

According to the Glossary of Education Reform, student-centered learning is defined as institutional approaches that “address the distinct learning needs, interests, aspirations, or cultural backgrounds of individual students and groups of students” (The Great Schools Partnership, 2014, para. 1). Until recently, the goal of higher education has been much more institution- or teacher-centered in that its goal is to educate the masses, allowing students the opportunity to learn in the format its faculty and leaders deemed best. Institutional leaders have placed value on its powerful, detached stakeholders (e.g., board of regents) over its students (Hannafin & Land, 2000). This led to didactic approaches that oversimplify complex ideas to quantify easy learning outcomes, ensuring the fulfillment of content and institutional requirements (Hannafin & Land, 2000; The

Great Schools Partnership, 2014). Oversimplified or over-standardized approaches to education no longer correlate with student success according to Hannafin and Land (2000), who write that “knowledge isolated from a meaningful context is of little productive value” (p. 7).

Cost increases and diversification of higher education stakeholders have inevitably also led to changes in organizational objectives that impact student success. Today, most institutions are striving to shift focus to student values and interests (Haverila & Haverila., 2021). Competitive pressures within higher education have prompted more business-like strategies to become marketable and stay relevant among current and prospective students. Thus, newer student-centric models have been derived from customer-centric marketing strategies such as an emphasis on a student’s “satisfaction, loyalty, perceived value for money and behavioral intentions” (Haverila & Haverila, 2021, para. 7). Since student satisfaction is shaped by their institutional experiences, institutions now need to pay attention to what experiences are most impacting student values to ensure and continue their institutional appeal (Haverila & Haverila, 2021).

Traditionally, the higher education classroom was teacher-centric, in that the teacher was the sole decision-maker and held all the power within the classroom. The student-centric approach to student success attempts to shift that power. Today’s teacher is expected to also create classroom communities by way of offering emotional support and engaging in student input with regards to course pacing and experiences (Haverila & Haverila, 2021; The Great Schools Partnership, 2014). The tables of power are turning

and, more often, the student is the one choosing the school, rather than the other way around.

The student-centered approach came not only from a change in stakeholders but also from an evolution in classroom pedagogy. Practitioner research has found that teacher- and institution-centeredness “works against students becoming successful, mature learners” (Wright, 2011, p. 92). In a teacher-centric classroom, students are subordinate, and learning is heavily directive rather than collaborative. Such inaction and powerlessness enable students who are “anxious and tentative rather than empowered, confident and self-motivated” (Wright, 2011, p. 92). Conversely, student-centeredness, wherein the students and instructors share in power, helps students learn *how* to learn. Instead of lectures and memorization, studies have shown that field experience, community-involved projects, and self-assessment lead to deeper learning wherein students are intrinsically motivated to succeed and learn (Wright, 2011). The student-centered approach invites and involves students in decision-making within the institution, not just within the classroom.

Institutional use of technology has become a key element of student-centricity because it helps shift the power in the student’s direction. A major goal of student-centered learning is to allow learning to occur more at their own pace, by presenting them with information in ways that consider their interests and experiences (Gelisl, 2009). With technology, information is more accessible, approachable, and adaptable because it is put directly in their hands. Students can use it to seek out their own answers proactively rather than relying on members of the institution, increasing their power and self-autonomy (Hannafin & Land, 2000). Student-centeredness views learning as a

partnership, one that aims to create authentic experiences that situate students in the real world (Gelisli, 2009). Technology that helps enhance an institution's social situation and sense of community (e.g., apps, websites, and social media) can support the student-centric approach because student satisfaction and learning are also socially situated (Hannafin & Land, 2000).

Making an institution's approach more student-centered has become a major initiative within student success. Studies have shown that student perception of peers, faculty, and overall institution is deeply connected to their academic involvement and ability to be retained (Tinto, 1999). An educational policy or practice is dependent upon the student's involvement, and that involvement is dependent upon the perceived support of the student from their institution (Astin, 1994; Tinto, 1999). When that support is misguided, insufficient, or not perceived, it can disrupt the student's sense of belonging and the institution's programmatic success.

### **Campus Safety and Student Attrition**

Campus safety is an issue on the rise. According to the U.S. Department of Justice, "the chance of being victimized today by a violent crime is greater than the chance of being injured in a traffic accident" (Chekwa et al., 2013, p. 325). A student survey in 2013 (Chekwa et al., 2013) found that 70% of students identified campus safety as very important. More recently, a 2021 campus safety survey found that more than 82% of students who returned to campus after the COVID-19 pandemic were very concerned about their personal safety (Mertz, 2021). That same survey found students were more likely to go to friends or family in times of crisis instead of their institution (Mertz, 2021). It is important to note that of the total reported campus crimes, sexual violence has

accounted for 43% and it is the only type of campus crime to increase since 2009 (Irwin et al., 2021b).

Campus violence affects students both directly (e.g., psychological trauma and/or physical injuries) and indirectly (e.g., fear of revictimization or reprisal). It is no surprise, then, that higher education institutions continue to increase their investment in campus law enforcement resources (Schuck, 2016). For many victims of violent crimes, “fear is often the most enduring consequence of victimization,” because it can lead to persistent bouts of anxiety, depression, mistrust, alienation, and avoidance tendencies—all of which increase the likelihood of reduced student engagement (Schuck, 2016, p. 79).

Victimization, as well as fear of revictimization, may negatively impact a student’s ability to succeed academically. Multiple studies on student survivors of sexual violence have found significant increases in post-traumatic stress disorders (PTSD), financial duress, and loss of confidence, all of which negatively impact their academic success (Molstad et al., 2021). Crime and campus violence often deter student participation in important educational activities by negatively impacting the campus climate (Chekwa et al., 2013). Studies have shown that violent crime is associated with lower four-year graduation rates among students in both private and public institutions (Schuck, 2016). The way in which institutions respond or are perceived to respond is also important, because students are less likely to seek institutional help if they do not feel supported by the institution (Haverila & Haverila, 2021). To protect students, it becomes necessary to understand the impact of violence on campus and, more important to this study, how institutions are perceived to address sexual violence.

## **Title IX in Higher Education**

The latter half of the 20th century saw a great deal of public outcry against discrimination, which led to legislative action. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 called for an end to both employment and public accommodation discrimination (OCR, 1999). Around this same time, Title VI was also enacted, which banned federally funded educational agencies from discriminating against their staff and students based on race, color, religion, and national origin, with sex notably removed (Melnick, 2018; OCR, 1999). Advocates for gender equality continued their legislative efforts, and, with the support of female college professors, representatives, and senators, Title IX was enacted in 1972 (OCR, 2021b; Sandler, 2007). This civil rights law intended to support women in education by redressing societal attitudes towards gender (Kadzielski, 1977). According to the U.S. Senate sponsor of this law, the discrimination seen in postsecondary education stemmed from the common sexist assumption that women's life goals were to get married and have children, so they should have no interest in pursuing academic or professional growth (OCR, 2022).

Congresswoman Edith Green, the principal sponsor of Title IX, had originally intended to add "sex" to the list of anti-discrimination practices in the Title VI statute. However, after listening to the civil rights activists' concerns about opening the statute up to amendments, she instead added Title IX to an education bill that was soon to be enroute to Congress (Melnick, 2018; Sandler, 2007; Valentin, 1997). As a tactic, its supporters did not lobby or try to draw attention to it, but rather briefed it as a rational law aimed to protect female students from being denied equal educational opportunities (Melnick, 2018; Valentin, 1997). This tactic proved successful. Title IX passed with so

little attention paid to it that President Nixon did not even mention it in his signing statement (Melnick, 2018).

### ***Compliance and Federal Interpretations***

Title IX states, “No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance” (Education Amendments Act of 1972, 2020). Decades later, “sex” was amended to include sexual orientation, sexual harassment, and gender identity (Exec. Order No. 14021, 2021). In the beginning, Title IX was closely tied to sports because college athletics had long been (and continues to be) commonly segregated by gender (Kadzielski, 1977; Melnick, 2018; Sandler, 2007). When Title IX was first enacted, only 14% of college athletes were women; more recently, females accounted for over 40% of all college athletes (Melnick, 2018). Because Title IX covers so much more than athletic programming—admission practices, treatment of pregnant students, sex education, transgender protections, and professor relationships with students, to name a few—it has been deemed a powerful tool for equitable, cultural change (Melnick, 2018; OCR, 2021a). An early example of the changes it propagated include the fact that, by the end of the 1970s, most public schools put an end to male-only enrollment practices, and it further served as catalysts of two additional Equal Rights Amendments (Melnick, 2018; Sandler, 2007).

The OCR has authoritative oversight over Title IX compliance and rulemaking, as needed. To create and revise any part of Title IX, however, the OCR is obligated to follow the Administrative Procedure Act (APA), in addition to obtaining final approval

from the president (United States Environmental Protection Agency, 2021). The APA is the lengthy legal process that federal agencies must follow as they develop and issue regulations, a process which includes public notices and opportunities for comment (Melnick, 2018; United States Environmental Protection Agency, 2021). During its initial rulemaking in the 1970s, the OCR held nation-wide hearings, collected 10,000 written comments, negotiated with various departments like the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare and the White House, and responded with the appropriate revisions (Melnick, 2018).

Though federal funding is a contingency of compliance, failure to comply with Title IX does not mean automatic revocation. There is first a hearing process in which the OCR must present clear evidence of noncompliance to a judge. Then, there is a “negotiations” period that can take years, during which time the OCR works with the school to determine if and how the school can become compliant (Melnick, 2018; OCR, 2021a). Only after the negotiation has failed can the school’s termination hearing be scheduled. Even if found guilty, there is a grievance protocol for schools that do not believe they received a fair review. Federal funding has, to this day, never been revoked due to Title IX rule breaking (Melnick, 2018; RAINN, 2021).

The number of sexual harassment complaints brought to the OCR continues to rise. In the 2017-18 fiscal year alone, the OCR received over 8,500 Title IX complaints, sexual violence complaints spiked 500% when compared to the per year average rate of the prior eight years (OCR, 2020). At first, the OCR used the courts to help them regulate Title IX disputes, but then subsequently realized the conservative views of the federal court deterred many victims from pursuing litigation (Melnick, 2018). That realization, in



addition to increased media attention of stories wherein schools grossly responded to reports of sexual misconduct, led the OCR to change tactics (Ellman-Golan, 2017). In 2011, the OCR began publishing renewed guidance in the form of Dear Colleagues Letters (DCL) that recommended sexual violence prevention to schools, as well as clarified the institutions' obligations during investigations (Ali, 2011; Ellman-Golan, 2017). The goal of adding preventative measures into Title IX mandates was to reduce violence from occurring in the first place through cultural reform. By doing so, institutions can not only save potential victims from harm, but also save monetarily in the resources and time required to adjudicate such criminal offenses.

### **Title IX and Sexual Harassment**

When sexual harassment lawsuits claiming violation of Title VII or IX first began to appear in courts in the 1970s, most judges found the matters too personal and, therefore, not fitting of adjudication (Sandler, 2007). However, that was in large part because the term "sexual harassment" did not yet exist (Sandler, 2007). Starting in the late 1970s, judges were forced to rule that a straight man who harasses a woman for sexual reasons is in fact doing so because of her sex, which makes his behavior a civil rights violation. That same hypothetical man would not harass another male in the same way, so Title VII and IX do in fact apply (Melnick, 2018). Many unintended interpretations grew from these rulings, so courts then began to insist that instead of focusing on the gender or sexual orientation of the persons, the law should focus on any actions considered severe or pervasive that created hostile environments for the victims, herein spawning the eventual definition of sexual harassment for Title IX:

Under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 (Title IX) and its implementing regulations, no individual may be discriminated against on the basis of sex in any education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance. Sexual harassment of students is a form of prohibited sex discrimination under the circumstances described in the Guidance (OCR, 1997, para. 1).

The brevity of the Title IX statute itself has led to much ambiguity related to its interpretation and implementation (Sandler, 2007). According to Melnick (2018),

With only one exception (the 1988 Grove City Bill), Congress has failed to amend the law either to clarify its intent or to address the serious implementation problems that have arisen. Up until the new millennium, clarification had only been done by federal judges and administrators (p. 39).

The first Supreme Court connection of Title IX to sexual harassment occurred in the 1990s, when a school district was held liable for a teacher's harassment of their student (OCR, 2022). After years of consulting, the OCR published sexual harassment guidance to bridge circumstances of sexual harassment as forms of discrimination prohibited under Title IX (OCR, 2022). Finally, between 2000 and 2015, the OCR published updates by way of several DCLs to clarify that sexual violence is a form of sexual harassment, thus also falling under the purview of Title IX (Ali, 2011; Lhamon, 2015; Monroe, 2006; OCR, 2001; OCR, 2022). Updates within this guidance included Title IX coordinator and staff training, a preponderance of evidence standards (i.e., greater than 50% chance of occurring) rather than clear and convincing (i.e., highly probable to have happened), and iterated that any known incident of sexual harassment regardless of location must be investigated (Ali, 2011; Lhamon, 2015; Monroe, 2006; OCR, 2001).

### ***Legal Interpretations Causing a Political Divide***

To address a prevalence of sexual violence among college students, the Obama administration created a White House Task Force that held almost 30 sessions, wherein

stakeholders were invited to speak on the issue (Melnick, 2018; White House Task Force to Protect Students from Sexual Assault, 2014). From these discussions and related studies, the White House Task Force created a report identifying sexual violence as a national concern, pointedly reminding to schools of their responsibility to provide safe learning environments. The Obama administration published the DCLs to reinforce aspects of Title IX that had seemingly been unclear or unenforced (Ali, 2011; Lhamon, 2015; White House Task Force to Protect Students from Sexual Assault, 2014). A major addition to Title IX work was prevention of, not just response to, sexual violence. The federal law expanded to ensure institutions were doing enough to reduce the violence by examining school culture. According to Nagle (2016), “Rape is not irrelevant to other struggles for equality, but rather foundational to how systems of oppression in the U.S.—including systemic racism, ableism, sexism and homophobia—were created and how they persist today” (para. 5). While the entire country began the hard work of reevaluating their campus policies, the 52-point guidance within the DCLs was treated by many, especially the Republican party, to be an executive overreach that violated due process and instigated a cultural revolution, which was arguably not the original law’s intention (Houston, 2017; Melnick, 2018).

Whether the DCL guidance was legally binding became a point of contention. The OCR argued that nothing in the letters was new, but rather only recommended best practices and clarification of previously unclear aspects to the law (Melnick, 2018; U.S. Department of Education, 2021). While the Democratic party supported the OCR in this, others within the Republican party argued that the DCLs were actually revisions of the law and, therefore, should have to undergo the public scrutiny of the APA process

(Anderson, 2021; Melnick, 2018). Though the guidance legality was questioned, failure to comply can lead to costly investigations (both in legal fees and reputation), so many schools still took to following the new guidance. However, the political divide made Title IX a target for revision for upcoming presidential cabinets (Anderson, 2021; Melnick, 2018).

The added purview of sexual harassment to Title IX became highly controversial and politicized. Demands for victim protection collided with demands for due process (Houston, 2017; Melnick, 2018). Much of the Republican party argued that the DCL guidance favored too much the complainant (i.e., the student making the accusation) and lacked the due process that occurred in criminal proceedings. It was no surprise when, during the Trump administration in 2017, the appointed secretary of education Betsy DeVos revoked the DCL guidelines, calling an end to “rule by letter,” referring to and condemning the DCLs (Kreighbaum, 2017). The Trump administration spent the next year and a half reviewing thousands of comments during the APA public commenting period (Kreighbaum, 2017). Major revisions appeared in the 2020 Title IX updates, most notably a narrowed definition of sexual harassment and narrowed scope of its jurisdiction regarding where the incident occurred. DeVos also removed the “preponderance of evidence” mandate and added in the requirement of live cross-examination in determination rulings, which obligates both parties and witnesses to participate in a live hearing (OCR, 2021a). These changes intended to resolve what many Republicans and free-speech activists felt was previously lacking in Title IX rulings—due process. See Table 2 for a comparison of key Title IX changes between the Obama and Trump administrations.

**Table 2***Title IX Interpretations of 21<sup>st</sup> Century Presidential Administrations: Revision Comparisons*

<b>Obama Administration</b>	<b>Trump Administration</b>	<b>Biden Administration (proposed June 2022)</b>
Affirmed that sexual violence is a form of sexual harassment in violation of Title IX	Renounced Obama's DCL guidance as not legally enforceable	Specifically included sex stereotypes, sexual orientation, and gender identity
Defined sexual harassment to be "unwelcome conduct determined by a reasonable person to be so severe, pervasive, <i>or</i> [emphasis placed] objectively offensive that it effectively denies a person equal access to the recipient's education program or activity."	Redefined sexual harassment to be "unwelcome conduct determined by a reasonable person to be so severe, pervasive, <i>and</i> [emphasis placed] objectively offensive that it effectively denies a person equal access to the recipient's education program or activity."	Redefined sexual harassment to be "unwelcome sex-based conduct that is sufficiently severe <i>or</i> [emphasis placed] pervasive, that, based on the totality of the circumstances and evaluated subjectively and objectively, denies or limits a person's ability to participate in or benefit from the recipient's education program or activity"
Defined mandatory reporters <sup>a</sup> as anyone students could reasonably believe has authority	Allowed schools to choose which employees are mandatory reporters	Defines mandatory reporters as all administrative leadership, teachers, and advisors
Required schools to respond to any complaint, regardless of where incident occurred	Title IX only covers occurrences on school's property or during programming	Covers any complaints that occurred within educational activity/program, even if outside of the U.S.
Strongly discouraged mediation as resolution for most harassment cases	Encouraged schools to consider mediation and restorative justice	Can offer informal resolution prior to determination unless it involves employee and student, clarifying this at coordinator's discretion and evaluation of future harm potential
Required investigations to be completed within reasonable timeframe, recommends 60 days	Removed the 60-day specification	Reasonably prompt timeframes of investigations
Required schools to use a preponderance of evidence standard	Allowed schools to choose between preponderance of evidence or clear-and-convincing standards	Requires a preponderance of the evidence standard, unless a clear and convincing standard is used in all other comparable proceedings
Strongly discouraged live cross-examination of parties	Required live cross-examination of both parties	Live cross-examination option at decisionmaker's discretion when witness credibility assessment deemed necessary

*Note.* The above information was retrieved from the U.S. Department of Education website and archival documentation.

<sup>a</sup> Mandatory Reporter = See Terms/Abbreviations for definition

<sup>b</sup> Mediation = alternative to formal hearings to resolve a dispute

Many victim advocates and others within the Democratic party argued that DeVos' changes were too in favor of the respondent (Camera, 2021; Kreighbaum, 2017). Unsurprisingly, the end of Trump's presidency brought with it a mission from the new Democratic President Biden to re-revise Title IX. Within three months of President Biden's inauguration, his administration began the process to redact the 2020 revisions by rewriting Title IX (Camera, 2021). Because DeVos followed the APA for the Title IX revisions, Trump-era mandates were legally binding and could not simply be repealed. Thus, in June 2021, the Biden administration began its own APA public-commenting period, holding a week-long hearing during which time pre-approved stakeholders could offer input about the rewriting of Title IX (Anderson, 2021). The proposed Title IX revisions of President Biden's revision were announced on Title IX's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary, June 23, 2022. Unfortunately for federally funded schools and their students, such political back-and-forth of Title IX regulations has caused a legal whiplash, as institutions struggle to comply with the law's constant changes.

### ***Policy Confusion Causing Frustration***

According to Anderson (2021), "[t]he lack of clarity and conflicting policies and rhetoric has frustrated students and discouraged some from filing sexual misconduct reports" (para. 27). Victim advocates are hoping that President Biden's revisions of the law will not be a reversion to previous guidance, but rather an opportunity to push forward cultural changes that fight against sexual discrimination and violence (Anderson, 2021). The Biden administration seems to agree, as the U.S. has already seen an expansion of the law's coverage. For example, citing the 2020 Supreme Court case *Bostock v. Clayton County, Georgia* that found transgender and gay employees could not

be discriminated against, the Justice Department's Civil Rights Division issued a decree in early 2021 that discrimination against a person based on transgender or queer identity is also a violation of Title IX (Camera, 2021).

It appears as if Title IX will continue to be contentious, perhaps because it calls into question this country's cultural views on gender, which may or may not have been the law's original intent. A few years into Title IX's establishment, Kadzielski (1977) foresaw that "Title IX will be misinterpreted, ignored, slandered and openly defied," and all sides seem to be pointing fingers (p. 203). While the legislative goal of student safety stays at the center of the argument, political parties continue to disagree on exactly which students it should protect and by whose authority.

The frequency of sexual assault on college campuses is largely debated because of researchers' and politicians' "failure to adopt clear and consistent definitions of sexual violence and assault," obscuring comparison studies (Melnick, 2018, p. 159). Many cite 20% or higher females ages 18-24 are most frequent victims of sexual violence (AAU, 2020; Cruz, 2020; Fedina et al., 2018; White House Task Force to Protect Students from Sexual Assault, 2014). Others have cited less than half of that or find that non-college students are more at risk of victimization when compared to college students (Ellman-Golan, 2017; Melnick, 2018; RAINN, 2021). The Association of American Universities (AAU) began implementing large-scale national surveys to help universities better understand their students' experiences and campus climates specific to sexual violence. These surveys are unique in their size, with 150,000 students 27 institutions surveyed in 2015 and over 181,000 students from 33 institutions surveyed in 2019.

