Before Working with Men Can Stop Rape

Drake University (DU) is a medium-size private university in Des Moines, Iowa with a student body of approximately 5,000. When describing the state of their engaging men efforts prior to working with Men Can Stop Rape, Lynne Cornelius said, “It was a very ‘men are the problem’ kind of environment, and I don’t think men felt welcome at the table to have these conversations.” In the past, athletics teams “have been targeted pretty heavily” for sexual assault programming. “But I think the feel of it was still very much mandatory, more lecture and less of a conversation—that kind of approach.” Additionally, DU had begun the early stages of forming a men’s group they called Positive MENTality.

How Men Can Stop Rape Supported DU

DU’s engaging men work was supported by the Office on Violence Against Women (OVW) Campus Program grant that they received in 2016 as part of a Consortium led by Mercy College of Health Sciences along with Grandview University and Simpson College as companion grantees. Men Can Stop Rape (MCSR) served at that time as the OVW Campus Program Engaging Men Technical Assistance (TA) provider. In that role, MCSR provided DU with a guide and other supplemental materials for organizing the Engaging Men Campus Conversation (EMCC), an event based on an innovative format using personal stories to spark critical, constructive, and contemplative conversations around individual and shared understandings of what it means for campus men to engage in the prevention of gender-based violence. To support the EMCC planning, MCSR held EMCC planning calls with key staff to discuss progress organizing the event. MCSR conducted a webinar to prepare storytellers to share a personal story related to what it means to be a man, a DU facilitator to guide the conversation, and Ms. Cornelius to emcee the conversation. In February 2019, MCSR traveled to Des Moines to conduct a 1-day Engaging Men Prevention Training Institute (EMPTI) with students, staff and faculty from all four Consortium institutions. Through one day of discussions about theory, interactive group exercises, role-playing, and multi-media presentations, the EMPTI presents participants with a framework to positively construct what it means to be a man and to motivate men’s engagement in challenging the attitudes and behaviors that support all forms of gender-based violence.

“All of those have definitely been things that we utilized and found supportive,” Ms. Cornelius said. “I just also think having a relationship with you all” and “knowing that you’re the resource there that I can turn to” were other ways that Ms. Cornelius felt supported by MCSR.
How DU Used Men Can Stop Rape’s Support

Drawing from the EMPTI that she attended, Ms. Cornelius has facilitated MCSR’s *Continuum of Harm* exercise “in almost all of our fraternities this year, and was personally invited to those.” Ms. Cornelius explains, “I firmly believe that men aren’t the problem,” and that it was “important for me to engage men.” This approach and messaging to the DU community led one fraternity to come forward and request programming with Ms. Cornelius. After she facilitated the *Continuum of Harm* exercise with that group, word of their positive experience spread to other fraternity chapters who came forward requesting the same program. “I would tell them upfront: I’m not here to prescribe what these things are,” Ms. Cornelius said. “I’m just here to help facilitate a conversation about these things and help [you] come to your own conclusions.” With MCSR’s exercises and Ms. Cornelius’s approach combined, the impact of DU’s engaging men work didn’t stop with fraternities.

In the fall of 2018, after going through their NCAA required Title IX trainings, three male student-athletes at DU—one on separate occasions and of their own individual volition—approached the Title IX Coordinator to ask what more they could do to be involved in the work. She directed them to Ms. Cornelius, with whom the three student-athletes began the Positive MENtality initiative: a group to engage men on campus in the prevention of gender-based violence. While the group had a name, broadly defined intention, two DU staff and faculty facilitators and a few key student members, it still needed more structure and more interest from the community. What carried the group forward in 2018, Ms. Cornelius reported, was that “those three guys bonded. They became really, really good friends.” The following semester, in February of 2019—the night before the EMPTI—DU and MCSR hosted the Engaging Men Campus Conversation, the three student-athletes serving as storytellers to spark the dialogue. Attended by 75 students and staff combined, this event was well received. “I know our campus conversation definitely was a kick starter for our men’s group and really getting some buy-in throughout campus in that group,” Ms. Cornelius said. Following the ripple effects of the campus conversation, Positive MENtality’s weekly meetings had increased attendance and interest from men and women on campus. Where the group had previously let the conversation choose its own direction, Positive MENtality now began advertising discussion topics ahead of the meetings. “I still use the activities that you provided in the 1-day training at Grandview,” Ms. Cornelius said. But also, “I think the biggest thing for us was [learning] a kind of framework—how to go about our meetings, how to go about some of the activities we’re using.”

In addition to the exercises and teaching points discussed in the EMPTI, MCSR also trained the consortium staff on the principles of meeting men where they are in gender-based violence prevention work. In line with these principles, Ms. Cornelius explains the approach that she and her co-facilitator and colleague from the education faculty at DU take, reserving her comments until after the exercise that the group is currently doing: “I have little points that I want to make sure I get across for most of them. But it’s already things that they’ve brought up on their own, which is always fascinating to me.” Speaking about the meetings, which often go late into the evening, Ms. Cornelius said “it’s really one of my favorite parts of the week.”

Impact of MCSR’s Support

Reaching multiple different touch points of their community, DU’s engaging men work grew significantly. Men’s increasing participation in violence prevention gained visibility with fraternity brothers and male-student athletes not only showing up voluntarily to events and conversations but also requesting additional programming for themselves. Speaking of the campus conversation, Ms.
Cornelius shared that she feels “more confident going into our athletics conversations this year, since many of them were already at the campus conversation last year. That event helped us set the tone for how and why we’re having these conversations. And so I think that’s important to point out too that those pieces have helped to create that message that we’re here to help build them up and not tear them down.”

When asked what impact MCSR’s support has had on the DU community, Ms. Cornelius shared this story:

So I had a young man from a fraternity come in to see me. He had over the weekend engaged in some activity at one of their parties that was less than desirable for their chapter and he was held accountable by their J-board and their house. And the fraternity ultimately decided to take that information and file a Title IX complaint. The young man who came was the one who was behaving questionably; he was genuinely remorseful, taking full accountability, and understood his chapter’s position and all of those things. And to me, that was insane, because here’s a young man 1) that feels that the violence prevention office is a safe space for him to come and know that he’s going to be held accountable but not in a shameful way. He knew that that was a resource for him to find a way to make this better and ask, “How do I do better?” which was really interesting to me. And 2) the fact that their chapter had taken it upon themselves to say, “We’re not going to stand for this” is very different than most of the culture that we see coming from fraternities. So that was to me just like, wow, we have made some strides and have definitely begun to create a safe environment that even the people potentially causing harm know that they can be supported in a growth-mindset.

In summation, the prosocial shift in DU’s environment and social norms stem from their comprehensive, positive, and supportive approach to addressing not only the problematic behavior but also the way that male students view DU’s ability to help them.