



# Community College Health Study

## How does students' previous sex education influence their current sexual health behaviors?

Welcome back to the Community College Health Study newsletter! In this issue, we report on students' experiences with the school-based sex education they received since the 9th grade and describe some key sexual health outcomes associated with that education.

As a part of the Community College Health Study, community college students filled out a survey to describe the topics covered by their previous school-based sex education, rated the quality of this sex education, and answered questions about their current sexual and relationship health behaviors (e.g., condom use). As such, this newsletter will help stakeholders better understand how types of previous sex education are associated with critical sexual and relationship health outcomes experienced while youth are attending community college.

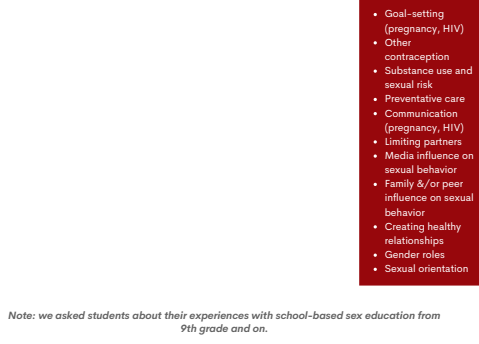
With this information, stakeholders may also better understand the opportunities colleges have to provide their students with sexual health information they may not have received previously to promote healthy behaviors like bystander intervention, condom use, and STI testing.

### Types of Previous Sex Education

Based on students' reports of the topics most often covered by their previous, school-based sex education, students were categorized as receiving 4 types of previous sex education. We will refer to these types of sex education as no sex education or none, **abstinence-only**, **abstinence+**, and **comprehensive**.

Comprehensive sex education, as it is defined here, includes a broad spectrum of sexual health topics. These topics include not only medically accurate information about safe sex, but also information related to contraception, sexual and gender identity, media influence, communication, and healthy relationships.

#### Percentage of students that reported receiving each type of previous sex education

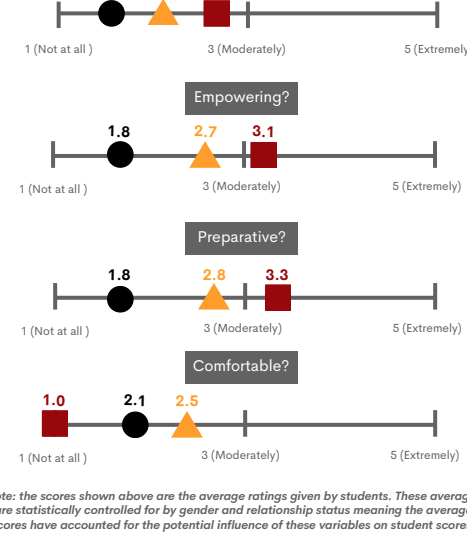


Note: we asked students about their experiences with school-based sex education from 9th grade and on.

Notably, 40% of students surveyed reported receiving no sex education since 9th grade. Of the students that report receiving any sex education, most have received abstinence-only or abstinence+ sex education which covers limited topics. Only 15% of students surveyed reported receiving comprehensive sex education.

### Student Perceptions of Previous Sex Education

Students who reported receiving comprehensive sex education generally rated the quality of their education more favorably.



Note: the scores shown above are the average ratings given by students. These averages are statistically controlled for by gender and relationship status meaning the average scores have accounted for the potential influence of these variables on student scores.

Those who received comprehensive sex education felt their education was more inclusive, empowering, and preparative compared to students who received abstinence-only or abstinence+ sex education. On the other hand, students who received comprehensive sex education reported feeling less comfortable during their education than did other groups. One possible explanation is that the additional sexual health topics that are discussed in comprehensive sex education are not typically discussed in many U.S. communities (i.e., they are taboo) which may make them more uncomfortable to learn about.

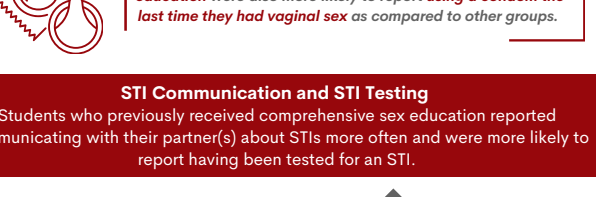
It is important to be aware that college students may be uncomfortable at times when learning about new and/or sensitive topics and important for sex educators to be prepared to respond to this discomfort. While learning about these topics may be uncomfortable, they may ultimately help students feel more empowered and prepared to make informed decisions about their sexual health.

### Current Sexual Health Outcomes

Students who reported receiving comprehensive sex education were more likely to practice safe sex behaviors such as...

#### Condom Use

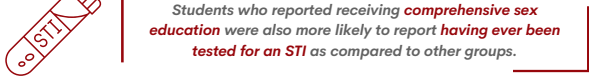
Students who previously received comprehensive sex education reported using condoms more often and were more likely to report using a condom at their last sexual encounter.