The comprehensive AAU survey intends to establish clarity and consistency when it comes to sexual violence measurement within higher education by distinguishing types of nonconsensual contact (e.g., penetration and sexual touching) as well as “tactics” (e.g., inability to consent and use of physical force) (AAU, 2020). In 2019, the overall nonconsensual sexual contact rate reported by respondents ranges from 14 – 32% across institutions, an increase from the 2015 survey (AAU, 2020). Within both surveys, less than a third of those who reported nonconsensual contact contacted a survivor service, like Title IX, with the most common reasons being they thought it could be personally handled, were too embarrassed, or was not serious enough. At the same time, the 2019 survey also found an 11.5% increase in reported knowledge of sexual violence definitions among undergraduate women and 12.4% in undergraduate men, when compared to the 2015 survey (AAU, 2020). Thus, these recent findings demonstrate how, despite a reported increase in education, sexual violence incidents in college continue to rise while reporting rates remain low.

### **Sexual Violence Prevalence in Higher Education**

Around 75% of students surveyed in 2019 were between the ages of 18 and 29 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021a). Despite a revitalization of Title IX during the Obama administration (2008-2016), studies show that adults ages 18-24 are still at a much higher risk of sexual assault (Carey et al., 2015; Coulter & Rankin, 2017; RAINN, 2021; Vladutiu et al., 2010; Zinzow et al., 2018). Title IX policy has fluctuated as to the institution’s role and purview of sexual violence among its community. However, it is important to note that institutions are hosting a significant portion of students who are deemed at higher risk of sexual victimization. Studies have found that



sexual violence can proliferate within organizational policy oversights and toxic campus culture (Cruz, 2020; Dykstra-DeVette & Tarin, 2019). With the rise of survivor movements and protests, those oversights can become heightened in the public eye (Huff, 2022; Jaffe et al., 2021).

Even though Title IX policies provide formal condemnation of sexual violence and discrimination, an institution's culture can impact a perpetrator's justification of violence, as well as a victim or bystander's decision to report an incident (Dykstra-DeVette & Tarin, 2019). Studies have found that "institutional characteristics and organizational norms are likely contributing to high rates of college sexual assault and organizational practices can create settings where sexual harassment is both expected and tolerated" (Cruz, 2020, pp. 364-365). If responses to reports are ineffective, diminishing, or otherwise harmful, the institution can appear to its community as complicit in normalizing violence, deterring future victims from coming forward, thus alienating large portions of its community (Dykstra-DeVette & Tarin, 2019). An example of this is the treatment of underserved groups across campus, groups that are considered not part of the institutional dominant culture (e.g., students who identify as LGBTQ, having a disability, or multiethnic). The U.S.'s historical under-serving of these students has led to a lack of protection understood by both the victims and the victimizers. Multiple studies have found that historically underserved groups like LGBTQ students, Black women, and students with disabilities are the most at-risk for sexual violence victimization and are the least likely to receive support (AAU, 2020; Campbell et al., 2009; Horan & Beauregard, 2016; Krohn, 2014).

It is important to note that students arrive at college with lived experiences and learned expectations that will impact their campus experiences. Those past experiences can make them even more vulnerable to targeted victimization. For example, one study (McCauley & Casler, 2015) found that, when compared to those who entered without having experienced sexual victimization, “students who experienced incapacitated rape before entering college were six times more likely to experience incapacitated rape and more than four times more likely to be forcibly raped during the first year of college” (p. 584). When examining those groups of students who are more likely at-risk of sexual victimization, understanding past trauma becomes an important part of the student support equation. Women with disabilities, for example, are more than twice as likely to have experienced sexual abuse in their childhood than women without disabilities (Krohn, 2014). Though a student’s personal and prior history is not in the institutions’ control, their campus culture is.

When students do not feel safe or when they arrive on campus dealing with trauma in unhealthy ways, they do not learn. As was discussed previously in this chapter, historically underserved groups are already less likely to trust their institutions or feel a sense of belonging, and experiencing sexual violence only exacerbates student alienation. According to the American College Health Association (ACHA, 2016), student survivors of sexual assault often “experience alienation, barriers to academic success, lower graduation rates, health problems, persistent mental health issues, and fear of retaliation” (p. 1). Studies have discovered significant negative impacts on GPA and graduation rates for student sexual assault survivors (Molstad et al., 2021). An estimated one in five students is sexually assaulted during college; this becomes an even larger

estimate when stalking and harassment crimes are factored in, which makes for a very large population of at-risk students (AAU, 2020; Vladutiu et al., 2010).

### **Rape Myths and Re-Victimization Concerns**

Sexual violence is a traumatic, emotional, and physical experience for the survivor. A trauma occurs when a person experiences something overwhelming that leaves them “feeling powerless, out of control and/or severely disconnected from oneself, family, community, and/or beliefs” (O’Mailey, 2022, slide 6). Gender-targeted crimes proliferate in communities that experience a “disruption of responses” or worse, do not respond at all (World Health Organization, 2015). Because college campuses are becoming more community-oriented, this means that to effectively change an unresponsive or uninformed culture, the campus community must respond to all reports of sexual violence with clear, organized immediacy (Backman et al., 2020; Kuzu et al., 2013).

Equally as important is it to make sure the response to survivors is supportive rather than retraumatizing. According to Campbell et al. (2009), survivors are often hesitant to come forward for fear of treatment by officials, friends, and family: “With each disclosure and interaction with the social world, victims are given explicit and implicit messages about how they are to make sense of this crime and apportion blame” (p. 227). Upsetting to victims are also the mixed messages within our legal system. Legal definitions of sexual assault and rape, for example, vary across state lines, and other key definitions, like consent, may not even exist (RAINN, 2021). Victim-blaming or unclear messaging can be psychologically harmful, causing “anxiety, humiliation, depression, stress, suicidal ideation, and trouble concentrating” (Vladutiu et al., 2010, p. 1). Negative

messages lead to sexism and rape myths that lead to victim-blaming, which deters reporting.

Rape myths are false beliefs about rape, victims of rape, and rapists that stem from gender-based prejudices (Hockett et al., 2015). Often tied into objectification theories, rape myths work to dehumanize women into sex objects (Maes et al., 2021). Common myths include the belief that perpetrators are most often strangers, or that victims “asked for it” by excessive drinking or attire choices. Rape myths cause many victims to question the validity of their experiences and reinforce the U.S.’s long history of stereotyped gender power dynamics such as, for example, men holding dominion over women (Dills et al., 2017; Hockett et al., 2015; McMahon & Farmer, 2011; RAINN, 2021).

Rape myths can be perpetuated in both social and professional technology. The increased role of social technology has been found to lead to increased acceptance of rape myths like the objectification of women (Maes et al., 2021). According to Maes et al. (2021), the sexualization taking place within social media can “operate as an educator in the adoption of sexist beliefs and resistance” (p. 61). One study (Lund & Thomas, 2015) found that 10% of university Title IX websites “actually endorsed some form of victim blaming or rape myths on their websites, often related to alcohol or communication” (p. 535).

However, online exposure can have positive impacts too, Online movements like #MeToo have made significant contributions to combat those dangerous attitudes. In 2017, the actress Alyssa Milano shared a tweet asking people to respond with that hashtag if they had been sexually assaulted. Within a day, it had been responded to

millions of times, across multiple social media platforms and in over 80 countries (Jaffe et al., 2021). One study (Jaffe et al., 2021) found that the #MeToo movement in particular led to greater recognition of unwanted past events as sexual assaults. Online communication tools thus hold the power to help and hurt the fight to end sexual violence.

The often-intense scrutiny and vulnerability survivors experience during the reporting process can feel like experiencing a second trauma, a phenomenon known as retraumatization. Retraumatization refers to the violation a victim feels when exposed to blaming and other insensitive responses from those to whom they report (Campbell & Raja, 1999). Common lines of investigative questioning—asking victims what they were wearing, inquire about their past sexual experiences, or whether they had been drinking, etc.—can imply that the victim’s choices led (at least in part) to the assault, or that the victim is making false claims. Such implications often cause feelings of guilt, shame, or distrust (Campbell et al., 2009; Lorenz et al., 2019). Even if the case is investigated and brought to trial, studies indicate “that beliefs in rape myths still influence lawyers’ perspectives as well as juries’ and judges’ decisions in rape cases to rule in favor of alleged perpetrators” (McMahon & Farmer, 2011). Survey studies of sexual assault survivors have revealed that the legal reporting process made survivors feel bad about themselves (87%), guilty (73%), depressed (71%), violated (89%), distrustful of others (53%), and most alarmingly, reluctant to seek further help (80%) (Campbell et al., 2009). This literature exemplifies powerful explanations as to why reporting rates are so low across the country (Lorenz et al., 2019; RAINN, 2021).

## **Underreporting and Student Trust in Institutions**

Sexually violent crimes are the most underreported of all crimes, and student victims of sexual violence are less likely to report their experiences than non-student victims (Sinozich & Langton, 2014; Vail, 2018; Wood et al., 2017). In fact, one study (Holland & Cortina, 2017) found that less than six percent of student victims made a formal report of sexual assault to their institutions. There are many reasons why students choose not to report. Reasons can range from their uncertainty of the severity of their experiences, to fear of reprisal (AAU, 2020; Holland & Cortina, 2017; Sinozich & Langton, 2014). Likelihood of reporting also varies by type of assault inflicted. One study (AAU, 2020) found that 29.5% of rape cis-heterosexual female survivors, 42.9% of LGBTQ survivors, and 17.8% of cis-heterosexual male survivors contacted a support program.

Reporting victimization or witness to victimization is essential because it increases the likelihood that victims will receive medical and mental support. It also works as a deterrent for future crimes since many perpetrators of sexual violence are repeat offenders. As an example, one study of repeat offenders (Lisak & Miller, 2002) found that 120 rapists sampled, over 63% of them committed multiple rapes, averaging four rapes each. Low report rates also mean perpetrators are less likely to be brought to justice. It is estimated that 97.5% of perpetrators do not face any jail time (Sinozich & Langton, 2014; RAINN, 2021).

The act of seeking help after experiencing a sexual assault is both brave and risky for the survivor. It is important that the survivor's power to choose if, when, and how to tell their story remains in their own hands. This is especially true because reporting

sexually violent crimes places the survivor in a vulnerable position. For institutions to best support survivors, the vulnerability of reporting a traumatic experience must be understood across all institutional lines of communication. Such understanding can go a long way to encourage student reporting. Multiple studies of victimization within higher education have found that students who reported their sexual trauma did not feel their school responded appropriately (AAU, 2020; Sinozich & Langton, 2014). It is important for students to trust that their institution will treat them with care throughout the reporting process.

While there are many reasons why sexual violence is so underreported, one very common reason is distrust in the reporting process. When survivors do not trust their school officials to believe, support, or protect them, their likelihood to report decreases and negative coping mechanisms such as “staying at home, withdrawal, disengagement, and substance abuse” become much more likely (Campbell et al., 2009, p. 233).

Avoidance tactics and decreased mental health will often impact student survivors’ motivation and ability to continue their education (Campbell et al., 2009; McCauley & Casler, 2015; Potter et al., 2018). In fact, one study (Potter et al., 2018) found that survivors of sexual violence are more likely to leave their academic programs, experience lower academic confidence, and drop out of school when compared to the overall student population. Of the survivors in that study, less than 34% were able to finish their programs without disruption (Potter et al., 2018).

### ***Federal Assurances of Institutional Accountability***

Accountability and transparency have become two tools employed by the federal government to rebuild students’ trust in their institutions. In 1990, the Jeanne Clery

Disclosure of Campus Security Policy and Campus Crime Statistics Act (Clery Act) was enacted to hold higher education institutions more accountable for student safety.

Intended to complement Title IX, the Clery Act mandates that all federally funded institutions publicly report their crime statistics, as well as the campuses' prevention programming and victim rights (Know Your IX, 2018). Following close behind, the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) of 1994 established important legal definitions for sex-related crimes, like stalking and dating violence, and created additional funding opportunities within higher education (Know Your IX, 2018). Nearly a decade later, the Campus Sexual Violence Elimination (SaVE) Act was added as an amendment to Title IV of the Higher Education Act, further specifying sexual violence prevention protocols for higher education institutions (Campus Sexual Violence Elimination Act, 2013).

While legal oversight of prevention programming and campus safety transparency strengthens the bridge between students and institutions, there are many other factors that can increase a student's trust in the reporting process, one being visible female campus mobility. One study (Boyle et al., 2017) found that campuses with feminist and/or a female empowering presence (e.g., a female university president, women's center, gender activism events like V-Day) had both increased reporting of sexual assaults and increased compliance with the Clery Act. The study concluded that female mobilization often corresponded to "a more efficient, open, and trustworthy system" that encouraged college students (particularly female students) to report their experiences of sexual violence (Boyle et al., 2017, p. 326). To become a trustworthy system and, thus, promote a trusting relationship between the institution and the student, it becomes important for the



institution to understand trauma-informed approaches important to student communication practices.

### ***Trauma-Informed Approaches to Sexual Violence Communication***

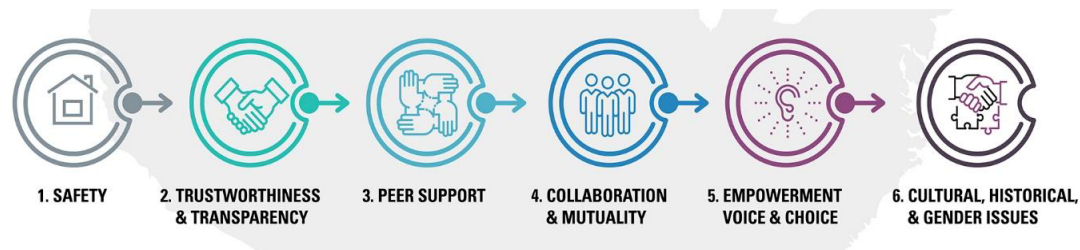
A student's ability to trust the institution is becoming more and more a deciding factor when school shopping (Chekwa et al., 2013; NSSE, 2021a). This means that, from the start, students are evaluating their ability to trust their institution. When factoring in that more than half of college students have experienced at least one adverse or traumatic event in their lives, it is important that institutions understand how trauma can alter student needs (Smyth et al., 2008). Institutional organizations develop trusting systems through social education and violence prevention programming. Effective prevention programs can lower victimization rates, as well as the spread of harmful messaging, like victim blaming and rape myths (Backman et al., 2020).

One of the most effective prevention methods of sexual violence is the trauma-informed approach. According to the ACHA (2016), "trauma-informed approaches involve vigilance in anticipating and avoiding institutional practices and processes that are likely to re-traumatize individuals and allow services to be delivered in a way that facilitates the victim's/survivor's participation" (p. 1). Trauma affects people very differently and at varying stages, so it is important for those who work with students to understand how to be effective in any stage of support. Trauma's impact can be delayed, prolonged, and confusing for the survivors, which can make their help-seeking efforts more challenging (Barros-Lane et al., 2021). Because of the varied responses to trauma, studies have shown that interventions without trauma-informed approaches are less effective (Oehme et al., 2018). A trauma-informed institution mitigates help-seeking

difficulties by elevating safety (e.g., welcoming signage, safe spaces for students, privacy in resource inquiries), transparency (e.g., avoiding vague language and clarifying expectations of privacy and processes), and empowering communication (e.g., offering choice, cultural awareness, and inclusive language) (Menschner & Maul, 2016). See Figure 2 for the six recommended guiding principles of trauma-informed care.

**Figure 2**

*Six Guiding Principles to Trauma-Informed Approach*



Retrieved from *Office of Public Health Preparedness and Response*, 2020

According to McCauley and Casler (2015), trauma-informed prevention is considered a best practice because it focuses on survivor empowerment by teaching institutional members to understand “that sexual assault may impact everything about survivors moving forward, including peer relationships, academic progress, likelihood of engaging in subsequent risky alcohol use, and poor mental health” (p. 585). Trauma-informed approaches teach institutions how to define those safe spaces for students. Safe spaces are those places to which students can turn for support without fear of judgment or pressure to act. Bad examples of victim support include (1) long lines of questioning, (2) spaces that do not allow for privacy or that are located in or near campus police stations,

(3) labeling or judgmental language, and (4) no choices in service or action (ACHA, 2016). All student touch points, including online communication, greatly benefit from trauma-informed guidance.

### **Technology's Role in Title IX Accessibility**

According to DeLoveh and Cattaneo (2017), “it is incumbent on decision makers to integrate survivor perspectives into any plans to assist them” (p. 65). Online technology has become a commonly sought medium for those seeking information and services. However, it has also become a source of harm for many people. Examples of technologically driven sexual violence tactics include “cyber harassment or stalking, monitoring or surveillance, image-based abuse (creating, distributing, or threatening to distribute intimate images without consent), impersonation, doxing (publishing private or identifying information online without consent), and deep fakes (digital falsification of images, video, and audio to simulate participation in pornography)” (Hrick, 2021, p. 597). Because of society’s increased reliance on technology, institutions that seek to support and protect their communities must understand these potential risks and actively strive to harness technology for good.

Technological communication like Title IX websites is becoming more essential to successful student contact (Dills et al., 2016). The White House Task Force to Protect Students from Sexual Assault (2014) published a checklist of Title IX guidelines that specifically highlight the importance of providing students with accessible and user-friendly communication of policy, resources, and rights related to sexual violence. Because little other guidance has been published, institutions often refer to their legal counsels to build website content that meets minimum compliance standards. Studies of

university Title IX websites have found that while most sites provide Title IX-mandated information, such as reporting processes, policy, and contact information, few provide important student friendly options (e.g., anonymous reporting forms), emotionally cognizant information (e.g., anti-victim-blaming language), and consent education (e.g., information about healthy sexual relationships) (Lund & Thomas, 2015; Wiersma-Mosley & DiLoreto, 2018).

A well-designed Title IX website can also serve to safeguard time-sensitive information for survivors of sexual trauma. For many years, higher education institutions have been experiencing very high turnover rates, meaning that “colleges and universities are consistently faced with the loss of institutional knowledge, individual buy-in, and available hours” (Backman et al., 2020, p. 81S). One out of every nine academic employees have lost or left their job since 2020 (Ellis, 2021). Title IX offices particularly have experienced staff retention issues due to inherent stress “woven into the fabric of the positions themselves” (Brown, 2019, para. 10). A 2018 survey found that 40% of Title IX staffers had been on the job less than two years (Sokolow et al., 2018). Backman et al. (2020) encourage institutions to “consider the ways in which turnover affects project outcomes and the ways in which it can be mitigated when structuring their programs” (p. 81S). Due to this rapid employee turnover and the accompanying chance of service instability, a Title IX website has the potential to mitigate disruption to care. It can provide essential information to students and offer immediate help in times of trauma when the institution’s in-person staff cannot.

Technology in the reporting process can serve as a private, confidential survivor resource, as well as a deeper educational tool. Compared to a singular workshop or

orientation, online sites and confidential smartphone apps put resources directly “in the hands of survivors” (Potter et al., 2018, p. 503). Offering university resources online invites students to repeatedly access what they need whenever they need it (Lund & Thomas, 2015). Studies have also found that the interactive engagement that takes place with online activity helps students “to process the information meaningfully,” which supports attitudinal changes that can improve campus culture (Hayes-Smith, 2010, p. 347).

The value in a resource lies in its ability to be used, as well as discovered. Accessibility as a student success approach is defined as the “removal of as many barriers as possible” (Broadhead, 2021, para. 8). Those barriers can be to content comprehension as well as access. The World Health Organization estimates that around 15% of people around the world have at least one disability. Disabilities may be physical (e.g., sight impairment) or cognitive (e.g., dyslexia), often benefit from the user of assistive technologies (e.g., screen readers) and adaptive strategies (e.g., recoloring browsers), but these assistive technologies also benefit nonnative language learners (Shute & Zapata-Rivera, 2007). Trends indicate that the number of people with disabilities continues to grow and that at least once in their life, a person is likely to have a disability (temporarily or permanently) (World Health Organization, 2021). It is thus important for online content to be accessible to all users, but especially those with a disability or who are experiencing emotional duress.

Though “accessibility” has successfully become a hot topic in education, comprehension and application has not necessarily been yet reached. A recent systematic literature review of university online accessibility features (Campoverde-Molina et al.,

2021) found across 42 global studies, which included over 9,000 universities, many websites, PDFs, and YouTube videos were missing necessary accessibility features. Common violations included readability (e.g., page language, reading level, use of abbreviations) and predictability (e.g., navigation ease, consistent design, correct heading levels). These problems have shown to persist over time. For example, a study in 2002 found only 42% of university websites to be accessible and another study in 2017 found that almost all the sampled institutional websites had multiple accessibility errors (Campoverde-Molina et al., 2021). It is difficult to improve accessibility after the fact; therefore, accessibility planning is recommended at the start of the website design and/or development (Campoverde-Molina et al., 2021; Shute & Zapata-Rivera, 2007).

Online access to resources is especially important for those experiencing a trauma. An internet search is a risk-free first step survivors can take when seeking help, which makes Title IX websites a significant way to disseminate information (Hayes-Smith & Levett, 2010). However, one of the few studies on Title IX websites (Hayes-Smith & Levett, 2010) found that only about half of students receive sexual assault resources. This demonstrates that simply having the information online does not automatically make it accessible. One study (Bin et al., 2018) found that “include keywords, links, meta tags, web content, visual plugins, domain names, servers and websites” are major factors in determining a website’s search engine optimization (p.260). It becomes important, then, for the website developer of a Title IX page to understand those technical factors to ensure the site content is easily found.

A Title IX website that is predictable, current, search optimal, and convenient will increase contact with its content. For that reason, accessibility and trauma-informed

approaches are well aligned with the overall concept of student-centeredness (or student-centric). Neither approach happens accidentally, however. By intentionally implementing design approaches based on both accessibility and trauma-informed best practices, a university website has the potential to increase its utility and value. Table 3 provides for more details about student-centric approaches to Title IX website design elements.

