

Freshman Safe Start- Knowledge is Power
Marjorie Bommersbach
Director, Counseling and Wellness

Freshman Safe Start is a collaborative safety education and sexual assault prevention program developed at Chico State by the University Police Department Community Service Unit, The Counseling and Wellness Center, the AS Women's Center and University Housing. While it may seem like an unlikely combination (cops, counselors, and coeds) we collectively provide a highly interactive and informative program presented to first year students residing in campus housing. In its third year, the program delivers workshops to over 1800 students during move in week (several days before classes start in the fall semester). A total thirty workshops are delivered to small groups of students separated by gender. Male presenters facilitate workshops for male students and female presenters facilitate workshops and discussions for female students. While the content is basically the same, the message has a slightly different emphasis in men's and women's groups.

The presentations aim to educate students about legal and safety issues that could impact their safety and well-being during the first few weeks of school. The intervention aims at educating students about "The Red Zone," a period of time between the start of school and Thanksgiving break when sexual assaults may be more likely to occur. Presenters, who are staff, faculty, and students, discuss general safety tips (e.g., safe use of social networking sites, the definition of consent, defining rape and rape myths, relationship violence, stalking, and hate crimes). Also discussed is how to avoid that "trip to Oroville or Enloe" – which in our community is code for avoiding the costs of underage drinking. (Oroville is our county seat, home of the drunk tank and the county jail. Enloe is the hospital that treats cases of alcohol poisoning or physical assaults).

While the program may not seem like prime time fodder for students (after all it is a mandatory program and the problems we discuss are somewhat grim) the response to the program has quite positive. It is successful due the talents, sincerity and passion of our presenters. Helping present to the men is counseling psychologist Dr. Aldrich Patterson, who may have missed his calling as a stand up comedian. He keeps the message real and uses humor effectively as he stresses the message of consent. Students rave about "the shrink." Comments regarding the male police officers are equally positive. Students have told us "the program is perfect, don't change anything. "

The women's program is equally compelling as many female presenters share their personal stories. With the help of shows like Law and Order: Special Victims Unit, our campus police officers help shatter old stereotypes about law enforcement officers who are insensitive to women's issues. It is clear from student comments and response to the program that students experience our campus police as caring people who are there to help them. Quotes from students include " they made me more comfortable with the police department" and "very super sweet, very alpha female." The counselor's role is to help educate students about the dynamics of interpersonal violence, sexual assault and to

trust their gut and take action. We also are there to inform students about resources available to them on campus.

Since we have started this program—reports of rape to University police have increased dramatically (they have more than doubled). In addition, in the counseling center we are seeing more women victims come to counseling early (within a few days of a rape) and this had been a very rare occurrence in the past. Most often our sexual assault survivors were women who had been assaulted 6 months to a year before. They would come in, not about the sexual assault but instead to dealing with severe problems in functioning that we would eventually help them link to a sexual assault.

In follow up studies of program evaluation we have discovered that, months after the presentations, students remember the content discussed, value the program, and see it as relevant. Ninety eight percent of students surveyed report having been at parties where alcohol is served. Many of those students report having used safety strategies that were taught in Safe Start. In addition, in the last two years, due to increased reporting and stellar police investigations, non-student perpetrators have been caught and incarcerated. In addition, students who have raped other students have been dismissed from our campus. Future plans include expanding our program in order to provide presentations offered to off campus housing units. There is no budget or funding for this program. We utilize staff time and passion for prevention to get this program delivered.