Students who reported receiving comprehensive sex education were also more likely to report using a condom the last time they had vaginal sex as compared to other groups.

#### STI Communication and STI Testing

Students who previously received comprehensive sex education reported communicating with their partner(s) about STIs more often and were more likely to report having been tested for an STI.



Students who reported receiving comprehensive sex education were also more likely to report having ever been tested for an STI as compared to other groups.

Note: the scores shown above are the average ratings given by students. These averages are statistically controlled for by gender and relationship status meaning the average scores have accounted for the potential influence of these variables on student scores.

Students who reported receiving comprehensive sex education also felt more confident in their ability to intervene as a bystander.

For example, students who reported receiving comprehensive sex education, on average, felt more confident that they could implement skills like...

- ✓ Talking to a friend who might be in an abusive relationship
- ✓ Helping a friend find resources if they have experienced sexual assault
- ✓ Doing something to help a very drunk person at a party
- ✓ Helping someone who looked uncomfortable or upset at a party

Students who received comprehensive sex education were more likely to report getting tested for STIs and using a condom the last time they had sex. They also reported more frequent communication with their partners about STIs, more consistent condom use, and more confidence in their ability to intervene as a bystander to potential sexual or relationship violence. This information suggests that comprehensive sex education that goes beyond disease prevention may promote college students' ability to engage in healthy sexual and relationship behaviors.

### Key Takeaways

Our findings indicate that receiving comprehensive sex education may have many benefits for young college students. For instance, students who received more comprehensive sex education generally rated the quality of their sex education more favorably, although they did indicate that these topics may be uncomfortable to learn about.

Students who received comprehensive sex education also reported more confidence in their ability to intervene as a bystander to sexual or relationship violence. In addition, students who received comprehensive sex education reported more frequent condom use, were more likely to communicate with their partners about STIs and were more likely to get tested for STIs. These behaviors are important for preventing unplanned pregnancies and the transmission of STIs.

Unfortunately, many students have not previously received comprehensive sex education and 40% of students surveyed reported receiving no sex education at all since 9th grade. Community colleges are well-positioned to help students fill this gap and provide students with more comprehensive information about sexual and relationship health. This may be especially important for students that reported less coverage of sex education topics in their previous sex education.

### Next Steps

#### Explore Programs

Media Aware is an evidence-based comprehensive sexual and relationship health promotion program designed to fill gaps in previous sex education and meet the unique needs of young adults.

[Explore Media Aware](#)

#### Check Out This Funding Opportunity!

The Institute for Women's Policy Research (IWPR) has launched the Connect for Success Initiative and is providing grant funding to improve community college students' access to high-quality and comprehensive sexual and reproductive education and care. To apply, a Letter of Inquiry Form must be submitted by December 8th, 2023.

\*The Community College Health Study Team is not affiliated with the IWPR

[Connect for Success Website](#)

[Connect for Success Letter of Inquiry Form](#)

#### Learn More

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Click the button below to visit our study website where you can find a downloadable email template. Feel free to use this template to share our findings with your college listserve or on other relevant platforms. If you decide to share this information, please cite the information using the following: Ahuna, K., Evans-Paulson, R., Porter, E., Scull, T., and The Community College Health Study Team (2023). Community College Health Study Newsletter, 5th edition. <https://cchealthstudy.com>.

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### Meet the People Behind This Newsletter

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Kylia Ahuna is a Master of Public Health student with a concentration in health behavior at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. She has experience in conducting research in behavioral neuroscience and maternal and pediatric health. Her current research interests involve developing and evaluating health interventions and programs, and she is particularly passionate about making research more accessible.

#### Elizabeth Porter

Content Marketing Specialist

Elizabeth Porter studied communication media, rhetoric, and professional writing at North Carolina State University, and she is passionate about creating content that is relevant, engaging, and helpful for others. She has experience in marketing, writing, social media management, web content creation, email design, and editing.

#### Tracy Scull, PhD

Senior Author and Principal Investigator

Over the past 16 years, Dr. Scull has conducted rigorous research on child, adolescent, and family health, with specific focus on promoting sexual health and preventing substance abuse. Dr. Scull has secured over 10 million dollars in federal funding for her research and has published her work in esteemed peer-reviewed journals such as *Pediatrics*, *Developmental Psychology*, and the *Journal of American College Health*. She holds a doctorate in developmental psychology from Duke University.

#### Reina Evans-Paulson, PhD

Senior Author and Project Director

Dr. Evans-Paulson conducts research related to adolescent and young adult health with a focus on implementation and evaluation of sexual health interventions, parent and family influences on adolescent sexuality, and sexual communication. Dr. Evans-Paulson has published in esteemed peer-reviewed journals such as *JAMA Pediatrics*, *Journal of Sex Research*, and *Pediatrics*. She received her doctorate in applied social and community psychology from North Carolina State University.

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