**Table 3**

*Literature-Supported Review of Student-Centric Website Elements*

Website Element	Literature Explanation
Accessible	<p>Well-developed, easy to use for diverse populations, easily found via search, inclusive of all users, key terms defined</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Inaccessible websites and apps hinder usage for people with disabilities while also being inconvenient to people without disabilities” (Cao &amp; Loiacono, 2021, p. 2)</li> <li>• “[L]ack of centrality could make it difficult for students to efficiently locate the sexual assault related information, even if it does exist on the institution’s domain” (Lund &amp; Thomas, 2015, p. 535)</li> </ul>
Clear Outcomes	<p>Explanations that help students identify resource and reporting options from start to finish, transparency in privacy options with disclosures</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Survivors communicated that they did not think it would be useful or helpful to tell the support about their assault” if they were unsure or distrusting of the outcome (e.g., the perpetrator may go unpunished, or they would be doubted or blamed for the assault) (Holland &amp; Cortina, 2017, p. 57)</li> <li>• “Research has shown that making the information more personally relevant to students increases the likelihood they will pay attention to the message” (Hayes-Smith &amp; Levett, 2010, p. 348)</li> </ul>
Care & Compassion	<p>Language and resources that demonstrate institutional concern and assurance of care</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Survivors should be made to feel supported and connected to resources on campus and in the community” (Dills et al., 2016, p. 10)</li> <li>• It is important to create “a campus climate that emphasizes the importance of clear, affirmative consent to sexual activity. Well-developed and accessible website content can be an important component of such an intervention” (Lund &amp; Thomas, 2015, p. 536)</li> </ul>
Comprehensive	<p>Sexual violence treated as an intersectional social justice issue beyond administrative concerns, addressing victim experiences post-trauma as well as prevention education and survivor empowerment strategies and challenging oppressive norms</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Schools should also address the potential less-immediate consequences of sexual assault, such as psychological and emotional effects of assault and the effects—and unacceptability—of victim blaming” (Lund &amp; Thomas, 2015, p. 535)</li> <li>• School communication should “educate students through dispelling inaccurate beliefs about sexual assault and ultimately produce attitudinal change” (p. 339)</li> </ul>

Trauma-Informed	<p>Language aimed to empower survivors, recognize individualized responses to trauma, non-judgmental, dispels victim-blaming, dispels rape myths</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “A coordinated, trauma-informed approach across disciplines (faculty, staff, administrators, health professionals) would create an environment where survivors feel more comfortable reporting sexual assault and have safe spaces to share their stories and where all members of the campus community feel empowered to challenge social norms, including hypermasculinity and homophobia, which perpetuate sexual violence” (McCauley &amp; Casler, 2015, p. 585)</li> </ul>
Engaging Design	<p>Information presented clearly, concisely, visually appealing, user friendly</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Information is unlikely to be viewed by university students who are seeking out sexual assault information preemptively but who do not wish to read the entire university policy on sexual assault” (Lund &amp; Thomas, 2015, p. 535)</li> <li>• “Accessible and attractive content may be more frequently used by students, increasing knowledge dissemination and retention” (Lund &amp; Thomas, 2015, p. 535)</li> </ul>

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To be student-centric (that is, both accessible and trauma informed), Title IX websites should go beyond policy publication and work to debunk harmful rape myths, teach risk reduction, and raise awareness of more holistic sexual violence issues (Lund & Thomas, 2015). As illustrated earlier, the dangers of revictimization in the reporting process are real. One study (Dill et al., 2016) advocates that it is the responsibility of the institution to ensure students are made to feel safe and without judgment during the reporting process. Language within Title IX websites should “validate and normalize survivors’ emotions, reactions and experiences” rather than confuse, admonish, or diminish their experiences (Potter et al., 2018, p. 503). According to Lund and Thomas (2015), the “availability of centralized, accurate sexual assault information on school websites” has the potential to “reduce some of the frustration and fatigue associated with searching for sexual assault-related information online” (p. 536). If not designed intentionally, a Title IX website has the potential to deter student reporting. Examples of possible deterrents include difficulty in locating the website from an institution main menu; reporting forms with vague or intimidating instructions; or a site that requires



students to scroll through lengthy, legal jargon explaining institutional policy before locating its resources.

## **Summary**

Institutional strategies in higher education continue to seek ways to incorporate a more holistic understanding of student success beyond academic achievement. To keep students enrolled and successfully moving through to graduation, institutions should consider student mental health, sense of belonging, and sense of trust and safety in their institutions when developing resources. Because of the added risk of sexual violence for adults ages 18-24 (the traditional age of college students), Title IX continues to serve the important role of ensuring protections. At the same time, while studies show that students are becoming more aware of Title IX policy and procedures, the number of sex-related crimes continues to increase even though the reporting rates do not significantly increase (AAU, 2020; Streng & Kamimura, 2015). Title IX communication is a potential factor in student reporting decisions, which makes the Title IX website a valuable place to expend more attention.

Political debate as to how much responsibility institutions have in sexual violence investigations and prevention has led to back-and-forth changes in policy, which have also led to confusion in process and practice. The stress of compliancy can distract institutions from focusing on deep, meaningful reform to a higher education culture that may be perpetuating sexual violence. Since technology has become prominent in student communication strategies, Title IX websites can be an important supplemental resource for students during times of staffing or policy transition. One example of website utility is how quickly new policy and practice information can be updated and distributed.

Websites and victim-support resources benefit from trauma-informed approaches that encourage help-seeking for survivors, clarify student rights, educate on healthy sexual relationships, and avoid alienating or deterring student reporting.

This chapter's literature review leads the researcher to consider new ways to articulate what in a website encourages or deters student help-seeking and if an instrument can be created to score those elements. The researcher then seeks to compare Title IX website student-centricity scores to its institution's sex-related reports to examine possible associations, as will be discussed in the following chapters.

### CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study's design is to develop a novel instrument that can help explore the relationship between a Title IX website design and its institution's sex-related crime reports. After applying this instrument across several websites, its scores were compared to sex-related crime reports to determine if a student-centricity score was associated with a significant change in reporting. This chapter will review how the sequential exploratory mixed methods design was employed to address the researcher's questions and each related hypothesis:

- RQ1: What do Title IX experts perceive as the primary attributes of student-centricity that can relate to an institution's Title IX website?
  - The results of RQ1 will inform the design of a novel website evaluation instrument.
- RQ2: Does the evaluation instrument informed by Title IX expert opinion accurately assess Title IX website student-centricity?
- RQ2.1: Is the website evaluation instrument developed from RQ1 valid?
  - $H_0$  The student-centricity scoring instrument is not valid.
  - $H_{2.1}$  The student-centricity scoring instrument is found to have face and content validity.
- RQ2.2: Is the website evaluation instrument developed from RQ1 reliable?
  - $H_0$  The student-centricity scoring instrument is not reliable.
  - $H_{2.2}$  The student-centricity scoring instrument is found to have interrater reliability.

- RQ3: Are institutional Title IX website student-centricity ratings assessed using the instrument developed in RQ1 and validated in RQ2, associated with the number of institutional sex-related crimes reported?
  - $H_0$  There is no relationship between student-centricity website scores and the institutional sex-related crimes report.
  - $H_3$  There is an association between student-centricity website scores and the institutional sex-related crimes report.

### **Research Design**

This study employs a mixed methods approach. A mixed methods approach is one that integrates both qualitative and quantitative data, which Creswell and Creswell (2018) argue can “provide a stronger understanding of the problem or question than either by itself” (p. 213). Quantitative methodology and conventional feminist inquiry have had a contentious history, mostly due to the prejudices often inherent within empirical assumptions (Caprioli, 2014). Feminist researchers have been the most vocal to call attention to these methodological prejudices and explore alternative frameworks. Qualitative research has become most often aligned with feminist inquiry because (unlike quantitative) it attends to the understanding that human experience is not universal but rather contextual and situational. Though feminist qualitative research strives to correct the objectivism assumed within quantitative, qualitative does have its own limitations (e.g., fewer opportunities for larger scope and study samples) (Greene, 2015). Thus, feminists like Greene (2015) have come to appreciate the value of mixing both approaches, noting that a mixed methods approach offers a better understanding of studied phenomena because of its multiple perspectives.

### ***Exploratory Sequential Mixed Methods Approach***

An exploratory sequential mixed methods design was selected to capture the richness of qualitative research with the generalizability of quantitative research (Caprioli, 2014). As illustrated in the literature review, there is limited research on the impact that an institution's Title IX web presence can have on a student's likelihood to report, whether it be due to trust in the institution or cognizance of the resources. This study will address the research gap by attempting to establish a website evaluation instrument that can be used to identify if an association between a site's student-centric design and reporting behaviors exists. The exploratory sequential mixed method approach was specifically chosen for this study because the qualitative data will aid in the development of a guiding instrument, to be applied towards the data collected during the quantitative analysis. The exploratory mixed methods design especially facilitates the creation of this instrument. The exploratory sequential mixed methods design is most applicable when there are not currently "adequate instruments to measure the concepts with the sample the investigator wishes to study" because it allows the researcher to develop an instrument based on exploratory findings of qualitative data to then assess the researcher's interested population quantitatively (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 224).

### ***Mixed Methods and Critical Feminist Theory***

Though the critical feminist lens is not always aligned with the concept of creating objective truth, according to Caprioli (2004), there is value in objective instrumentation that facilitates the rejection of harmful social constructs in support of feminist agendas:

The existing feminist literature based on critical-interpretive epistemologies forms the rationale for quantitative testing. No one methodology is superior to the others. So, why create a dichotomy if none exists? All methodologies contribute to our knowledge, and, when put together like pieces of a puzzle, they offer a clearer picture. The idea is to build a bridge of knowledge, not parallel walls that are equally inadequate in their understanding of one another (p. 257).

At the core of sexual violence is most often the gender-based power struggle. The fight to end sexual violence has a long way to go, but it is important to look for immediate relief and supports along the way. Thus, this instrument intends to bridge knowledge from trauma-informed and student-centric research, practitioners of Title IX advocacy, and website accessibility to address the violence in a way that is both practical and which offers immediate feedback for improvement. The researcher's hope for the instrument is that its design be malleable in a way to encourage its adaptability across diverse institutions, based upon the particular needs of their communities.

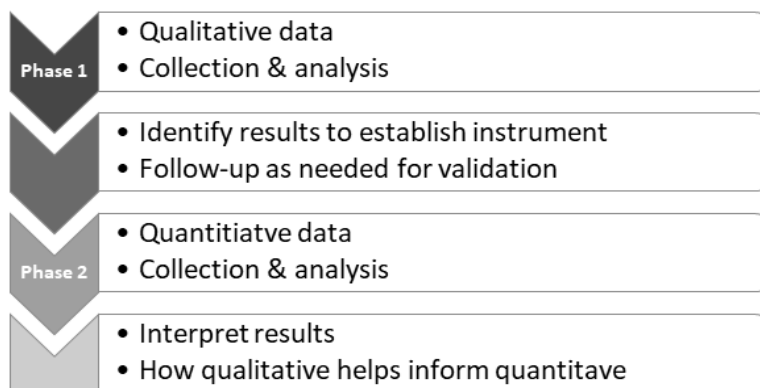
### **Research Phases**

The design of this study took place in two phases (qual → QUAN). In Phase 1, the interviews of those identified as experts in the Title IX field helped answer RQ1, which sought to learn more about best practices as they relate to and clarify student-centricity. To help answer RQ2, the researcher created an instrument that measures Title IX website student-centricity and obtained interviewee insights into its face validity, or trustworthiness. This also served as a form of member-checking to ensure authentic representations of expert perspectives. Having completed the first phase of this study, the researcher moved into the next phase. Using the data collected from Phase 1, Phase 2 of this study (addressing RQ3) adopted a cross-sectional, quantitative design aimed to measure an association between Title IX websites' student-centricity scores and

university sex-related crime report counts. This two-phased exploratory sequential design is presented visually in Figure 3 and is broken down further in the following sections.

**Figure 3**

*Exploratory Sequential Design (Two-Phase Design)*



### ***Phase 1: Instrument Design***

The goal of the mixed methods design is to “offer a more complete picture of the social phenomenon” (Ansari et al., 2016, p. 135). In this study, the phenomenon under examination is Title IX website content as it relates to sexual violence on college campuses. During Phase 1 of this study, the researcher collected data on Title IX and student-centricity characteristics through three initial interviews of Title IX coordinators. The Title IX coordinators were selected for expert interviews based on character vetted referrals from coworkers who spoke to their positive work in student advocacy and professional background. The researcher also took into consideration their institution type (community college, four-year, public, and private), as well as demographic attributes

(physical region, gender, and ethnicity) to ensure diverse experiences were captured.

These experts were not compensated. The primary focus of this phase was on gathering student-centered, trauma-informed qualitative data that pertains to Title IX web accessibility rather than technical aspects of user experience (UX) design.

The researcher understands that “the fixing of meaning is never a neutral act, but always privileges certain interests” (Ryan, 2006, p. 24). Therefore, it is important to view the expert-derived qualitative data as capturing a few lived experiences. These experiences can provide useful observations of cultural phenomena impacting sexual violence on campus, such as the institutional or political power dynamics related to Title IX work. A critical feminist researcher should always be cautious of giving a voice to those who may already have privilege. However, the coordinator role is also one dictated by the OCR to be independent of university oversight, so the researcher focused on themes in their experiences that can help call attention to any imbalance of power, (e.g., institutional-centric observations) as well as to discuss successful student-centeredness approaches witnessed in their advocacy work. Though Title IX coordinators are employed by institutions and therefore benefit from institutional power, it is important to note key definitions of the Title IX coordinators by the OCR:

- independent from the university
- protected from any retaliatory behavior that might prevent them from advocating for victims
- tasked with pushing forward gender equity
- tasked with presenting themselves in a way that invites community trust (Lhamon, 2015)



The researcher acknowledges that choosing to interview experts instead of students may be elevating already privileged voices. Because the coordinator role is rooted in both student advocacy and thorough policy comprehension, they are in the unique position to have the most contact with student survivors while understanding institutional barriers to process and communication. Students are often not knowledgeable about Title IX, so the coordinators' experiences can also provide valuable insight into the limitations and prospects the researcher may face in the development of Title IX-related instrumentation. The researcher will lean heavily on literature informed by feminist perspectives to balance the coordinator perspectives.

The primary technique of these interviews was in-depth and semi-structured. Following the IBR-approved protocol, they were conducted virtually due to distance and COVID-19. All interviews took place within the same month. The virtual setting also allowed for interactive screen-share activities that would not have been possible with in-person interviews. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), interviews are useful when seeking interactive knowledge-making, which is in line with the researcher's goals for this phase of the study. The in-depth interview allows the researcher to extract as much information from as expert as possible in a "free-flowing interaction" (Morris, 2015, p. 3). There are three types of interviews: structured (formal order of questions with interviewer in complete control), semi-structured (guiding questions with some control allowed to interviewee), and unstructured (informal conversation with interviewee in complete control) (Longhurst, 2003). The researcher selected the semi-structured interview because this approach provides enough guidance for the researcher to ensure

essential questions are asked while leaving flexibility that allows the interviewees to interact with and explore the topic from their own perspectives.

Interviewees were asked about their professional experiences with Title IX and its policy changes, as well as questions to help construct key elements of a to-be-established Title IX website instrument elements. (See Appendix A for the interview protocol.) Each interview included a card sorting activity in which the interviewee was provided a list of research-developed elements that relate to Title IX “student-centricity,” a term repurposed for this instrument to capture the following elements: accessibility, comprehensiveness, trauma-informed language, engaging design, care and compassion, and clear outcomes. Table 3, earlier in this study, provided the corresponding literature with each of these elements. Interviewees were asked to rank the elements in terms of importance, as well as to discard any they perceived as harmful. They also had the option to add in elements they thought relevant and include it in their ranking. A clarifying definition was provided with each element to provide context, and interviewees were asked to explain their thought process aloud, as well as to offer specific examples of choices during the sorting.

Interviews were recorded and transcribed. Interview coding took place in two cycles. The first cycle employed Descriptive Coding to create an overview of patterns that established summary labels, which are important to “enable subsequent exploration of patterns of similarities and differences” (Skjott Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019, p. 264). In the second cycle of coding, the researcher applied pattern coding to generate themes derived from the data (Saldana, 2009). Using the identified themes and relevant literature

review, the researcher established an instrument that will measure a Title IX website for its level of student-centricity.

**Establishing Validity.** Several strategies were employed to establish the instrument's validity. Qualitative data (such as written and verbal feedback from experts and panelists) and quantitative data (such as assessment scoring) was collected as a method of triangulation to overcome systematic or intrinsic biases that can be produced from using a single method (Maxwell, 2012; Torrance, 2012). In this way, the researcher intended to build confidence in the validity, or trustworthiness, of the instrument. This assessment of validity also operated like a pilot test of the instrument in that the researcher was able to determine not just internal reliability but also interrater reliability, further establishing credibility for the application of this instrument.

**Face Validity.** After the interviews, the experts were given the opportunity to comment on the initial measurement draft and address whether its content was “a fair and reasonable reflection” of the Title IX website student-centricity it aims to measure, also known as respondent validation (Torrance, 2012, p. 5). They were asked to rate each item on whether it appears suitable or irrelevant to help establish its face validity. As the Title IX coordinators are the most likely intended users of this instrument, getting their practical responses is “an important feature of any psychological or educational test” (Nevo, 1985, p. 288).

**Content Validity.** To establish content validity, the researcher asked an expert panel of 15 persons to evaluate each item within the instrument as “not essential,” “essential,” or “useful but not essential” (Zamanzadeh et al., 2015). The Content Validity Ratio (CVR) was calculated for each indicator as follows:

$$\text{Equation 1: } CVR = (n_e - n/2) / (n/2)$$

In Equation 1,  $n_e$  equals the number of panelists who indicate “essential” items and  $n$  equals the total number of panelists (Zamanzadeh et al., 2015). Items identified as essential at a rate of 50% or more were treated as having some content validity. The panelists were asked to review the instrument and rate each item for essentiality and alignment with the intended measured construct. The results were aggregated, reported, and presented as evidence to the instrument’s content validity.

**Establishing Reliability.** Having developed an instrument with established face and content validity, the researcher and one of the interviewees both piloted this instrument with four Title IX websites randomly selected from the complete list of institutions and ran Cohen’s kappa to quantify the interrater reliability. The kappa statistic measures the extent to which instrument users assign the same score to the same test item. According to Cohen (1960), there is a certain expected degree of agreement by chance, so rather than quantifying the percentage of agreement, the statistic measures the portion of agreement beyond chance, in a range of -1 to +1. Though treated more as benchmarks than divisive categories, Landis and Koch (1977) propose that a measure of  $\leq 0$  indicates poor agreement, 0.01–0.20 indicates slight agreement, 0.21–0.40 indicates fair agreement, 0.41–0.60 indicates moderate agreement, 0.61–0.80 indicates substantial agreement, and 0.81–1.00 indicates almost perfect agreement. The researcher compared the kappa statistic against these ranges, with the goal of the highest reliability scoring possible. Based on findings as well as feedback from the expert, the researcher revised the instrument as necessary, to ensure its reliability. The researcher also collected supplemental qualitative data, such as website artifacts of best and bad practices,

associated with anticipated outcomes for RQ3 and RQ4. If any items were causing the instrument to be unreliable, they were revised and re-tested. To assess the instrument's internal consistency, the researcher also ran Cronbach's alpha, which normally ranges between 0 and 1. The greater the coefficient, the greater the internal consistency. George and Mallery (2003) propose the following range recommendations:  $\geq 0.9$  is excellent,  $> 0.9$  to  $0.8$  is good,  $> 0.8$  to  $0.7$  is acceptable,  $> 0.7$  to  $0.6$  is questionable,  $> 0.6$  to  $0.5$  is poor, and  $< 0.5$  is unacceptable. This assessment was included because the score from the instrument will be reported as a composite, although the researcher recognizes some items may not necessarily be aligned in terms of working with one another

### ***Phase 2: Implementation of Instrument***

Once the instrument satisfactorily met reliability standards, the researcher moved on to Phase 2: application of the instrument to all higher education institutions that met select criteria to generate student-centricity scores ( $N = 78$ ). The researcher applied the instrument to each institution's Title IX website and created a corresponding numerical student-centricity score to be used in analysis. This process took three weeks. Scores were then compared to the most current publicly available count of U.S. Department of Education's Campus Safety and Security (CSS) reported sex-related criminal offenses against the population of colleges and universities. Data were analyzed to assess whether, and to what extent, an institution's student-centric Title IX website score is associated with an increased or decreased number of reported cases of sex-related criminal offenses on its campus(es) for the year 2019 (the most recent year at the time of this study). The cross-sectional research strategy is appropriate to use in this instance as the researcher

collected data at one point in time to describe the population (Johnson & Christensen, 2020). See Table 4 for an explanation of the research design logic.

**Table 4**

*Logic of Research Design*

Research Question	Corresponding Source of Information	Data Analysis/Reporting Procedures
RQ1: What do Title IX experts perceive as the primary attributes of a student-centric Title IX website?	Interviews and Element Sorting	Descriptive Coding and Member Checks
RQ2: Does the evaluation instrument informed by Title IX expert opinion accurately assess Title IX website student-centricity?	Interviews and Pilot Review	Descriptive Coding and Face Validity Affirmation
RQ2.1: Is the website evaluation instrument developed from RQ 1 valid?	Website Evaluation Data and Pilot Review	Content Validity Ratio
RQ2.2: Is the website evaluation instrument developed from RQ 1 reliable?	Pilot Review	Cohen's kappa
RQ3: Are institutional Title IX website student-centricity ratings, assessed using the instrument developed in RQ1 and validated in RQ2, associated with the number of institutional sex-related criminal offenses reported in a sample of large US colleges and universities?	Website Composite Rating and Clery Sex-Related Criminal Offenses Reported	Multiple regression models for count data, controlling for potential confounders.

## Population and Sample

A national cohort of federally funded four-year public and private nonprofit institutions were selected using criterion-based sampling. Institutions were included in

the study if they met the following criteria as discerned from the U.S. Department of Education's CSS online database ( $N = 78$ ):

- U.S. -continent-based
- public or private nonprofit four-year+
- enrollment of  $\geq 30,000$  students
- offers on-campus student housing

The researcher selected large institutions because Title IX offices for large student populations most likely have higher reliance on website presence in its outreach. For institutions with multiple campuses, only those identified as main campuses were included. Population decisions assumed that larger institutions likely have significantly more standardized resources to dedicate to Title IX work compared to smaller institutions. Such resource differences might lead to unmeasured confounding by institutional resources. To control for this, the researcher restricted the dataset.

Additionally, campuses with on-campus and off-campus housing likely have different student resources, reporting opportunities, and social environments that could also lead to unmeasured confounding. For example, studies have shown that whether a student lives on campus impacts their decision to report (Holland & Cortina, 2017). To control for this, the researcher restricted the dataset to only those institutions with on-campus housing. All participating institutions are non-identifiable within this study.

### **Outcome Variable**

Under the Clery Act, criminal offenses that occur within the institution must be annually reported and made public. Each type of crime is assigned a category identified

by its nature. The offenses of interest in this study will be limited to the following CSS-coded categories:

- Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) offenses categorized as Domestic Violence, Dating Violence, and Stalking
- Criminal offenses categorized as Rape (both forcible and non-forcible) and Fondling

As dependent variables, the researcher examined both individual counts of each of the above reporting types (e.g., Domestic Violence) as well as a count outcome of reporting type totals (e.g., VAWA crimes) and all reports of interest for each institution.

### **Poisson Regression Analysis**

After the researcher applied the novel instrument to all included institutional websites, the next stage was to examine the association between student-centricity of Title IX websites and the number of reported sex-related crime reports at the sampled institutions (RQ3). The researcher first attempted to employ multiple Poisson regression, controlling for the size of the student body as a continuous variable, to ensure the researcher's count-outcome associations are not being driven by size differences in the included universities. If the modeling assumptions of a Poisson distribution were not met (i.e., variance and mean are not equal, or there are a significant number of institutions with zeros), the researcher would use other appropriate statistical techniques (e.g., zero-inflated Poisson or Negative Binomial regression). All data were organized and data analysis procedures ran, including Poisson regression, to identify the extent to which the student-centricity score predicts the number of sex-related crimes reported.



## **Summary**

The political whiplash of Title IX guidance has created confusion and anxiety among higher education communities. Institutions have come to recognize how imperative it is to improve communication of their victim-support services and reporting processes. Since the internet is a popular communication tool, institutions can look to student-centeredness, trauma-informed, and accessibility approaches to strengthen communication of their Title IX websites as a means of deepening student trust. To determine the level of impact a Title IX website has on student reporting decisions, the researcher will first establish a student-centricity website scoring instrument.

The purpose of this study is to support higher education institutions in their efforts to protect students by establishing a Title IX website evaluation instrument through an exploratory sequential mixed methods design. In Phase 1, Title IX expert interviews were used to qualitatively establish themes that can be included in the development of the instrument. In Phase 2, publicly available Clery data were used to quantitatively compare Title IX website student-centricity scores to each sampled institution's sex-related criminal offense reports. If an association is determined, this instrument can identify areas of growth and practical improvements for the critical work of Title IX on college campuses.

## CHAPTER IV: RESULTS

### Introduction

In Chapter 4, the researcher discusses the data obtained from both Phase 1 (qualitative) and Phase 2 (quantitative) to address the area of interest: the measurement of student-centricity of a Title IX website design and its association with sexual violence reporting. The following research questions and hypotheses guided the researcher through the data obtainment:

- RQ1: What do Title IX experts perceive as the primary attributes of student-centricity that can relate to an institution's Title IX website?
  - The results of RQ1 will inform the design of a novel website evaluation instrument.
- RQ2: Does the evaluation instrument informed by Title IX expert opinion accurately assess Title IX website student-centricity?
- RQ2.1: Is the website evaluation instrument developed from RQ1 valid?
  - $H_0$  The student-centricity scoring instrument is not valid.
  - $H_{2.1}$  The student-centricity scoring instrument is found to have face and content validity.
- RQ2.2: Is the website evaluation instrument developed from RQ1 reliable?
  - $H_0$  The student-centricity scoring instrument is not reliable.
  - $H_{2.2}$  The student-centricity scoring instrument is found to have interrater reliability.

- RQ3: Are institutional Title IX website student-centricity ratings assessed using the instrument developed in RQ1 and validated in RQ2, associated with the number of institutional sex-related crimes reported?
  - $H_0$  There is no relationship between student-centricity website scores and the institutional sex-related crimes report.
  - $H_3$  There is an association between student-centricity website scores and the institutional sex-related crimes report.

In Phase 1, semi-structured interviews of Title IX experts were conducted to develop themes that would inform the researcher's design of a novel instrument intended to capture an institution's Title IX website student-centric design qualities. After having found the instrument to provide reliable and valid measurement in this context, in Phase 2, the researcher applied the instrument in a cross-sectional study to all institutional websites that met select criteria. Because assumptions were not met for the Poisson regression model, a negative binomial regression model was employed to compare website student-centricity scores to institutional sex-related crime reports. All findings are depicted below.

### **Phase 1: Qualitative Findings and Instrument Development**

Three Title IX experts were interviewed to obtain their professional insight into institutional experiences that might increase or decrease a student's willingness to seek help from the institution after sexual trauma. Experts came from various regions (Middle Atlantic, Southeast, and Rocky Mountain), genders, and ethnic backgrounds, to capture diverse professional experiences. (See Appendix A for the full interview protocol.)

During the interviews, each expert was also asked to rank six research-developed student-centric elements as they pertain to a Title IX website, developed from RQ1:

1. Accessibility
2. Care & Compassion
3. Comprehensive
4. Clear Outcomes
5. Engaging Design
6. Trauma-Informed Language

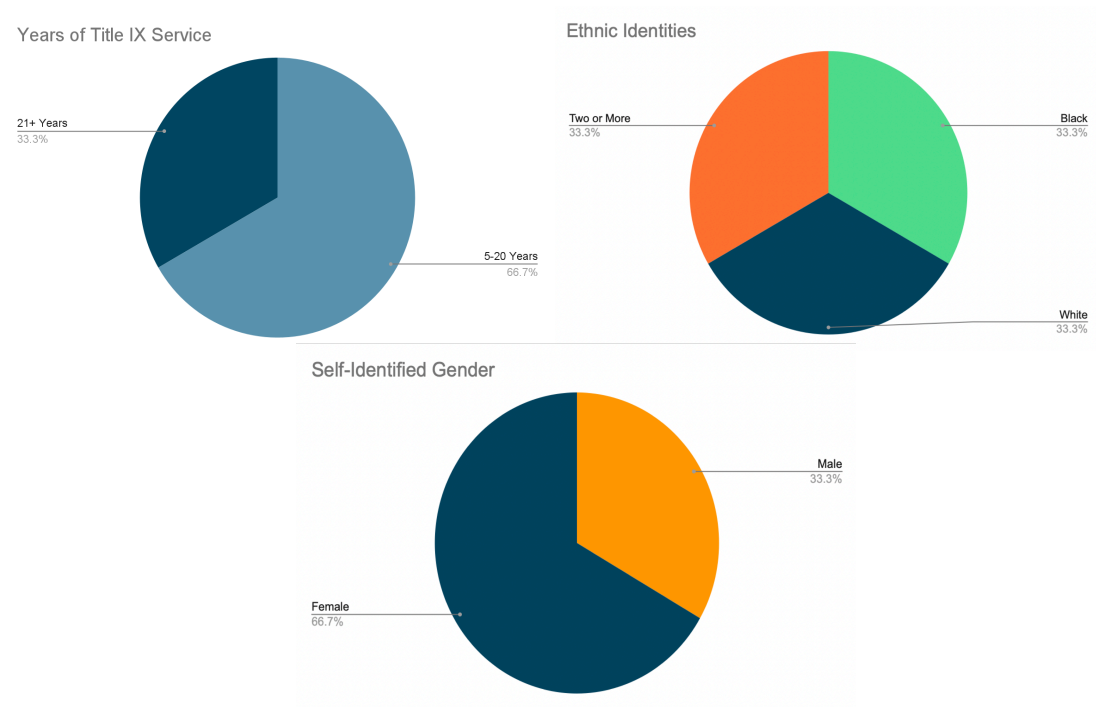
### ***Expert Profiles***

The body of literature has pointed out that the goal of interviews is to create shared meaning making (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In this study, the phenomenon under examination is Title IX website content as it relates to sexual violence on college campuses. According to the OCR, the Title IX coordinator role is rooted in both advocacy and policy comprehension (Lhamon, 2015). Though the coordinator is a position of power, they are also in the unique position to have significant contact with students who experience sexual trauma and choose whether to report. Considering the literature, and the purpose of this study, the researcher sought out experts to help construct this instrument who would have relevant experiences, empathetic dispositions, and expertise to guide the process. The experts were chosen based on trusted referrals of colleagues who could affirm each expert's commitment to student advocacy as well as their professional knowledge. What follows are brief profiles of the experts. Figure 4 also provides a visual demographic summary.

- **Expert 1.** Expert 1 identifies as a Black female who has worked with in various leadership roles within Title IX departments of multiple higher education institutions for almost 40 years. She currently serves as the Chief Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Officer at a technical college.
- **Expert 2.** Expert 2 identifies as a White male who has worked as a coordinator within the Title IX department of one higher education institution for eight years. He currently serves as an Academic Program Director and Associate Professor at a public research university.
- **Expert 3.** Expert 3 identifies as a multiethnic female who has worked various leadership roles within Title IX departments of multiple higher education institutions for over four years. Before entering higher education, she worked with sexual trauma victims in social services. She currently serves as an Executive Director of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion at a community college.

**Figure 4**

*Expert Demographics*



*Emerging Themes*

Over the course of several weeks, the researcher coordinated interviews with each of the experts. Each interview lasted approximately one hour and was conducted via Zoom to comply with COVID-19 research protocols approved by the institutional review board. During the interviews, the researcher took notes and following the interviews recorded memos reflecting on key insights. After all were concluded, the interviews were transcribed and coded using descriptive coding as described by Saldana (2009). Memos and the descriptive codes of transcriptions were examined additionally through pattern coding. Through this process, there emerged seven themes that guided the interpretation

and later development of the instrument. The following sections explain how each of these themes aligned with the raw data collected during this study's first phase. Each theme description will be followed by a brief table summary. After all themes have been presented, there will follow a summary table (Table 6) all the themes.

**Theme 1: Equitable and Humane Resources.** Equity in access, language, service, and demonstrable humanity in student communication was discussed prominently within each interview. To demonstrate to the student early on that they are not a number, experts discussed how important it was to avoid assumptions into their experiences and to emphasize that there is a human on the other end of each student interaction. It became clear that when students made it to the Title IX office, the experts were confident in their ability to provide care and support, but it was challenging getting students to the office in the first place. As an example, Expert 1 stated, "We had a person who was hearing impaired [on] our campus that we worked with, and they were afraid to talk to us because they thought that we wouldn't be able to help them." As an example of equity in resources, Expert 2 stated the importance of "assuring that the organization or institution is interested in the student first and foremost." See Table 5.1 for a summary of findings related to Theme 1.

**Table 5.1***Overview of Theme 1 Derived from Title IX Expert Interviews*

Theme	Sample Code	Memo Notes	Key Quote
Equitable and humane resources for all involved	Equity, Nonjudgement, Human, Inclusive	Inclusivity and accessibility are very related among experts, perhaps because limiting the scope of what a victim/assailant looks like limits access to resources and help seeking tendencies for anyone who does not fit that perceived mold.  Accessibility is also tied to usability, or user-friendliness technically speaking, but also for those who are ESL or live with a disability	“They matter to somebody, just remember that” (Expert 1)

**Theme 2: Community Partnership Improves Support.** Building educated, intentional partnerships across the campus community was brought up across the interviews. This concept ties into the social justice model that sexual violence reduction needs a multi-pronged cultural approach (Nagle, 2016). Community leaders trained in healthy sexuality education are better at intervening on behalf of students and referring students to Title IX services. Expert 1 used phrases like “reciprocal relationship” to exemplify their community partnership expectation. Regarding the importance of external partnerships, Expert 3 stated, “We have providers that they can go to outside of our area, and still have the help that they need. I think we need to always provide those other resources within our community that [students] can also get help from, because at the end of the day, they’re not going to always be our students.” See Table 5.2 for a summary of



findings related to Theme 2.

**Table 5.2**

*Overview of Theme 2 Derived from Title IX Expert Interviews*

Theme	Sample Code	Memo Notes	Key Quote
Community partnership improves support	Partnership, Reciprocal relationship, Outside resources	Connects to treatment of sexual violence as a cultural and/or social justice problem to address collectively	“I wrote a Memorandum of Understanding with the sexual assault center in town. And one of the things was really as a resource for students. I wanted to make sure that if they felt they couldn’t come to us, that we had a reciprocal relationship that would protect the confidentiality of our students” (Expert 1)

**Theme 3: Importance of Staff Training and Student Education.** Though staff and student training has become a Title IX mandate, all experts agreed that training and education needs to go beyond rehashing policy. Experts discussed trainings such as consent education and healthy relationships as being important to the reduction of sexual violence. Expert 1 stated, “The university owns the liability, because we have an obligation to make sure that they understand what the rules are.” Expert 3 stated, “Education is the key.” See Table 5.3 for a summary of findings related to Theme 3.

**Table 5.3***Overview of Theme 3 Derived from Title IX Expert Interviews*

Theme	Sample Code	Memo Notes	Key Quote
Importance of staff training and student education	Education, Ambassador, Relevance, Up to date	More would come forward if they had better understanding of rights and types of victimization  Policy changes create confusion among relevant staff and can trickle down to students	“Students are now reporting on behalf of other students. They are learning... and standing up for each other... First of all, they’re being educated at an early/young age [to] be an upstander, be a bystander, stand up and speak for yourself” (Expert 3)

#### **Theme 4: Transparency of Expectations and Protection of Privacy.** Privacy

and transparency seemed to go together across the interviews. The experts discussed how students and staff alike can be hesitant to come forward with information or help-seeking if they are uncertain as to what will happen once they do. As Expert 1 stated, her role in Title IX investigations is to “help folks feel comfortable, safe.” Expert 2 stated, “a lot of confidence could be engendered if students understood kind of what it looks like going into that process.” According to Expert 3, “hearing the process of what you have to go through when you do report” can make the difference in a student’s decision to report. See Table 5.4 for a summary of findings related to Theme 4.

**Table 5.4***Overview of Theme 4 Derived from Title IX Expert Interviews*

Theme	Sample Code	Memo Notes	Key Quote
Transparency of expectations and protection of privacy	Students' worry, Rights, Obligations, Exposure, Uncertainty	Title IX serves as provider of facts as to student rights, staff obligations  Avoid fearmongering in policy explanation	"Students worry about retaliation, or they worry about how the investigation is going to look... Like, are they gonna have to face their accuser? How many times are they going to have to be interviewed?" (Expert 2)

**Theme 5: Awareness of and Trust in Title IX.** Across the interviews, the experts discussed how institutional support and community trust was related to the awareness of sexual violence prevalence and its official history of response. Attempting to hide sexual violence on campus can hurt the charge of Title IX. Expert 1 stated, "This wasn't something that we could just pretend. . . doesn't happen on our campus because we're a 'good' campus." If an institution has received backlash for previous sexual violence handlings that have not been publicly addressed, this can also deter support. Expert 2 stated, "The way Title IX is administered at universities can be supportive or corrosive to the culture." See Table 5.5 for a summary of findings related to Theme 5.

**Table 5.5***Overview of Theme 5 Derived from Title IX Expert Interviews*

Theme	Sample Code	Memo Notes	Key Quote
Awareness of and trust in Title IX	Mishandled, Did not act strongly enough, Made public, Referrals, Previous connections	Student utility of Title IX based on public relationship to community and history of its handlings	“We took care of the resolution of [the reports], but I made it public how many, because I wanted folks to understand this was serious, and this wasn’t something that we could just pretend doesn’t happen on our campus because we’re a ‘good campus’” (Expert 1)

**Theme 6: Understanding Trauma for Effective Communication.** While understanding trauma’s impact on the biological level is not essential to supporting students, all the experts agreed that understanding trauma’s differentiated impact on individuals is essential to the charge of Title IX. Expert 3 recalls witnessing a male police officer’s interview of a young, female victim, stating, “He made her shut down to where she just couldn’t remember anything... if he just would have asked or I just would have known to ask the right questions during that trauma to communicate with that person...And we missed all of those elements, because we asked the wrong questions.” Expert 1 discusses how important it is to be aware of the way support is published, stating that institutions can unwittingly “create fear sometimes in the way that they present information.” Expert 3 states that to be trauma-informed is “to understand how to communicate” with survivors experiencing any level of trauma. See Table 5.6 for a summary of findings related to Theme 6.

**Table 5.6***Overview of Theme 6 Derived from Title IX Expert Interviews*

Theme	Sample Code	Memo Notes	Key Quote
Knowledge of trauma for effective communication	Understanding, Reaction, Trauma, Handle with care	Trauma-informed beneficial to the victim and university in improving interactions and fact finding	“Fear! I think it’s fear. I think it’s being overwhelmed. I think, almost like, if I come forward, and they know this happened to me, then people are going to look at me differently. Will I have the support that I need? Somebody else is going to make the decision on if this happened to me or not?” (Expert 3)

**Theme 7: Campus Context in Resource Development and Strategy.** The experts all spoke to how their specific campus situation (e.g., political climate, public image, or campus locations) factored into their communication strategies as well as the decisions the institution made regarding resources. Expert 1 discussed the challenges of an institution housed in a state that both socially and politically did not approve of the LGBTQ community. To this, she said, “Some of the responses in the community, both on campus and off campus, to same-sex relationships, where there was misconduct and assault. . . It was like I had to protect both parties from the public scrutiny that they were going to face.” Expert 2 spoke to the challenges of finding ways to support students hundreds of miles away at remote campuses, explaining that there were situations wherein the university had difficulty discerning how or if it could respond. Expert 3 spoke to the challenges of a wide scope in working for an institution that had “five campuses” across the state, because their students and resources needed to stretch across

several communities. See Table 5.7 for a summary of findings related to Theme 7. To this, Expert 3 agreed that a strong website would benefit her institution.

**Table 5.7**

*Overview of Theme 7 Derived from Title IX Expert Interviews*

Theme	Sample Code	Memo Notes	Key Quote
Campus context in resource development and strategy	Public situation, Because of where we were, Resource limitations	The cultural and political climate of campus community impacting outreach  Important to understand who is being served and possible reactions	“Some of the responses in the community, both on campus and off campus, to same-sex relationships, where there was misconduct and assault. . . It was like I had to protect both parties from the public scrutiny that they were going to face” (Expert 1)

After preliminary interviews with three Title IX experts, the researcher conducted two phases of interview coding, the first descriptive and the second coding for patterns. From pattern coding and extensive memoing emerged seven themes:

1. Equitable and humane resources for all involved
2. Community partnership improves support
3. Importance of staff training and student education
4. Transparency of expectations and protection of privacy
5. Awareness of relates to trust in Title IX
6. Knowledge of trauma for effective communication
7. Campus context in resource development and strategies

For a summary of all emerging themes, see Table 6.

**Table 6**

*Summary of All Themes Derived from Title IX Expert Interviews*

Theme	Sample Code	Memo Notes	Key Quotes
Equitable and humane resources for all involved	Equity, Nonjudgement, Human, Inclusive	Accessibility is also tied to usability as in user-friendliness technically speaking but also for those who are ESL or live with a disability	“Any resource is only as good as it is available” (Expert 2)
Community partnership improves support	Partnership, Reciprocal relationship, Outside resources	Connects to treatment of sexual violence as a cultural and/or social justice problem to address collectively	“Reciprocal relationship” (Expert 1)
Importance of staff training and student education	Education, Ambassador, Relevance, Up to date	More would report if they had better understanding of rights and types of victimization	“Make sure that we’re trained on the most relevant and up-to-date information around how to provide the best services to those within our community” (Expert 3)
Transparency of expectations and protection of privacy	Students’ worry, Rights, Obligations, Exposure, Uncertainty	Title IX serves as provider of facts as to student rights, staff obligation, steer away from fearmongering in policy explanation	“A lot of confidence could be engendered if students understood kind of what that looks like going into that process” (Expert 2)
Awareness of and trust in Title IX	Mishandled, Did not act strongly enough, Made public, Referrals, Previous connections	Student utility of Title IX based on public relationship to community and history of its handlings	“The way Title IX is administered at universities can be supportive or corrosive to the culture” (Expert 2)
Knowledge of trauma for effective communication	Understanding, Reaction, Trauma, Handle with care	Trauma-informed beneficial to the victim and university in improving interactions and fact finding	“And he made her shut down to where she just couldn’t remember anything... that if he just would have asked or I just would have known to ask the right questions during that trauma to communicate with that person” (Expert 3)
Campus context in resource development and strategies	Public situation, Because of where we were, Resource limitations	Cultural climate of community impacting outreach, important to understand who is being served and possible reactions	“Some of the responses in the community, both on campus and off campus, to same-sex relationships, where there was misconduct and assault. . . It was like I had to protect both parties from the public scrutiny that they were going to face” (Expert 1)

### ***Element Rankings***

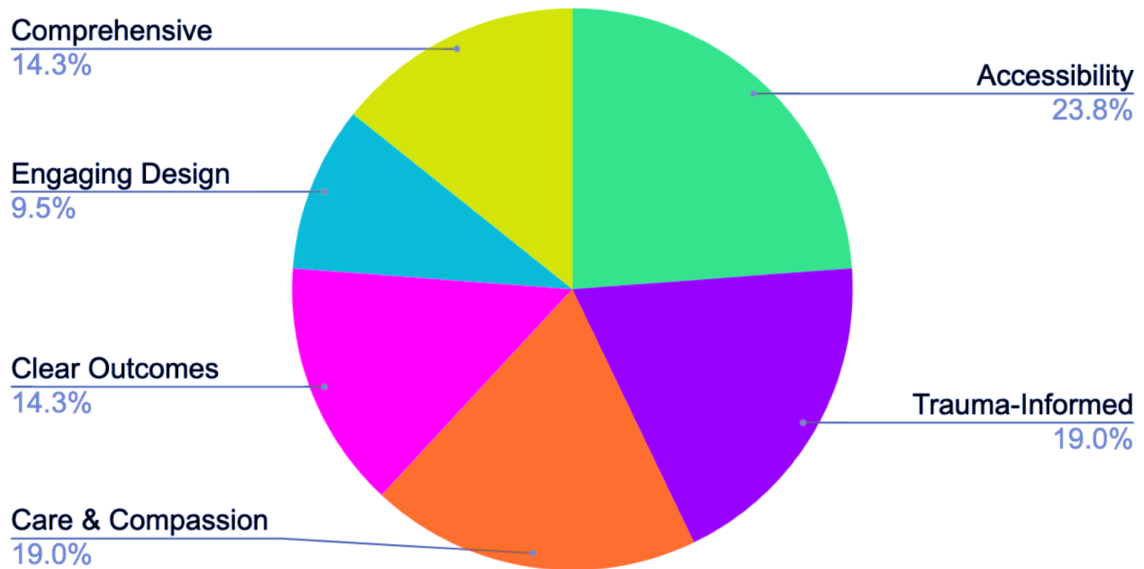
Experts were presented with an online visual display of the six elements: Accessibility, Comprehensiveness, Trauma-Informed Language, Engaging Design, Care & Compassion, and Clear Outcomes. Table 3 in an earlier chapter provides a summary of elements and their corresponding literature. The experts were asked to click and drag the elements across the screen in order of importance as each pertains to student-centeredness, and to explain their decision-making aloud. Their responses and sequencing were recorded and measured.

In response to the element sorting activity, as well as codes from the initial interviews, all experts agreed that Accessibility was the most important element and Engaging Design was the least, although no expert suggested that it was *not* important. When given the option, no expert discarded an element and two experts each added in one element: Expert 1 added in Transparency and Expert 3 added in External Resources. Each of the added elements aligned with existing elements (Clear Outcomes and Comprehensive respectively). In coordination with the experts, the added elements were used to continue the development of the existing elements. See Figure 5 for a visual display of the element rankings as they were weighted into the instrument's measurement.



**Figure 5**

*Element Weights Within Instrument's Measure*



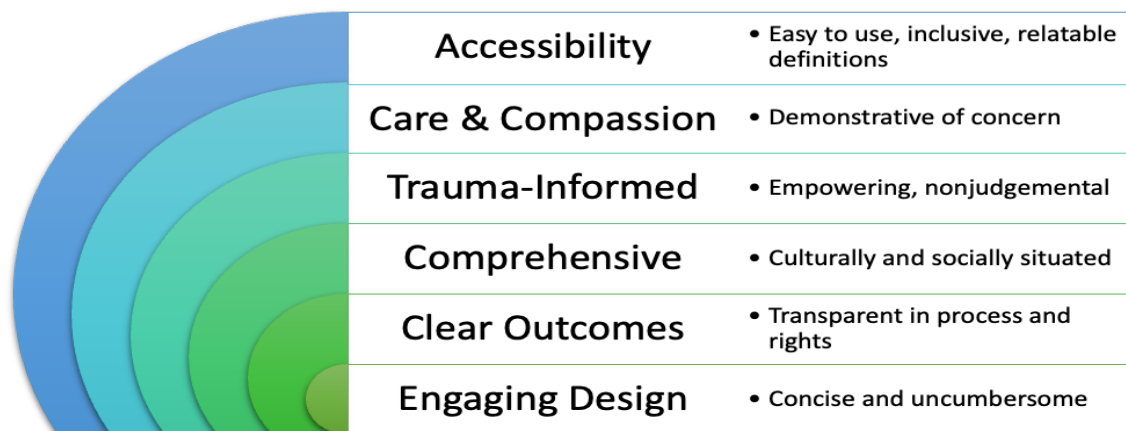
### ***Instrument Question Drafting***

After these phases of descriptive and pattern coding, as well as consideration of the expert element rankings (with added emphasis on Transparency and External Resources), the researcher developed 21 questions for the instrument of Title IX website student-centricity. To balance the ratio of questions with the degree of importance of each theme, the quantity of questions related to each theme mirrored its rank order (e.g., more questions were related to the highest ranked element, Accessibility). See Appendix B for explanations of each element as they fit with literature, interviews, and derived question items.

Overall, experts agreed that a Title IX website design should highlight accessibility (e.g., user-friendliness and inclusive language), education (e.g., resources and relatable key term definitions), and visibility (e.g., training opportunities and internal as well as external supports) to improve its student-centricity. See Figure 6 for a summary of the themes in order of ranked importance. Therefore, the developed instrument made sure to capture key site aspects in a way that aligned with indicated importance of the themes. See Appendix C for the final drafted instrument.

**Figure 6**

*Title IX Website Student-Centric Element Summaries, In Ranking Order*



For scoring purposes, each question within the instrument corresponds to one of the six elements and is assigned a numerical score of 0 if the item is not present or 1 if the item is present. The final instrument included 21 questions, ranging from a score of 0, representing a website with no student-centricity, and a score of 21, representing a website with maximum student-centricity.

With the instrument's concept of "student-centricity" developed, the study then shifted to the second research question (RQ2) to determine the instrument's ability to accurately assess the student-centric elements of a Title IX website design.

### ***Instrument Validation***

To address RQ 2 and 2.1, a draft of the instrument items was sent to the three experts for initial feedback. Experts 1 and 2 continued their participation in this stage of feedback. Though the researcher made repeated attempts to obtain additional feedback from her, Expert 3 stopped responding. Among the other two, the researcher went back and forth with revisions and related follow-up questions until there was 100% agreement as to each item's suitability. This served to establish the instrument's face validity as well as a member-checking, to validate that the expert perspectives were accurately presented. In this stage, revisions included changes in word choice (e.g., "survivor" rather than "victim") as well as clarity (e.g., offered multiple examples related to each item but specified that the list was not comprehensive).

To determine the instrument's content validity, an online assessment tool was created using the accessible Google Form program and sent to 15 higher education professionals who have an above-average understanding of Title IX (e.g., program directors, provosts, and Title IX advisors). These panelists were selected because they would be likely users of the instrument at an institution. The online assessment explained context and purpose of the instrument, presenting under each question item a multiple choice ("essential," "non-essential," or "useful but not essential"), wherein the panelist would select their determined level of essentiality, specifically as the item related to the related student-centric element. Items identified as "essential" at a rate of 50% or more

were treated as having some content validity. In the first assessment, 15 of the 21 items met or exceeded the Content Validity Ratio (CVR) standards. According to Ibiyemi et al. (2019), the mean CVR can be used as an indicator of overall test validity. Although the mean CVR was above the minimum ( $M = 0.535$ ), the researcher decided to continue improvement efforts and revise the six lowest-scoring items. She then resubmitted those six items to the panelists for a second review.

In the second review, four of the six items met or exceeded the CVR standard. Though two items still did not meet the minimum CVR, there were no instances in which any item was rated as “non-essential” by any panelist. Additionally, multiple panelists contacted the researcher seeking further clarification as to the purpose of the assessment, due, seemingly, to the incongruent language of the CVR test of “essentiality” and the goal of this instrument to drive “best practice.” Essentiality seems to align more with required, which many aligned with legal compliance. The two questions that did not pass the second round were as follows:

- Question #9: *Does the site directly explain and dispel rape myths/victim blaming?* (CVR = 25%)
- Question #15: *Does the site include educational information about cultural or relational attitudes that impact sexual violence reduction?* (CVR = 25%)

The researcher decided to leave these two items in the instrument due to several reasons. First, both had numerous instances of “useful, though not essential” rankings. Second, neither item had a ranking of “non-essential.” Third, there was strong literature supporting a need for anti-victim blaming and cultural attitudes to be elevated in best practice student support (Hayes-Smith & Levett, 2010; Lund & Thomas, 2015; Maes et

al., 2021; Vladutiu et al., 2010). Finally, the overall CVR mean had risen notably after the second review ( $M = .69$ ), remaining well above the minimum. See Table 7 for a complete summary of CVR findings between the two rounds of validity testing.

**Table 7**

*Content Validity Ratio for Instrument Items*

Question Item	1st Round	2nd Round
1	0.5	
2	0.5	
3	0.875	
4	0.75	
5	0.875	
6	1	
7	0.5	
8	0	0.875
9	0	0.25
10	0.857	
11	0.75	
12	1	
13	-0.25	
14	0.625	
15	-0.25	0.25
16	-0.25	1
17	1	
18	0.75	
19	1	
20	0.25	0.875
21	0.75	
<i>M</i>	0.535	0.69

### ***Instrument Reliability***

To address RQ2.2, the researcher used an online random selection software to choose four institutions from the to-be-sampled list and piloted the student-centricity instrument on each of the Title IX websites with Expert 2. Expert 2, who was already familiar with the purpose of this instrument, independently piloted the instrument on the same four websites. Cohen's kappa was run to determine the level of agreement between raters, or interrater reliability. Item scores were compared and found to have a moderate level of agreement, which means it is above chance agreement ( $\kappa = .521$ , 95% CI, .253 to .745,  $p < .001$ ). Problematic items were further revised to improve their agreement. (See Appendix D for a summary of question revisions and related feedback.)

To assess the instrument's internal consistency, the researcher also ran Cronbach's alpha on across 22 items (the 21 questions as well as total score). Alpha coefficients normally range between 0 and 1. The Cronbach's alpha was  $\alpha = .67$ , which is between the questionable and acceptable range of reliability, though closer to acceptable. The researcher noticed no notable improvement when assessing the impact of any deleted item (i.e., the removal of any one item). See Table 8 for a summary of these findings.

**Table 8**

#### ***Internal Reliability Results of Instrument***

<b>Cronbach's Alpha</b>	<b>Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items</b>	<b>N of items</b>
.673	.679	22

During this stage, the researcher also made some design decisions to the instrument to improve its accessibility and clarity. The researcher chose to separate the examples and question item background information from the direct question and move elsewhere for those who seek more help in responses. The researcher also decided to add a cover page with thematic definitions and overall purpose. As a result of this process, the instrument met both statistical bases for sufficient measures of interrater reliability as well as affirmation by the experts that the tool was reliable.

## **Phase 2: Quantitative Analyses of Website Scores and Sex-Crime Counts**

In Phase 1, the researcher developed an instrument to measure a Title IX website design's level of student-centricity, based on themes derived from expert interviews and an extensive literature review. The instrument was then submitted to professionals, who would be likely users of the instrument, for review. Feedback was solicited to refine the product's utility, while keeping in consultation with the experts and literature. Through this iterative process, the instrument was found to be both valid and reliable in its use within this context. Because the goal of this study is to offer practical opportunities for institutions to improve their Title IX support to students, the researcher sought to further situate its relevance in the larger scope of the reporting decisions of those who experience sexual violence.

To address RQ3, the researcher used the novel instrument from Phase 1, which had now established its valid and reliable interpretation for this context, to numerically score each Title IX website (predictor variable) of all colleges and universities that met the following criteria according to Campus Safety & Security (CSS):

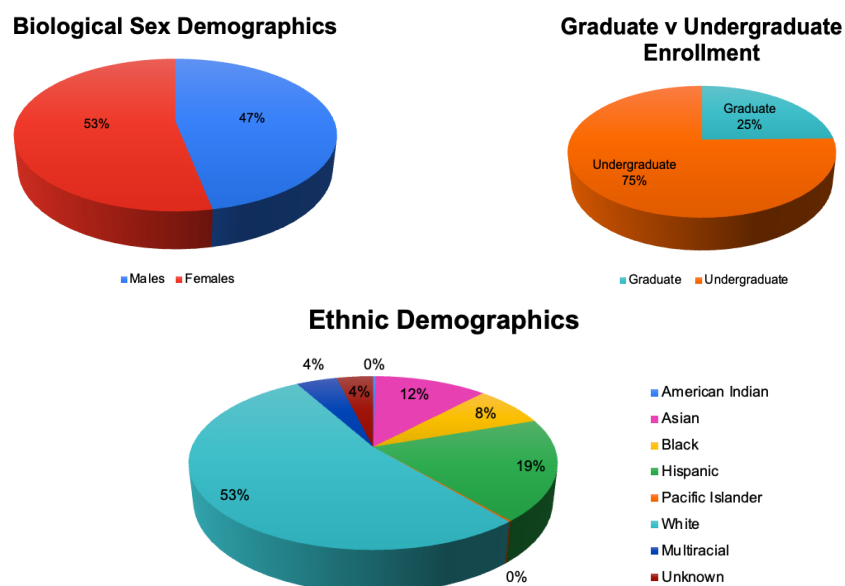
- U.S.-continent-based

- four-year
- public or private not-for-profit
- enrollment size of  $\geq 30,000$  students
- offers on-campus student housing

All institutional demographic information was retrieved from the National Center for Education Statistics (n.d.). The average overall enrollment of the institutions included in this study ( $N = 78$ ) was 41,428 of which the average male enrollment was 19,439 and the average female enrollment was 21,989. The average undergraduate student enrollment was 31,287 and the average graduate student enrollment was 10,272. The average demographic among all institutions was White 53%, Hispanic 19%, Asian 12%, Black 8%, Multiethnic 4%, and American Indian 4%. See Figure for a visual summary of the institutional demographics.

**Figure 7**

*Demographic Norms of Sampled Institutions*





The website scores of student-centricity were compared to each institution's CSS published sex-related criminal offenses (outcome variable). The researcher included report counts for the below descriptions of sexual violence-related incidences, as defined by the CSS database:

- Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) offenses
  - Domestic violence
  - Dating violence
  - Stalking
- Criminal offenses
  - Rape (non-forcible and forcible)
  - Fondling

See Table 9 for a summary of the institution sizes and reported sex-related crime offense counts.

**Table 9**

*Institution Characteristics Compared to Reported Offenses*

	25th percentile	50th percentile	75th percentile
Institution Size	32,617	38654	113,514
<b>VAWA Offenses</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>54</b>	<b>86.75</b>
Fondling Offenses	7.25	13.5	19
Stalking Offenses	13.25	23	48.25
<b>Criminal Offenses</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>56</b>
Dating Violence Offenses	4.25	12	22
Domestic Violence Offenses	3	7	21
Rape Offenses (All)	14.25	27	38.75
<b>Total Offenses</b>	<b>62.25</b>	<b>98</b>	<b>129.75</b>

Using a cross-sectional approach, data were analyzed to assess whether, and to what extent, an institution's student-centric Title IX website score was associated with an increased or decreased number of reported cases of sex-related criminal offenses that occurred on campus, in student housing, off-campus properties, and public property. As the outcome data were discrete counts, the initial design intended to utilize Poisson regression. However, regression diagnostics identified significant overdispersion, meaning that the modeling assumption of equidispersion (i.e., variance must be equal to the mean) was not met. As such, a negative binomial regression model, which is a generalization of Poisson regression, was determined to better fit the data because it does not assume equidispersion (Gardner et al., 1995). The following presents the results of that analysis with regards to RQ3.

Of the institutional websites examined ( $N = 78$ ), student-centricity scores resulted in a range from 6 to 18. A score of 21 was the highest possible student-centricity score and 0 was the lowest possible. When comparing the total reported offenses to the institutional total website student-centricity score, controlling for institutional size, no statistical significance was indicated ( $p < .05$ ). Analyses were explored for total reported offenses, as well as the sub-categories within Criminal and VAWA to examine whether student-centricity scores were associated with reports of some, but not other, offenses. See Table 10 for a summary of these findings. A statistically significant association was observed between website scores and Stalking reports, such that a 1-unit increase in the website student-centricity score was associated with an 8% increased prevalence of reported Stalking offenses (95% CI: 1.00, 1.16,  $p = 0.041$ ).

**Table 10***Reported Offenses Compared to Website Scores*

	<b>PR</b>	<b>Lower CI</b>	<b>Upper CI</b>	<b><i>p</i></b>
<b>VAWA Offenses</b>	<b>1.05</b>	<b>0.99</b>	<b>1.11</b>	<b>0.125</b>
Stalking	1.08	1.00	1.16	0.041*
Dating Violence	0.98	0.90	1.07	0.685
Domestic Violence	1.06	0.97	1.17	0.200
<b>Criminal Offenses</b>	<b>0.96</b>	<b>0.89</b>	<b>1.02</b>	<b>0.153</b>
Rape (All)	0.96	0.91	1.02	0.185
Fondling	0.96	0.87	1.06	0.347
<b>Total Offenses</b>	<b>1.00</b>	<b>0.94</b>	<b>1.06</b>	<b>0.959</b>

Note: PR = Prevalence Ratio, which represents the ratio of reports compared to a one-unit increase in website score

\* =  $p < .05$

The researcher then divided the total website scores into four quartiles to examine potential nonlinear effects and/or exposure response effects. See Table 11 for a summary of the institutional report totals and website scoring quartile descriptions.

**Table 11***Summary of Reported Offenses and Website Score Quartiles*

	<b><i>n</i></b>	<b>Range</b>	<b><i>SD</i></b>	<b><i>M</i></b>
All Institutions	78	28,058-113514	13,221	41,427
Total Offenses	10,358	11-1,909	216	132
Total Website Scores	78	6-18	2.94	13.17
Quartile 1	24	6-11		
Quartile 2	26	> 11, <= 14		
Quartile 3	9	> 14, <= 15		
Quartile 4	19	> 15, 18		

There were several statistically significant findings. When examining total Criminal offenses, student-centricity scores in the second quartile were associated with a 43% decreased prevalence of reported offenses (PR: 0.57, 95% CI: 0.36, 0.90,  $p = 0.012$ ) relative to the first quartile, while institutions in the fourth quartile were associated with a 44% decreased prevalence of reported offenses (PR: 0.56, 95% CI: 0.34, 0.91,  $p = 0.002$ ). Overall, quartiles were significantly and inversely associated with the report counts of total Criminal offenses. While associations were inverse for total Criminal offenses, quartile models of total VAWA offenses showed significant positive associations, with those in the third quartile of student-centricity scores associated with a 130% increased prevalence of reported offenses (95% CI: 1.35, 4.10,  $p = 0.003$ ). Table 11.1 presents the results of the quartile models for the primary study outcomes.

**Table 11.1***Association Between Website Score Quartiles and Reported Offenses, by Total Category*

Offense Type		PR	95% CI		p
			LL	UL	
Total Offenses		1.00	0.94	1.06	0.959
	Q1	reference	reference	reference	
	Q2	0.73	0.50	1.07	0.109
	Q3	1.44	0.85	2.52	0.178
	Q4	0.73	0.48	1.12	0.139
Total Criminal Offenses		0.96	0.89	1.02	0.153
	Q1	reference	reference	reference	
	Q2	0.57	0.36	0.90	0.012*
	Q3	0.83	0.45	1.61	0.552
	Q4	0.56	0.34	0.91	0.002*
Total VAWA Offenses		1.05	0.99	1.11	0.125
	Q1	reference	reference	reference	
	Q2	1.01	0.67	1.50	0.970
	Q3	2.30	1.35	4.10	0.003*
	Q4	1.00	0.65	1.55	0.996

Note. Number of institutions = 78; website score range = 0-21; CI = confidence interval; LL = lower limit; UL = upper limit; Q = quartile; PR = prevalence ratio; \* =  $p \leq .05$ .

Table 11.2 presents the quartile models for each offense by sub-category, in which there were several other notable findings. As in the total Criminal Offenses, when looking at Rape offenses, there was a statistically significant inverse association between website scores and prevalence of reports, meaning that institutions with higher student-centricity scores had fewer Rape reports (PR = 0.63, 95% CI: 0.43, 0.93.  $p = 0.022$ ). However, when looking at Stalking and Domestic Violence offenses, a significantly positive association was observed. Institutions with website scores in the third quartiles

associated with prevalence of Stalking and Domestic Violence reports 215% and 199% higher than institutions with website ratings in the first quartile, respectively.

**Table 11.2**

*Association Between Website Score Quartiles and Reported Offenses, by Sub-category*

Sub-Category	Quartile	PR	95% CI		p
			LL	UL	
Rape (All)	1	reference	reference	reference	
	2	0.63	0.43	0.93	0.022*
	3	0.88	0.52	1.56	0.642
	4	0.65	0.43	1	0.051
Fondling	1	reference	reference	reference	
	2	0.61	0.32	1.14	0.094
	3	0.91	0.38	2.31	0.823
	4	0.53	0.27	1.04	0.051
Stalking	1	reference	reference	reference	
	2	1.06	0.66	1.69	0.806
	3	3.15	1.72	6.14	<0.001*
	4	1.06	0.64	1.76	0.825
Dating Violence	1	reference	reference	reference	
	2	0.72	0.38	1.34	0.296
	3	0.77	0.33	1.96	0.548
	4	0.77	0.39	1.54	0.457
Domestic Violence	1	reference	reference	reference	
	2	1.39	0.71	2.7	0.334
	3	2.99	1.26	7.97	0.018*
	4	1.23	0.6	2.56	0.658

*Note.* Number of institutions = 78; website score range = 0-21; CI = confidence interval; LL = lower limit; UL = upper

limit; Q = quartile; PR = prevalence ratio

\* $p \leq .005$ .

## **Closing**

In this chapter, findings were presented regarding three guiding research questions. In response to RQ1, the researcher collected data from three interviews with Title IX experts and relevant literature to determine student-centric elements and create an instrument to measure them. In response to RQ2.1, the null hypothesis was rejected, as the student-centricity scoring instrument was found to have face and content validity. In responses to RQ2.2, the null hypothesis was rejected, as the instrument was also found to have interrater reliability. In response to RQ3, the null hypothesis was rejected, as statistically significant associations between the website scores and institutional sex-related crime reports were found.

To determine significant associations of the nonlinear data, the student-centricity website scores were examined both overall and as quartiles. In doing so, positive associations were found for reports of Stalking when examining the overall website score totals, for Domestic Violence when looking at the third quartile of website scores, and for total VAWA offenses when looking at the third quartile of website scores. For reports of total Criminal offenses and Rape offenses in the second website score quartile, reported offenses decreased as website scores increased (an inverse association). In the next chapter, the researcher will offer interpretations of the findings and practical recommendations, as well as further research opportunities.

## **CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION**

The goal of this study was to create a practical tool that encourages institutions to assess (or reassess) their Title IX websites, taking into consideration design choices that may impact student help-seeking after sexual trauma. Title IX, the 1972 federal civil rights law, obligates institutions to protect its students from gender-based discrimination. Though the law encompasses more than sexual violence, its regulations specific to sexual violence (e.g., assault and stalking) have become highly controversial and politicized (Gravely, 2021; Houston, 2017). Sexual violence is the most underreported of all crimes (Sinozich & Langton, 2014; Vail, 2019; Wood et al., 2017). Across higher education, only an estimated five percent of campus rapes are reported based on several national surveys (Panel on Measuring Rape and Sexual Assault in Bureau of Justice Statistics Household Surveys et al., 2014; Vail, 2019). A survivor of sexual violence does not have to report the incident to get help. However, reporting does improve their likelihood of receiving mental and medical support, while also serving as a deterrent of future crimes, as many assaulters are repeat offenders (Boyle et al., 2017).

This law has been especially contentious within the past three presidential cabinets. Title IX is currently undergoing yet another review of policy changes, expected to be published in 2022. However, despite the continued attention paid to Title IX, sexual violence and underreporting continue to be problematic (AAU, 2020; Melnick, 2018; RAINN, 2021; Sinozich & Langton, 2014; Vail, 2019; Wood et al., 2017). Before an institution can promote itself as a safe, inclusive learning environment, it needs to first establish communication and reporting processes that seek to avoid retraumatization or alienation. To determine how institutions can best support students, there needs to also be



an understanding of the current student needs and values, with particular attention to their perceived institutional trust. An institution's website design can be one important way to demonstrate this understanding and strengthen student trust.

Following the critical feminist framework, a major goal of this study was to bring marginalized voices to the center of sexual violence awareness by way of highlighting the following three approaches into institutional website design: student-centeredness, accessibility, and trauma informed. The increasing reliance on web-based technology in student support, as well as the lack of Title IX website design resources beyond legal compliance, demonstrate necessary avenues for this work (Rezaeean et al., 2012). Because an online search is an expected, safe first step in the help-seeking process after a sexual trauma, websites designated to support survivors should make intentional design choices with those students in mind.

According to Ansari et al. (2016), the "contextual nature of qualitative findings complement the representativeness and generalizability of quantitative findings" (p. 140). Thus, the first phase of this study collected qualitative data to help in the development of a novel instrument, which was found to be reliable and valid, intending to measure a university Title IX website's student-centricity. An internet search is an expected starting place for students seeking support in the aftermath of a traumatic sexual encounter, as well as for students who have harmed others and want to change. The goal of the instrument was to, thus, support institutions in their efforts to improve student institutional access, trust, and sense of belonging (especially during times of legal fluctuation and staff turnover).

The second phase of this study collected quantitative data to determine the instrument's generalizability and situate it within institutional practices. As the researcher, I scored a sample of websites that met certain criteria and then compared each institution's total score to its sex-related crime report counts, as they appeared in the U.S. Department of Education's CSS database. The analysis was intended to discern a possible association between a student-centric website design and sexual violence reporting. What follows is a discussion of both phases of my findings as they relate to each of the research questions.

### **Discussion of Results**

Three research questions drove this study. I used a mixed methods approach to respond to the questions, which involved the collection of open-ended data (qualitative) through interviews of Title IX experts to help in the development an instrument that could then be administered on close-ended data (quantitative) to determine if an association exists between a website score and sex-related crime reports.

#### ***RQ1: What do Title IX experts perceive as the primary attributes of a student-centric Title IX website?***

Three Title IX experts were interviewed to obtain their professional insight into institutional experiences that might factor into student reporting after sexual trauma. In advance of the interviews and based on literature, I established key elements of student-centricity as they relate to Title IX. The experts were asked to rank six key elements in order of importance:

1. Accessibility
2. Care & Compassion

3. Comprehensive
4. Clear Outcomes
5. Engaging Design
6. Trauma-Informed Language.

In following the critical feminist framework, driving this phase of the study was the goal to highlight existing power dynamics that are negatively impacting students from seeking institutional help after sexual trauma, especially those students historically marginalized by institutions. The Title IX experts were selected because they have the legal knowledge required to speak to Title IX processes, as well as a unique insight into what occurs during various student reporting experiences (Gannon & Davies, 2014). From the interviews, seven themes emerged:

1. Equitable and humane resources
2. Community partnership improves support
3. Importance of staff training and student education
4. Transparency of expectations and protection of privacy
5. Awareness of and trust in Title IX
6. Understanding trauma for effective communication
7. Campus context in resource development and strategies

The themes were then examined within the context of the experts' student-centric element rankings to further explore connections between literature and their experiences. Because the emergent themes fit well within at least one of the literature-based student-centric elements, this affirmed the healthy direction of the instrument development. See Table 12 for a summary of the themes and element connections.

**Table 12***Derived Expert Themes Compared to Student-Centric Elements of Title IX Website*

Derived Themes	Related Website Element(s)
Equitable and humane resources	Accessibility, Care & Compassion, Engaging Design
Community partnership improves support	Comprehensive, *External Resources
Importance of staff training and student education	Comprehensive, Clear Outcomes
Transparency of expectations and protection of privacy	Clear Outcomes, Trauma-Informed, *Transparency
Awareness of and trust in Title IX	Comprehensive, Engaging Design, *Transparency
Understanding trauma for effective communication	Trauma-Informed, Care & Compassion
Campus context in resource development and strategies	Accessibility, Comprehensive, External Resources

\* Indicates element added into sorting by expert

While much of the experts' discussions of experiences stemmed from investigations of sexual reports, they all spoke to the importance of the Title IX office's online presence as an important way to steer students into their offices. Very few studies have focused on Title IX website student impacts, but student success studies have concluded that publishing resources online does not make them automatically accessible to students (Broadhead, 2021). One of the few studies on Title IX websites (Hayes-Smith & Levett, 2010) found that only half of students were aware of survivor resources. Knowledge without effective context is of little value (Hannafin & Land, 2000). The limited research on the recommended content and aesthetics of a Title IX website affirms

the importance of further exploration on this topic.

An interconnectedness of the elements became more apparent when they were linked to the experts' themes. A well-developed site (Accessibility) is one that also has inviting aesthetics (Engaging Design), which must take into consideration both the presentation of language (Care & Compassion) and clarity of resources (Clear Outcomes). To achieve the design, a website should contextualize individualized student experiences (Trauma-Informed), which also requires an awareness that students may enter the site seeking immediate support and/or lifelong learning opportunities (Comprehensive). Newer tenets of student success (e.g., institutional trust and student sense of belonging) also fit well into the ideas of accessibility and trauma-informed approaches.

It is important for an institution to establish trust with its students through the demonstrative knowledge of and appreciation for their diversity of experiences. Establishing trust requires a perceived balance of power between the institution and the student. Studies have found most students are concerned about their safety on campus (Chekwa, 2013; Mertz, 2021). Since over 40% of all campus crimes are sexually violent in nature, it stands to reason then that sexual violence is a top concern (Irwin et al., 2021b). Alienation is a common feeling for students who experience sexual trauma, and when students feel alienated by their campus, they are prone to increased stress and decreased academic enjoyment (AAU, 2020; Kahu & Nelson, 2017). Students may be less likely to trust in their institution's ability to support them in times of trauma when websites contain outdated information, typos, broken links, or do not accurately address what they are going through.

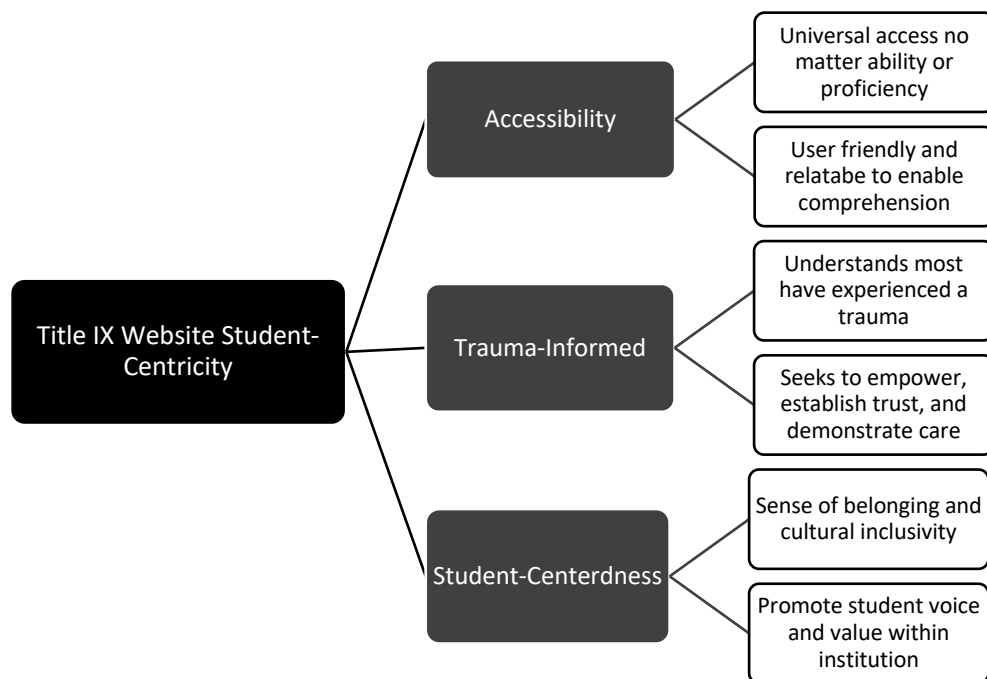
Recent studies have found significantly less perceived institutional trust among historically underserved student populations, especially students who identify as having a disability, LGBTQ, or Black (NSSE, 2021a). It may be no coincidence that these populations are also the same students found to be most at-risk for sexual violence victimization (AAU, 2020; Campbell et al., 2009; Horan & Beauregard, 2016; Know Your IX, 2018). Survivors of sexual trauma often feel unsafe, linked to common reasons students choose not to report (AAU, 2020). A recent study (Mertz, 2021) found that students who are most concerned about their safety on campus are less likely to seek institutional help. Thus, it is noteworthy that the experts and literature all speak to the importance of illustrating a community of care and establishing trust for all student communities within a Title IX website (ACHA, 2016; Hannafin & Land, 2000).

***RQ2. Does the evaluation instrument informed by Title IX expert opinion accurately assess Title IX website student-centricity?***

I conducted several phases of coding to develop themes and make connections to literature as they related to a Title IX website representation of student-centricity, to develop a measurement of student-centric elements within a Title IX website. Question items highlighted key aspects of expert-agreed-upon student-centric qualities: accessibility (e.g., user-friendliness and inclusive language), education (e.g., resources and terminology displayed in ways to improve sense of belonging), and visibility (e.g., training opportunities and community partnerships). Much of what was discussed within the interviews regarding student-centric qualities aligned with the literature on student-centeredness and intersected with recommended trauma-informed and accessibility practices. See Figure 8 for a graphic demonstration of this intersection of approaches.

**Figure 8**

*Approaches Within the Instrument's Student-Centric Definition*



**Situating Expert Experiences within Literature.** I was cognizant that this study captured only a few experiences and as experts in their fields, those voices were privileged. To increase the study's diversity, I ensured that the experts worked in different regions and had different ethnic and gender identities. To link the experience of three into the larger discussion of sexual violence and student success, I reevaluated any expert observations or opinions that did not immediately align with literature. There was no misalignment noticed during the interviews and only a few instances wherein the feedback on a question item draft did not immediately align. For example, Expert 1 disagreed with an initial draft of Question 15, which tied healthy relationships and masculinity to cultural education. She instead thought the question content was captured

within Question 13, which asked about prevention training. (See Appendix D for the complete list of question revision tracking.)

- Initial Draft of Question 15: *Does the site include cultural education related to sexual violence (e.g., healthy masculinity and healthy relationships)?*

The literature on student success and trauma-informed practices identifies a person's culture to be a strong influence on their self and relational perceptions (ACHA, 2016; Kahu & Nelson, 2018; Schuck, 2016). According to McCauley and Casler (2015), dangerous gender-based norms like hypermasculinity and homophobia often derive from one's culture and tend to perpetuate sexual violence in a society.

While student training can cover such topics, the literature seemed to call for education to be distinguished from training (AAU, 2017; Kahu & Nelson, 2017; Lund & Thomas, 2015; Melnick, 2018). Therefore, I was concerned that combining cultural education into a training question might minimize its visibility. For example, training can (and often does) focus on immediate support, such as a review of rights and responsibilities related to Title IX. On the other hand, education might focus on more long-term support, such as understanding of other perspectives to reduce biases and stereotypes linked to sexual violence tendencies. Additionally, in following the critical feminist lens, it felt important that I give specific space to call out marginalization, by emphasizing the needed focus on culturally inclusive educational practices (Howell et al., 1999). Thus, to help further differentiate it from prevention training, I reframed the question to lead with an educational emphasis.

- Revision of Question 15: *Does the site include educational information about cultural or relational attitudes that impact sexual violence reduction?*



This revision of the item still correlated with the literature and provided enough clarity for the expert who then agreed to its fit. Eventually, each question item received 100% agreement.

This stage of instrument development also helped to highlight possible points of confusion as to the purpose of the instrument for future users. Thus, for the final draft, in addition to adding context and examples next to each question item, I also decided to create a cover page that provided more context to the instrument's purpose and utility. (Refer to Appendix C for the final draft of the instrument.)

**Presenting Trustworthiness Through Trauma-Informed Strategies.** Many overlapping commonalities were noticed among the experts, as to their understanding of the Title IX office's role. Campus safety is a growing concern among students and their families, and studies show that the prevalence of sexual violence is not subsiding despite past efforts (AAU, 2020; Chekwa, 2013; Mertz, 2021). All experts agreed that Title IX visibility can relate to a student's perceived trust in their institution. Expert 2 indicated that a Title IX office can either be "supportive or corrosive" to the campus culture by way of its reputation among the community. Expert 1 spoke especially to the prioritized goal of establishing a trustworthy reputation, stating, "People trusted our team... we worked really hard to protect both parties. Because, you know, that was our job."

The charge of establishing a trusting relationship through inclusive and compassionate communication aligns with literature on the trauma-informed approach. McCauley and Casler (2015) emphasize safety in their description of a trauma-informed campus, which is one that creates "an environment where survivors feel more comfortable reporting sexual assault and have safe spaces to share their stories" (p. 585).

The experts agreed that there are many benefits to a Title IX website incorporating a trauma-informed model. Specifically, a site should encourage help-seeking, clarify student rights, and educate while intentionally avoiding a design that would alienate or deter reporting. The following are relevant interview excerpts:

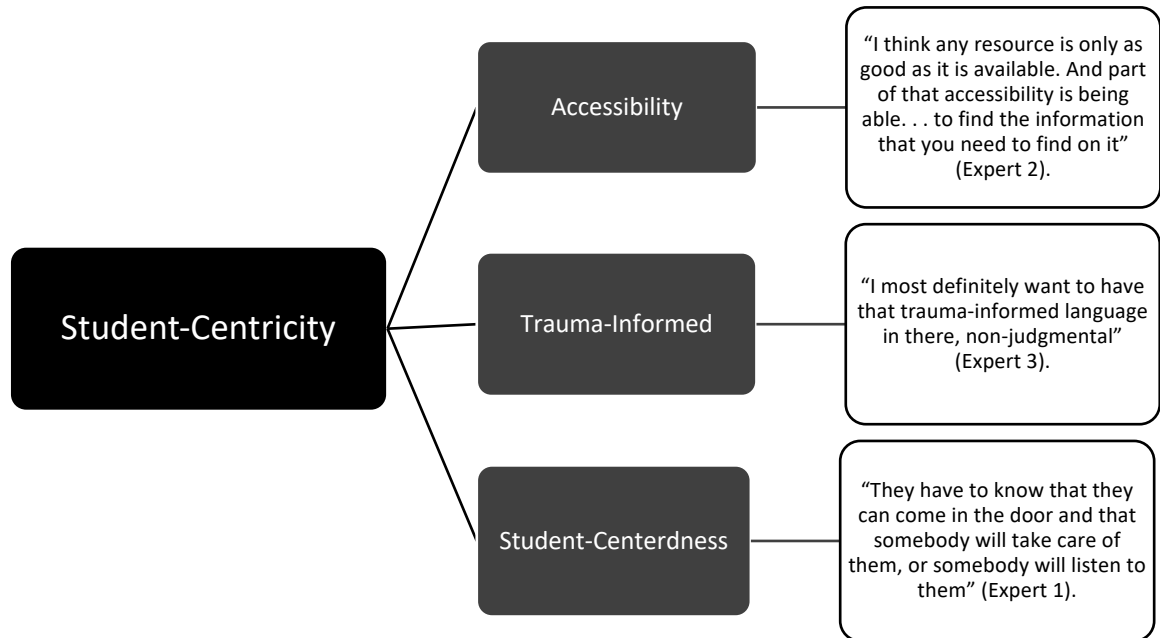
- “They have to know that they can come in the door and that somebody will take care of them, or somebody will listen to them” (Expert 1).
- “I think any resource is only as good as it is available. And part of that accessibility is being able. . . to find the information that you need to find on it” (Expert 2).
- “I most definitely want to have that trauma-informed language in there, non-judgmental” (Expert 3).

Experts 1 and 3 mentioned that they were amid a Title IX website update, which demonstrates that the website is a tool being considered among Title IX offices.

However, effective trauma-informed and accessible approaches require a committed investment from the institution to improve its student-centeredness (Broadhead, 2021). All three of these approaches aligned well with the expert experiences. See Figure 9 for quoted examples of this alignment.

**Figure 9**

*Expert Quotes Demonstrating Key Approaches to Student-Centric Title IX Website*



***RQ2.1. Is the website evaluation instrument developed from RQ1 valid and reliable?***

After creating an initial draft of the instrument, I continued to work with Experts 1 and 2 to ensure its content trustworthiness. My hypothesis was that the instrument would prove to have face and content validity. Feedback during this stage included scoring clarifications, word choice discussions, and stronger differentiations for items that were interpreted as initially too similar or vague. Each item received 100% agreement from the experts before moving on to a panel of 15 higher education professionals, likely users of this instrument, to assess each item's essentiality by way of measuring the Content Validity Ratio (CVR). This stage consisted of two rounds of review. In the first round, 15 items passed the CVR minimum ( $\geq 50\%$ ). The remaining

six were revised based on feedback and resubmitted to the panelists. Of those, four of the six passed. After careful review of panelists, experts, and literature, I elected to keep the two items that did not pass for several reasons. The overall mean CVR was above the minimum ( $M = 0.535$ ) and no panelist had ranked these items as “non-essential.” Also, several panelists called or emailed requesting further clarification as to the purpose of the instrument, initially thinking it was to capture requirements of a website rather than design best practices. If many panelists who did *not* contact me may have answered the assessment with a similar misconception, this led to the assumption that an introduction to the instrument’s purpose would help to reduce user confusion. Overall, the instrument underwent several rounds of revision to ensure as much user accessibility as possible.

**Adding a Cover Page to the Instrument.** During the panel review and piloting stage of instrument development, certain observations led to my decision to add a cover sheet to the final instrument. In the first round of content validity assessment, I observed a few panelists were ranking items as “non-essential” and “useful, but not essential.” These particular items related to topics that were well beyond Title IX compliance standards (e.g., rape myth debunking and social justice connections). Compliance refers to the institution’s legal obligation in its protection of students, whereas best practice seeks to go beyond obligation by way of forward-thinking care goals. Lancaster and Lorello (2020) pose an important question for administrators: “How do we create a balance between care and compliance?” (para. 10). Since the instrument is essentially a measure of best practice *after* compliance, I concluded that without a deeper explanation of the instrument’s purpose, it could potentially be misconstrued as a measure of compliance. The addition of a cover sheet to this instrument helps usability because it

summarizes the goal/intention and defines the themes from which each question was derived.

***RQ2.2. Is the website evaluation instrument developed from RQ1 reliable?***

The researcher hypothesized that the instrument would prove to have interrater reliability. To establish the instrument's reliability, four randomly selected institutions were independently piloted by two raters: Expert 2 and myself. Cohen's kappa was run and found to have a moderate level of agreement between raters, which is above chance agreement. During this stage, Expert 2 offered additional clarifying feedback, which led to the decision to separate the examples from the question and move them into endnotes, along with other relevant question context and term definitions. Throughout this stage of instrument development, I noted that much of the revision feedback I received related to accessibility, inclusivity, and clarity, which synchronized with the goal of the instrument itself and reiterated how impactful design and word choice can be within online communication.

To assess its internal reliability, Cronbach's alpha was run and it was found to be bordering acceptable. This is unsurprising because the items within the instrument overall are not all measuring identical constructs. For example, a user's response to a question on key terms defined would not necessarily relate to the way the user responded to a question on broken links. However, the researcher felt this analysis important to run for transparency. Future research on the instrument's reliability may be warranted.

***RQ3. Is the website student-centricity score associated with the number of institutional sex-related crimes reported?***

Because this instrument was designed to be a best practice tool for those tasked with improving their institution's Title IX website, an analysis was run to determine possible associations between website student-centricity and reported sexual violence incidents on a campus. Thus, having found the instrument to be trustworthy, I applied it on all institutions' Title IX websites that fit the selection criteria ( $N = 78$ ). I hypothesized that an association between the score and reports would be found. During the website scoring, I came into a few unexpected moments wherein I had to decide how to proceed to ensure a fair scoring process.

**Exclusion from Review Decisions.** Very quickly, I observed that some of the question item information could be found within policy documentation but not within the actual website. For example, one university had all the information in a PDF of their policy linked on the website. Its website, however, only provided a brief FAQ list and office contact information. Though the information within the policy itself is useful, reading through 50 pages of policy and interpreting legal jargon to access resources or reporting options does not follow accessibility or trauma-informed practices, which dictates that services should be presented in user-friendly, participatory ways (ACHA, 2016; McCauley & Casler, 2015). Studies on accessibility have also found PDFs to be commonly problematic (Campoverde-Molina et al., 2021). This agreement was reiterated during multiple interviews with the experts. For example, Expert 1 stated, "I think it's important to have the policy there. But sometimes it's easier if you have the bullets of the policy so that they're not inundated with words." Therefore, I decided that I would not include policy documents in the website scoring.

**Inclusion in Review Decisions.** During the review of websites, I observed that some university websites do have student-centric details, but they are scattered across several sites. This increases the potential confusion for new users who may not know where to go. The disorganization I experienced caused those resources to lose some of their power. To make the scoring process as equitable as possible, I decided to include victim-related websites only if they were readily accessible through the institution's Title IX website.

It is important to pay attention to the effect that page navigation had on my experience as a user, as I noted feelings of confusion and frustration in trying to figure out where to go. One institution, for example, had no resources and no prevention discussion on its Title IX website. After extra digging into the site through "link diving," I eventually came across a sexual misconduct page geared towards students. I did not include this case in the scoring because, as with others like it, the information was very difficult to find, making it problematic for students seeking help. It is important to note that professional UX website designers can evaluate websites for usability in this way.

**Website Observation Highlights.** During the website scoring stage, I also made two important observations noting the overall user experience.

***Getting Lost in the Shuffle.*** Each institutional system seemed to take its own approach to the organization of information that related to sexual violence. Some universities have several sites directed towards victimization and support, but not all of them were connected. This made the search confusing and frustrating. Universities had a Title IX site via Human Resources; via a Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion department; via a Student Conduct office, etc. Some had one site for both staff and students, whereas

others separated the staff and student resources on different sites. Many times, I felt lost in the shuffle between pages, or could not remember how I got from one site to the other. Regardless, it felt important, from a user perspective, to make it very clear upon immediate entry into the site which information is for staff, and which is meant for survivors or others seeking Title IX support. Similarly, it seemed important to reduce the amount of navigation required to receive help-seeking information.

***Saying, not Showing.*** A major theme brought up during the interviews was to avoid generalizing what a victim or perpetrator of sexual violence looks like. The use of imagery can be impactful, but it is important for institutions to be aware of representation within those images. Though gender-based crimes are most often targeted to women and LGBTQ persons, it is important that resources not seem limited to those individuals or, better yet, to capture *all* of those individuals by having targeted resources for multiple groups. Though some sites acknowledged that sexual violence happens among all genders, their resource titles and imagery implied otherwise. I did come across this often enough to feel it deserved specific attention. Here are two examples: One university only had pictures of female students in the victim services section. While there were several links to women's centers for resources, there were no male-specific or LGBTQ linked resources. A second university site had videos wherein domestic violence survivors shared their experiences. All the victims interviewed were female and all of the authority figures (e.g., police officers and survivor advocates) were male. This juxtaposition seemed in poor taste, reflecting historical patriarchal attitudes.

When sexual violence is only depicted as a "women's issue" it allows people to ignore the problem or to worry that their experiences do not fit into that mold and are,



thus, not worthy of reporting. In her interview, Expert 3 warned that if a website is not inclusive in victim and assailant types, “you’re missing a whole population of individuals that want to report and that need to report.” Images can speak just as loudly as words, which means that the institution must be mindful that, regardless of what the site’s text says, all images displayed on a site should not discourage people from utilizing its services.

**Analyses of Website Scores and Offense Reports.** After all the sampled institution sites were scored, a series of analyses were run to compare each website student-centricity score to its reported sex-related crime counts for the most recent year reported at the time (2019).

**Discussion of Non-Associations.** While analyses offered in some relevant results, in other results there were no significant associations. For example, when comparing the Total offenses reported to the total website student-centricity score, no statistical significance was identified ( $p < .05$ ). When looking at total and quartile scores of website student-centricity, no statistically significant associations were found for reports of Fondling and Dating Violence, which were two of the least frequently reported crimes across all institutions.

One possible explanation for the overall minimal statistical significance could be the sample size. As tests of significance in frequentist statistical approaches are influenced by sample size, it is possible that having an  $N$  of 78 was not adequate to detect associations for some of the studied outcomes with smaller magnitudes. Had more institutions met the selection criteria, I might have found more statistically significant

differences. Unfortunately, there was no possible way to increase the study size, as I included all institutions that met the study inclusion criteria.

***Discussion of Positive Associations.*** I also found significant positive associations that were consistent with the *a priori* assumptions. Significant positive associations were found within total VAWA reports and website scores within the third quartile, with a 130% increase in reported offenses. Stalking reports also showed a significant positive association when looking at total website scores, in that a 1-unit increase in student-centricity score was associated with an 8% increased prevalence of reported offenses.

One possible explanation for the significant, positive associations with Stalking may have to do with the rise of cyber violence. Cyberstalking, for example, is a crime most often targeted to young adult females (ages 18-30), involves threatening and/or sexually explicit, unwanted contact of another using technology (Kalaitzaki, 2020; RAINN, 2022). One study (Kalaitzaki, 2020) found that almost 24% of students surveyed had been the victim of cyberstalking. Cyber violence has become more prevalent as our society increases its reliance on technology and social media, so much so that social media and online safety tips have become national recommendations for universities to disperse to students (AAU, 2020). Students experiencing violence online may be more likely to seek help online.

When comparing quartile website scores, statistical significance was found for reports of Stalking and Domestic Violence among institutions that scored in the third quartiles, with prevalence of reported offenses about three times as often (215% and 199% higher, respectively) than in institutions with scores in the first quartile. One possible explanation could be the measurement strategy of the instrument itself. Some

associations on key aspects may have been positive, but because all questions are being weighed equally, this may have skewed the results. Almost all the positive associations were found in the third quartile of website scoring. As a reference, Quartile 3 included website total scores in the range of  $> 14$  and  $\leq 15$  points. Perhaps certain question items may have been extraneous. This intriguing finding merits future investigation.

***Discussion of Negative Associations.*** The following are findings of significant inverse associations inconsistent with the *a priori* assumptions, meaning that reporting rates decreased as website scores increased. When comparing quartiles, total Criminal offense reports were associated with a 43% decreased prevalence within institutions that scored within the second quartile. Also for Rape reports, institutions with website scores also in the second quartile were associated with a 37% decreased prevalence of reported offenses. Like the positive association observations, all negative associations appeared in the second quartile of website scores, which were scores in the range of  $> 11$  and  $\leq 14$  out of 21. While the reason is unclear and merit future investigation, the following are potential explanations as to findings that were negatively associated.

One possibility is reverse causality. Institutions more invested in their Title IX website development may have also invested in other campus initiatives that successfully created a campus culture intolerant of sexual offenses like rape. Additionally, studies show that survivors of rape often do not report because they were not convinced it was an actual crime (AAU, 2020; Krebs et al., 2007). Therefore, sites that offered more explanation as to their obligated jurisdiction of a crime like rape may have deterred reports, in that students may have been fearful their experiences did not meet the

protected definition of the crime. A longitudinal or quasi experimental study would be needed to elucidate an order of impact.

Reporting of Criminal or VAWA criminal offenses may also be influenced differently by the institutional reporting process. For example, there was a negative association of Rape reports and website scores. Rape is an extremely traumatic, violating, and confusing experience, which means that survivors are often concerned about judgement from loved ones or the way they will be treated by officials if they formally disclose their experiences (Campbell et al., 2009). Because of its nature, students who experience rape may feel more easily retraumatized in the reporting process compared to crimes like Stalking. With that understanding in mind, another possible explanation might be that websites with significant access to external resources may have also diverted reports by way of connecting survivors to private, off-campus help-seeking avenues, such as specialized therapy and support groups.

### **Delimitations**

In seeking answers to the questions for this study, there were certain delimitations the researcher set in advance. First, because the researcher could only collect Title IX website artifacts as they are presently published, website scores were compared to the most recently reported Clery data. Second, all four-year U.S. universities and colleges with on-campus housing and large sized student populations ( $\geq 30,000$ ) were sampled to allow for the removal of confounding variables that could interact with the study by sample restriction. These delimitations could make findings less generalizable to smaller institutions and institutions without on-campus student housing. Third, while UX web design is a highly relevant field within this study's aim, since it would outside of my

expertise and scope, this study primarily focused on website content. Finally, to capture all sex-related criminal reports, the Clery data includes any reports categorized as domestic violence, dating violence, stalking, forcible and non-forcible sex offenses, rape, and fondling. These reported numbers do not indicate any investigatory conclusions and are therefore treated as a proxy for sexual violence incidences.

### **Limitations**

This study has moved forward with the acceptance of several important limitations. First, the scope of the interviews used in development of this study's instrument was small. A critical feminist framework approach as an opportunity to transform gender-related concerns in the context of a larger society, while centering marginalized experiences (Kushner & Morrow, 2003). Ideally, there would have been more interviews in the study's first phase. Title IX offices are severely understaffed and overworked, so finding professionals with referrals who also had the time to commit to supporting the work of this study was a challenge. A greater threat to a study's trustworthiness "is not philosophical incompatibility or an incongruence of perspectives but the use of inappropriate or inadequate samples" (Thurston et al., 2008, p. 9-10). Therefore, the sampled experts for this study were very carefully selected by way of diversity of professional backgrounds and personal referrals as to their history in advocacy work.

Second, because of the novelty of this study's instrument, answers to RQ3 are contingent upon the strength of the instrument. Though derived from limited experiences, the instrument's balance with pertinent literature aids in the instrument's potential malleability, in that it may be adjusted to fit any institution's specific community needs.

Great care was taken during the instrument's development to avoid any experience of harm for users or institutional communities wherein the instrument is applied. Due to limitation of data needed to capture psychometric properties of the instrument (e.g., predictive or convergent validity), I instead focused on establishing the instrument's face and content validity.

Third, the instrument's aim is to offer support of institutional efforts to safeguard students, by way of considering their website's alignment to accessibility, student-centeredness, and trauma-informed approaches. Though this instrument discusses accessibility features of website design, it does not include technical aspects of web design. Ideally, a larger institutional sample size could also have been applied. To avoid confounding unmeasured variables that might differ between institutions of vastly different sizes, student bodies, and administrative structures, the sample was restricted to the selection criteria defined in advance of data collection. While decreasing the chance of residual confounding, this approach limited the number of institutions studied, and thus limited the statistical power of the analyses.

Third, the study moved forward with two assumptions. Though the Title IX website is an expected first stop for student victims of sexual violence, reactions to trauma vary greatly and help-seeking does not always occur. However, this study assumed that most student victims viewed or attempted to view their institutional Title IX websites after experiencing sexual trauma for its analyses. As a cross-sectional study, I also assumed that the websites had not significantly changed between the crime report year and the time of my assessment. The cross-sectional design, thus, limited the ability to draw causal inferences.

## **Implications**

As a result of this study, specific implications for practice will be discussed. These are aimed primarily at practitioners tasked with updating their institution's Title IX website, but many elements could also apply to any institutional website geared towards student support. Implications for related policy will also be discussed. This will be of importance for Title IX administrators as they seek to improve communication practices with students harmed by gender-based violence, as well overall education surrounding this issue.

### ***Implications for Practice***

Applying this student-centricity instrument to a Title IX website design has the potential to impact a student's decision as to whether the institution can be trusted with their story. Because the instrument findings are only intended to enhance awareness of the website's current state of student-centricity and not to be published, it is a low-stakes assessment that could have high impact if adjustments help to encourage student help-seeking and education.

User-friendliness is an important note for any administrator interested in improving their institution's website. As previously discussed in my experiences of website scoring, many institutional websites had navigational issues. In several assessments, I noted that the pages felt disorganized (e.g., having relevant information spread across several sites without direct paths between them) or leaned too heavily on their policy documentation (e.g., referred students to read policy instead of capturing key points outside of the policy). Online resources should not just be evaluated individually but also in context to how they are situated online among the others. Based on literature

and my own user experiences, I would recommend that sexual violence resources be reduced to one or two unique site pages, and all relevant sites readily labeled and linked across one another to reduce navigation “fatigue.” UX web design professionals can support institutions in this task.

Also, policy documentation tends to be lengthy and include legal jargon. While policy is important to be included on the websites, institutions should not expect students, especially those experiencing trauma, to review lengthy, formal policies to get help or clarity. Instead, I would recommend that key details be pulled from policy (e.g., institutional protections, reporting options, and supportive resources) and published clearly in a “digestible” format on the website to avoid possible fearmongering that legal jargon can incite.

Another recommendation is to increase search optics for survivor-specific online websites. To account for the differentiated names and site pages that universities elect to publish, it is imperative that, at the minimum, site pages with survivor resources and reporting options be easily found. Therefore, sites with this information should utilize search engine optimization (SEO) strategies so that students who are unsure of where to turn might easily discover Title IX websites when searching online for key words, like “stalking” and “rape” (Bin et al., 2018). Institutions can also put forth more effort into their social media platforms as avenues to increase Title IX awareness among students.

### ***Implications for Policy***

With the continued popularity of online learning and resource navigation, and the universal qualities of web accessibility and trauma-informed practice, applying these approaches to a website can only improve an institution’s online presence. Future policy



from the OCR or a Title IX training organization can improve their support of institutions through offering a website design guide. Policy can clarify key aspects of trauma-informed and accessibility approaches applicable to a Title IX web design. For example, embedding into the policy of website design should be a cognizance of video and image displays on the site. As mentioned earlier in the discussion, imagery that feeds into gender stereotypes can alienate survivors of sexual violence, as well as those seeking help from their own tendency towards violence.

Accessibility was notably a key component found within literature and expert discussions. During the website scoring phase of this study, I came across several instances of content that would have been difficult to access for to those who use assistive technology or who are second-language learners (e.g., missing headings or alternative text to help with those using screen readers). Bringing web accessibility advocates into Title IX web design assessments, thus, becomes a recommendation so that institutional leaders can ensure all of this important content is accessible to all users. Website guidance can also benefit from tools and strategies that follow international web accessibility standards. The Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI) and WAVE offers tools to support organizations in these efforts. Find WAI tools at [www.w3.org](http://www.w3.org) and WAVE tools at [www.wave.webaim.org](http://www.wave.webaim.org).

### **Future Research**

Further study and refinement of this instrument could have important implications for future research. This instrument mostly focused on website content rather than technical design. Future research should consider ways to integrate both technical design

aspects with trauma-informed, accessible, and student-centered content. Combined expertise from those in following areas would also be advised in future research:

1. Title IX legal experts
2. Gender-based violence prevention and intervention experts
3. User experience website professionals (UX)
4. Disability and accessibility advocates
5. Diverse student survivors

Because positive associations were found in the third quartile of total website scores, there may be some extraneous questions on this test that do not add distinctive power to the student-centricity measurement. Further studies might further explore the instrument's reliability, as well as conduct a factor analysis to evaluate the individual question items. This would help determine each item's power and overall necessity at measuring student-centric elements on their impact of sexual violence reporting. Another way to assess its overall impact is to apply this instrument in a pretest-posttest design, wherein an institution could redesign its website based on the instrument scoring, and then compare criminal reports in the following annual crime report.

Due to the nature of this study, experiences of those who understand and are a part of decision-making in Title IX work were captured. However, future research should expand upon these findings through capturing student experiences. Focus groups of students who did and did not report to their institutions should be brought into this conversation to elevate their voices, as well as to see if and how their experiences fit with the expert-derived themes. It is recommended that their voices as student-users and survivors should be necessarily central in the next stage of research.

Giving room to let survivors share their experiences may also glean insight into why certain sex-related crimes had positive associations (e.g., Stalking) and others negative (e.g., Rape). Asking students if they accessed their institution's website before choosing to report, as well as how they used it, and what factors contributed to their use (or lack thereof) would further help to enrich this instrument's utility. They might also assist future research by completing a web navigational experience to test the website for accessibility concerns.

## **Conclusions**

Critical feminist theory aims to destabilize gender-based oppressive systems. To be an effective feminist researcher, Thompson (2000) writes that it is important for the researcher to be willing to share their own story:

It is about informal learning and formal education and about how both have helped to shape our lives; about the knowledge that has been useful in the struggle for our liberation; and about the interpretations that can be made to throw some theoretical light upon the particularities and commonalities of our various, related and different journeys. (p. 6)

Though I had been an employee within higher education for years, my formal education of Title IX began during a graduate class project on legal issues. During my research for that project, I quickly realized how complicated a brief legal declaration had become over the years, and how institutions were seemingly left to interpret this very important law with limited, yet rapidly changing guidance. To understand how institutions were applying the guidance, I referenced several institution's Title IX websites and noted quickly that some came across as "cold" and others came across as "caring." It left me asking several questions that eventually led me to this study: How might I respond if I had accessed these sites after being sexually assaulted? How many institutions were

unintentionally isolating students in need, or sending the wrong messages about how an institution cares for its students? The struggle to keep up with continual Title IX updates while experiencing high staff turnover should lead institutions to understand the potential value of the Title IX website at assuring care and transparency (Backman et al., 2020; Brown, 2019; Sokolow et al., 2018). It thus becomes reasonable to care about the creation of resources for Title IX staff to help in their institution's website design.

More federal guidance has been provided to institutions about investigative practices. However, guidance on how to approach the website, especially from a prevention and survivor-centered lens, is still lacking. As mentioned by one of the experts involved in this study, a resource is only useful if it is accessible. Through my lived experiences as a student, teacher, trainer, and advisor in higher education, I saw the transformative potential of weaving together these three approaches:

- web accessibility to capture user-friendliness and inclusivity
- trauma-informed care to capture survivor experience and empowerment strategies
- student-centeredness to encompass strategies that support student belongingness, inclusivity, and social justice by inviting students into decision-making

Although this instrument may not have captured all the significant associations I first hypothesized, it did capture some, which means there is value to be had in this direction of research. The goal of this study was to offer a practical tool for institutions to use in their redesign of Title IX websites. If this instrument leads to even one person tasked with evaluating their institution's website, to think, "Oh, I never thought of looking at the site in this way," means this instrument did some good. Also, the examples provided for each

question help to serve as an idea-workshopping for ways to immediately address missing concepts.

Because as a young student and staff person there was a time that I could have used the support of the Title IX office, but did not know better, I think it is important to share my story. My first job was university tutoring when I was 19 years old. At the tutoring center, my number was posted in our office so that the staff could call if I was needed. When I first started getting disturbing text messages from an unknown number, I did not know who it was and ignored them. They continued for weeks before I eventually responded to try and make them stop. I became terrified when I learned the person texting was our center's custodian, someone with whom I was frequently alone in the office when tutoring at night. Never once did the few people I confided in suggest I bring this situation to the attention of our Title IX office. Never once did I think to tell my boss or report it to the custodian's boss. Instead, I avoided telling people because I felt embarrassed and somehow to blame. Worse even, I convinced myself that it was not a "big enough deal" to warrant telling anyone of authority. Though this experience was 14 years ago, the research conducted for this study sadly assures me not much has changed.

Sexual violence is complicated and deeply ingrained in our society, woven through many forms of oppressive cultural norms that make victims doubt their experiences or make aggressors feel justified in their behavior. Adjusting a website will not solve the violence. That is not the goal of this instrument. The fight to end it is unfortunately a longer journey out of our historically situated patriarchal tundra. Instead, this instrument offers some ways to immediately address missed opportunities for positive communication strategies. Trauma-informed care and accessibility approaches,

combined with student-centeredness, help us to understand that if we design for those most in need (be it a person experiencing trauma or a person with a disability), all of us will benefit. Any student may browse a Title IX website. One student may be undergoing trauma at the time. Another may have a visual disability that affects their web-browsing experience. Perhaps a student has just witnessed a friend hurt someone, or maybe it is someone with an interest in further educating themselves on gender-based violence. The Title IX website should make sure that all these students find a place that speaks to them.

Like Thompson (2000) expressed, what shapes us is a culmination of the learning that happens informally and formally. Websites are a popular medium used by most present-day students, and they teach students how their institutions care. Institutions should be aware of how their web presence impacts student perceptions. It is especially important for awareness of a Title IX website design, as it may be the first place a student goes to after experiencing sexual violence. That website may be the *only* tool that teaches them if and how to seek help. Be it the text on the screen or the experience of browsing, ultimately, this study boils down to intentionality. Being intentional with a website design is a low-cost way for institutions to demonstrate to students who need to hear it most that they matter.

## APPENDICES

## Appendix A

### Interview Protocol of Title IX Experts

*Opening Statement:* This interview is part of a study that I will be conducting in fulfillment of my dissertation for MTSU's Assessment, Learning, & Student Success Doctorate in Education program. In this interview, we will be discussing Title IX in higher education. As someone who has been a Title IX coordinator or in a similar role, your experience and authority on this topic is very valuable. We'll be discussing your work with Title IX as it relates to student-victim reporting habits, trauma-informed practices, changes to the law that impact institutional practices, and Title IX websites. The Office for Civil Rights defines the Title IX coordinator as an independent authority figure tasked with promoting gender equity by way of fighting against gender-based discrimination and advocating for the institution's community. Because of your experience in this role, your personal understanding of Title IX is most valuable to the establishment of an evaluation instrument I aim to create as part of my research. I will go into more detail at the end of this interview as to the nature of this instrument. I am going to record today's interview, but I will give you a pseudonym, and will ensure your personal identity is kept confidential. Do I have permission to record this interview?

*[If participant accepts]:* Thank you for your willingness to participate in this interview. Now, we will begin. As we go through the interview, I'm going to follow a scripted list of questions but may ask a few follow up questions or request examples. I also encourage you to interject when you have something related to offer. Later, I will ask you to complete a card sorting activity, during which you can rank elements of a Title IX website that you believe to be most valuable or harmful. I want you to provide as much detail and be as honest in your responses as you can. And I thank you in advance for doing so. Are you ready to begin?

### List of Questions

<b>Contextualizing Role of Title IX and the Coordinator</b>
1. What is your professional experience with Title IX?
2. In your role, if an allegation is made that is potentially detrimental to the university, can you explain your professional obligation between the university and the complainant?
3. What are all the roles that you believe the Title IX office should serve on its respective campus?
<b>Student Reporting Influencers</b>
4. What factors impact a student's decision to report a sexual violence incident to the Title IX office?
5. What experience have you had with the continued changes in Title IX policy guidance from the Office of Civil Rights?
6. How can institutional student support services be trauma informed?
<b>Title IX Website Design</b>



<p>7. When you think of a trauma-informed Title IX website, what specific design elements do you expect to see?</p> <p>a. Card sorting activity to order and/or discard student-centricity and trauma-informed elements (distinguish trauma-informed and student-centric elements, option to indicate desirable/undesirable, option to allow blank cards to fill in their own missing)</p> <p>8. Ideally, what should a Title IX website have to support students?</p> <p>9. What should a Title IX website avoid?</p>
<b>Concluding</b>
<p>10. Is there anything else you would like to share that you believe is relevant to this topic?</p>

*Closing Statement:* Thank you so much for taking the time. As I alluded to earlier, these interviews will be used to establish student-centric themes and key concepts of trauma-informed approaches that can be applied to Title IX website design. Derived from what each expert shares, I will create an instrument that aims to numerically score a Title IX website's student-centricity. The instrument, once proven reliable and valid, will be used to evaluate a sample of colleges and university Title IX websites and compare each score to its institution's Clery sex-related crime report counts. To ensure the trustworthiness of this instrument, would you permit me to follow up with its first draft for your review of its content?

## Appendix B

Table Linking Literature and Interviews to Title IX Website Instrument Construction

Website Element	Literature Support	Interviewee Support	Specific Items Constructed
<i>Accessibility</i>			
Well-developed, easy to use for diverse populations, easily found via search or university home page, inclusive, key terms defined	<p>“Inaccessible websites and apps hinder usage for people with disabilities while also being inconvenient to people without disabilities” (Cao &amp; Loiacono, 2021, p. 2)</p> <p>“[L]ack of centrality could make it difficult for students to efficiently locate the sexual assault related information, even if it does exist on the institution’s domain” (Lund &amp; Thomas, 2015, p. 535)</p>	<p>“If we’re not accessible, then that means that somebody can’t access our services”</p> <p>“They were worried that we couldn’t help them”</p> <p>“Inclusive of all types of victims”</p>	<p>Does the link to Title IX/Sexual Misconduct site appear directly on the university’s home page?</p> <p>Does the site avoid presuming physical attributes of a reporting or responding party?</p> <p>Do all links within the site take the user to working, current pages, and correct sites/resources?</p> <p>Are resources and text presented in accessible ways and without errors in formatting or grammar?</p> <p>Are key sexual violence terms explained/explored beyond legal definitions?</p>
<i>Trauma-Informed</i>			
Language aimed to empower survivors, recognizing individualized responses to trauma; emphasizes non-judgmental and anti-victim-blaming strategies to dispel rape myths	<p>“A coordinated, trauma-informed approach across disciplines (faculty, staff, administrators, health professionals) would create an environment where survivors feel more comfortable reporting sexual assault and have safe spaces to share their stories and where all members of the campus community feel empowered to challenge social norms, including hypermasculinity and homophobia, which perpetuate sexual violence” (McCauley &amp; Casler, 2015, p. 585)</p> <p>“Trauma-informed practices can be implemented as part of an impartial, unbiased</p>	<p>“it’s so important that for me, as an investigator to understand that trauma, and what trauma informed looks like, and how I need to do my investigation around and really handle that with care in order to get the information”</p> <p>“Trying not to stigmatize victims... making sure that everything about the university’s process doesn’t lend itself to blaming”</p>	<p>Does the site avoid using gender stereotypes?</p> <p>Does the site avoid any conflict of interest?</p> <p>Does the site refer to trauma and/or the ways in which people may respond to sexual violence?</p> <p>Does the site directly explain and dispel rape myths/victim blaming?</p>

	system that does not rely on sex stereotypes and otherwise complies with the Title IX regulations” (OCR, 2021c, 7:43)		
<i>Care &amp; Compassion</i>			
Language, design, and resources that demonstrate concern and assurance of care	<p>“Survivors should be made to feel supported and connected to resources on campus and in the community” (Dills et al., 2016, p. 10)</p> <p>“User satisfaction is strongly related to the perceived usefulness of the information system” (Bolhari, 2012, p. 1024)</p>	<p>“When we ask questions about them as a human being, they responded, feeling the care that was in the room”</p> <p>“Regardless of whether you're talking about policy, you know, the first thing I ask, ‘how are you?’”</p> <p>“Assuring that that the organization or institution is interested in the, in the student first and foremost”</p>	<p>Are the site pages easy to navigate between?</p> <p>Does the site offer specific ways the institution protects reporting and responding parties, outside of a link to the policy?</p> <p>Do "get help" resources appear upon direct entry into the site?</p> <p>Does the site describe campus initiatives to prevent sexual violence?</p>
<i>Comprehensiveness</i>			
Sexual violence treated holistically as a social justice issue beyond administrative concerns, addressing post-trauma experiences of victims as well as prevention education and empowerment strategies; offering external resources as a fully rounded approach to support	<p>School communication should “educate students through dispelling inaccurate beliefs about sexual assault and ultimately produce attitudinal change” (Hayes-Smith &amp; Levett, 2010, p. 339)</p> <p>“[W]eb-based programming should expand to raising awareness of issues related to sexual assault, debunking rape myths, teaching risk-reduction strategies, and providing services for victims of sexual assault” (Lund &amp; Thomas, 2015, p. 531)</p>	<p>“We need to do is first bring awareness and education”</p> <p>“Broaden their definition and broaden their experience in their understanding”</p> <p>“Train... every student leader”</p> <p>“Different programs around sexual misconduct and, you know, dating, relationships”</p> <p>“Whole idea of what is consent”</p> <p>“They need to know about resources outside of the institution”</p>	<p>Are external options offered for anyone seeking help outside of the institution?</p> <p>Does the site include educational information about cultural or relational attitudes that impact sexual violence reduction?</p> <p>Does the site present sexual violence as a social justice issue?</p>
<i>Clear Outcomes</i>			
Explanations that help students identify resource and reporting options from start to finish, emphasize transparency in privacy options	<p>“Survivors communicated that they did not think it would be useful or helpful to tell the support about their assault” if they were unsure or distrusting of the outcome (e.g., the perpetrator may go unpunished, or they would</p>	<p>“a lot of confidence could be engendered if students understood kind of what that looks like going into that process.”</p> <p>“Fear. Sometimes, yeah, I guess fear is still the word for that. Sometimes people see</p>	<p>Are all of the ways to report for students and those reporting harm clearly explained?</p> <p>Are both mandatory reporters and confidential reporting options clearly identified?</p>

	<p>be doubted or blamed for the assault) (Holland &amp; Cortina, 2017, p. 57)</p> <p>“Research has shown that making the information more personally relevant to students increases the likelihood they will pay attention to the message” (Hayes-Smith &amp; Levett, 2010, p. 348)</p>	<p>the legal language, you know, sometimes, you know, I think it's important to have the policy there. But sometimes it's easier if you have like, the bullets have the policy so that they're not inundated with words”</p> <p>“Making sure there isn't anything contradictory to sort of university policy”</p>	<p>Are the steps clear as to who will follow up on a reported incident and how?</p>
<i>Engaging Design</i>			
Information presented clearly, concisely, visually appealing, user-friendly	<p>“[A] attractive content may be more frequently used by students, increasing knowledge dissemination and retention” (Lund &amp; Thomas, 2015, p. 535)</p> <p>“Continuously undergoing innovative techniques within the websites not only fulfills the customers’ needs also goes beyond their needs” (Bolhari, 2012, p. 1027)</p>	<p>“it” so important that the site so well developed, that it's easy for people to understand where they need to go”</p> <p>“More self-serve resources”</p> <p>“Have the policy so that they're not inundated with words”</p> <p>“It should avoid draconian terms”</p>	<p>Does the site have at least one compelling element to encourage user engagement in the site content?</p> <p>Are reporting forms submitted through the site quick to access?</p>

## Appendix C

### Measurement of University Title IX Website Design Student-Centricity

**WHO:** This measure is intended for any university staff in charge of design and content for its respective Title IX and/or Sexual Misconduct website. Its aim is to offer tangible criteria of student-centered items that can support a design's encouragement of help-seeking in general and reporting of sexual violence in particular.

**WHY:** Understanding the relationship between Title IX website design and sexual violence reporting can improve awareness and intentionality within institutional communication decisions, and this instrument hopes to bridge the research for student success practitioners.

**HOW:** The 21 questions capture best practices of survivor-centered (or student-centric) content and design. Each question relates to at least one of the following student-centric themes, produced in working with experts in the field and literature. The term "user" within questions can refer to the survivor, a supporter of the survivor, a witness to someone harmed, or anyone seeking to further educate themselves about the issue of sexual violence. Evaluators are encouraged to only consider website elements outside of policy and large PDFs. Though there is a total score, evaluators are encouraged to take a closer at items scored with a 0 to look for ways to include this missing item within the site. Each question has an endnote with more context and helpful examples. Endnotes are found on the pages following the instrument.

#### QUESTION THEMES

1. **Accessibility (A):** Well-developed technology, easy to use for diverse populations, avoids legal jargon, inclusive of the many reasons users may be seeking the site, definitions offered to support understanding
2. **Trauma-Informed (TI):** Language and design aimed to empower survivors of trauma, recognize individualized responses to trauma, non-judgmental and anti-victim-blaming, dispels rape myths
3. **Care & Compassion (CC):** Language, design, and resources that demonstrate concern and assurance of care, humanizing emphasis, avoids fearmongering
4. **Comprehensiveness (C):** Sexual violence treated holistically as a social justice issue beyond compliance concerns, addressing cultural and relational issues that impact sexual violence as well as prevention education and violence reduction strategies.
5. **Clear Outcomes (CO):** Transparency of processes and rights to privacy, explanations that help students identify resource and reporting options from start to finish so that they can choose the best help-seeking path for themselves
6. **Engaging Design (ED):** Information presented concisely whenever appropriate and so as not to visually overwhelm the user, visually appealing, encourages user participation and browsing

University Title IX Website Questions		YES: Add 1	NO: Add 0
1. Does the link to Title IX/Sexual Misconduct site appear somewhere on the institution's home page? (A) <sup>i</sup>			
2. Does the site avoid presuming attributes of a reporting or responding party? (A) <sup>ii</sup>			
3. Do all links within the site take the user to working, current pages or resources? (A) <sup>iii</sup>			
4. Are resources and text presented in accessible ways? (A) <sup>iv</sup>			
5. Are key terms about sexual violence defined? (A) <sup>v</sup>			
6. Does the site avoid using gender stereotypes? (TI) <sup>vi</sup>			
7. Does the site avoid any conflict of interest? (TI) <sup>vii</sup>			
8. Does the site refer to trauma and/or the ways in which people may respond to sexual violence? (TI) <sup>viii</sup>			
9. Does the site directly explain and dispel rape myths? (TI) <sup>ix</sup>			
10. Are the site pages easy to navigate between? (CC) <sup>x</sup>			
11. Does the site offer specific ways the institution protects reporting and responding parties? (CC) <sup>xi</sup>			
12. Do survivor resources appear upon direct entry into the site? (CC) <sup>xii</sup>			
13. Does the site describe campus initiatives to prevent sexual violence? (CC) <sup>xiii</sup>			
14. Are external options offered for anyone seeking help outside of the institution? (C) <sup>xiv</sup>			
15. Does the site include educational information about cultural or relational attitudes that impact sexual violence reduction? (C) <sup>xv</sup>			
16. Does the site present sexual violence as a social justice issue? (C) <sup>xvi</sup>			
17. Are all ways to report for students and those reporting harm clearly explained? (CO) <sup>xvii</sup>			
18. Are mandatory reporters and confidential reporting options clearly identified? (CO) <sup>xviii</sup>			
19. Are the steps clear as to who will follow up on a reported incident and how? (CO) <sup>xix</sup>			
20. Does the site have at least one compelling element to encourage user engagement in the site content? (ED) <sup>xx</sup>			
21. Are reporting forms that can be submitted through the site present? (ED) <sup>xxi</sup>			
TOTAL SCORE			
0 to 21 = Least to Most Student-Centric			

## Question References and Related Examples

Question #1: Because students going through trauma may be hesitant to seek help, it is important to make that help as visible and present as possible. Having this site appear on the university's home page demonstrates how important the work is, and how seriously it will be taken.

Question #2: Some examples include use of pronouns or photos of people when referring to a victim or perpetrator. In order not to alienate a person seeking help (the victim, observer, or victimizer), sites should not limit the idea of what a victim or perpetrator of violence looks like by specifying pronouns or only including female stock photos to represent victims, for example

Question #3: Policy changes are expected in today's political climate. Online resources change, get rescinded, or taken down completely. Staff turnover within higher education and Title IX offices is also at a high. All of these are reasons to ensure the site can facilitate help-seeking during times of transition. Even one link taking you to a broken, erroneous, or outdated site could lead to mistrust in the user, which may ultimately impact their decision to seek institutional help.

Question #4: Accessibility features should be specific to your institution's community needs but should always appear careful. Examples of accessibility may include multi-lingual resources, screen readers, large font, strong contrast colors for visually impaired, explanations without legal jargon that may be confusing or intimidating, etc.

Question #5: While Title IX law mandates the legal definitions of the forms of sexual violence, it is important that other key terms and ideas are explained clearly. Examples of this includes offering context to ways to offer and receive consent, real-world examples of dating violence, types of stalking, etc.

Question #6: Unintentionally promoting gender stereotypes can perpetuate violence by preventing those who need help from coming forward. Examples of gender stereotypes include the implication that victims are only women or perpetrators are only men, that women are typically caretakers, or that victims are weak.

Question #7: It is important for an institution not to alienate any of its community who may be seeking help. Examples of conflict of interest include mention of political affiliations or religious beliefs that color the way the office will handle a report.

Question #8: Trauma can and does have immediate effects on a survivor, but there can also be prolonged effects. So as not to alienate a person seeking help at any stage in their processing of trauma, it is important that a site acknowledge the various ways people respond to traumatic events. Examples include physical, emotional, and behavioral responses.

Question #9: Just as gender stereotypes can perpetuate sexual violence, so can a missed opportunity to education the institutional community about rape myths because Rape Myths lead to victim blaming. Examples of rape myths a site can dispel include any "they asked for it" implications based on attire or alcohol consumption, or that it isn't really an assault if the victim did not fight off their attacker.

Question #10: Someone experiencing trauma may be discouraged from seeking help if there are any roadblocks, so it is important to ensure navigation between pages and resources is not cumbersome. Examples of easy navigation include a menu bar that remains the same on each page or that scrolls with the user, ensuring each page does not require a lot of scrolling, ensuring uniform site exits (all hyperlinks uniformly open a new window or open in the same window).

Question #11: Something that prevents a person from seeking help is an uncertainty as to how they will be protected during the investigation. Examples of protective measures the site can mention are safety escorts, counseling, schedule changes, and dorm-room changes.

Question #12: Some examples include use of pronouns or photos of people when referring to a victim or perpetrator. In order not to alienate a person seeking help (the victim, observer, or victimizer), sites should not limit the idea of what a victim or perpetrator of violence looks like by specifying pronouns or only including female stock photos to represent victims, for example.

Question #13: Sexual violence prevention efforts have become a mandatory component to Title IX work. However, it is important to offer more than a generic title of trainings to your community so as to demonstrate the care of the university in its fight against sexual violence. Examples of initiatives include details of how trauma-informed staff training, bystander intervention programs, and sexual misconduct workshops support their efforts to reduce violence.

Question #14: It is important to keep in mind that the decision to report and how is up to the survivor, and they should be empowered with all choices. For those who are not comfortable seeking help from within the institution, we still want them to get help. Examples of external resources a site can include are community organizations or online counseling or help lines.

Question #15: Understanding how accepted attitudes tie into experiences is an important way to support healthy relationships. Examples of educational information include links to/tips for healthy relationships, social media safety, and cultural competencies.

Question #16: Sexual violence has roots to systematic oppressions, such as homophobia, racism, sexism, and ableism. Acknowledging how social justice ties into sexual violence helps create a culture that actively fights against sexual violence.

Question #17: Transparency is a key tool in establishing trust between the institution and its community. Clearly identifying the chain of action to making a report or being identified in a report ensures that students are prepared and know how their information will be used at each step.

Question #18: A survivor or witness to an assault may be not realize that certain staff and faculty are required to report. And depending on process/policy changes, the staff themselves may not be aware of their responsibilities. Clearly identifying who is and is not required to report avoids situations that may disrupt a student's trust.

Question #19: Again, transparency is key at establishing trust within the campus community. Examples of best practice include identifying investigator/coordinator names, how they will contact you, what they may ask of you in that initial communication, and anticipated response time.

Question #20: An engaging design tell your users how and where to look, which can encourage them to spend time reviewing the information. Examples of compelling elements include shortcuts to menus, video tutorials or introductions, informative graphics, and buttons that link to important pages.

Question #21: Because sexual violence is so underreported, this site should make reporting as expedient as possible. The reporting form should be easily spot upon entry into the site and not more than a click or two away. The questions should balance detail-seeking without being cumbersome or confusing.



## Appendix D

Table Tracking Instrument Item Development & Revision

Element (From Most Weighted to Least)	Original Item/Question	Revision of Item (blank if no change)	Expert & Panelist Feedback/Reason for change
Accessibility (5 questions)	1. Does the site link appear on the university home page?		
	2. Does the site avoid identifying a specific type of victim or assailant (e.g., pronouns or photos of people)?	2. Does the site avoid identifying a specific type of reporting or responding party?	Avoid assumptive terms like victim and assailant prior to any finding of responsibility
	3. Do all of the links within the site take the user to working, current, and correct sites/resources?		
	4. Are resources and/or forms offered in multiple languages?	4 Are resources and text presented in accessible ways and without errors in formatting or grammar?	Broadening types of accessibility beyond language, as it will be based on campus community needs
	5. Are key terms defined?	5. Are key sexual violence terms explained/explored beyond legal definitions?	Clarification of definition type beyond what was legally embedded into policy
Trauma-Informed (4 questions)	6. Does the site avoid referencing gender stereotypes (e.g., women are caretakers, or victims are weak)?		
	7. Does the site avoid any conflict of interest?		
	8. Does the site describe the many ways that victims of sexual violence may respond to trauma (e.g., immediate or prolonged physical and emotional reactions)?	8. Does the site refer to trauma and/or the ways in which people may respond to sexual violence?	Removed use of victim, added option of discussing trauma responses without using the specific language

	9. Does the site directly debunk rape myths?	9. Does the site directly explain and dispel rape myths/victim blaming?	Clarified that a site should explain what rape myths are as well as refute them, which also occurs with anti-victim blaming language
Care & Compassion (4 questions)	10. Is the site cumbersome for users (e.g., requires a lot of scrolling through text or policy)?	10. Are the site pages easy to navigate between?	Assessed in opposite direction to better fit measurement style, also clarified what about site navigation to score
	11. Does the site describe ways that the university can protect the victim (e.g., schedule changes, safety escorts)?	11. Does the site offer specific ways the institution protects reporting and responding parties, outside of a link to the policy?	Clarified protections in place not just for reporting party, emphasized that this be an important point pulled out of policy documents
	12. Are the victim resources easy to locate and readily available upon entry into the site?	12. Do “get help” resources appear upon direct entry into the site?	Clarified resources are not just for victims, types of resources, and ready availability
	13. Does the site describe how the university is actively working to prevent sexual violence on its campus (e.g., staff training and student programs)?	13. Does the site describe campus initiatives to prevent sexual violence?	Further distinguish and disaggregate from #13 and #16, reduced wordiness
Comprehensiveness (3 questions)	14. Are there external resources for all involved, including accused and friends of victims?	14. Are external resources offered for anyone seeking help outside of the institution?	No need to mention specific types, emphasized the external factor of resources
	15. Does the site include cultural education related to sexual violence (e.g., healthy masculinity and healthy relationships)?	15. Does the site include educational information about cultural or relational attitudes that impact sexual violence reduction?	Further distinguish and disaggregate from #13 and #16, further connecting this to lifelong learning support opportunities
	16. Does the site offer student training, such as bystander intervention, that promotes awareness and violence reduction strategies?	16. Does the site present sexual violence as a social justice issue?	Further distinguish and disaggregate from #13 and #16, highlighting sexual violence intersections with other forms of systematic oppression

Clear Outcomes (3 questions)	17. Are all of the ways to report clearly explained?	17. Are all of the ways to report for students and those reporting harm clearly explained?	Specifying reporting differences, reduced wordiness
	18. Are mandatory reporters and confidential reporting options clearly identified?		
	19. Are the investigatory steps clearly outlined, beyond a copy or link to the policy, so that students know what to expect after making a report?	19. Are the steps clear as to who will follow up on a reported incident and how?	Simplifying language
Engaging Design (2 questions)	20. Does the site have engaging elements (e.g., videos, hyperlinks, images, or buttons)?	20. Does the site have at least one compelling element to encourage user engagement in the site content?	Clarifying beyond text options, specifying count
	21. Are there reporting forms that can be submitted through the site?		

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