

Healthy Relationships, Healthy Life: College Workshops Empower Students to Protect Their Own Sexual Health

STD Prevention SUCCESS STORIES

That first year of college is all about freedom for most students fresh out of high school. And for many, this newfound independence includes making choices about sex. But record high numbers of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), and an ever-present risk of **HIV** infection, can make those “in the heat of the moment” decisions dangerous. So what’s the key to speaking their language so that much-needed STD prevention and awareness information can be delivered to these newly-minted adults?

A healthy start = A smart start

“The idea is to introduce prevention tips before morbidity hits,” said David Johnson, a Public Health Advisor in CDC’s STD Program’s Office of Health Equity (OHE), describing the purpose of the *Healthy Relationships* sexual health workshop and course for incoming freshmen. CDC is working with a growing number of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) to implement this program. HBCUs can have disproportionate numbers of vulnerable populations, such as **young, black heterosexual women** and young, black **gay and bisexual men**. “With freshmen, you have the opportunity to lay a healthy foundation for those just coming into their own sexual identity,” he said.

CDC’s STD Program has expanded *Healthy Relationships*, a program that grew out of a sexual education workshop for medical students at a few HBCUs, into a comprehensive 6-8 hour course that is required at most of the colleges that offer it. This program aims to reduce **health inequities in STDs** among students by engaging the stakeholders of the campus community and ultimately impacting school policy. So far, *Healthy Relationships* has been rolled out at North Carolina Agricultural & Technical University (NCA&T), Morehouse College, Spelman College, Rust College, and Lane College. CDC’s STD Program is currently working with partners, such as the Links Inc., to engage other colleges and universities in order to bring *Healthy Relationships* to their campuses.

So what happens in *Healthy Relationships* workshops? ‘Real talk’ – sound advice delivered in a relatable tone and format that young adults are receptive to – that includes an open and frank discussion of sexuality as a whole. The workshop covers a broad spectrum of topics that include communication skills, consent, sexual and gender identity, birth control, conflict resolution, and everything in-between.

“We changed the conversation,” said Lydia Poromon, a Policy Analyst in CDC’s STD Program. “We connect with them by using language and scenarios that are culturally relatable. We teach them skills that are transferrable and applicable to all relationships. We communicate *with* them rather than talking *to* or *at* them. It’s empowerment through education.”



The workshops are set up as forums for the open exchange of thoughts and ideas – “discernment and critical thinking centered on sexuality,” said Johnson. But most importantly, the sexual education course is grounded in STD prevention that informs youth and helps them to safely navigate the often challenging, and sometimes confusing, world of human sexuality and real-life situations that can arise.

What makes the *Healthy Relationships* workshops so relatable for incoming freshmen?

Peer facilitators – students themselves – are the essential elements that pull everything together and make the workshops ‘work’. After participating in training sessions during the summer, these specially-selected student leaders independently conduct workshop sessions with incoming freshmen in the fall.

Since NCA&T administrators added the *Healthy Relationships* course requirement to the freshmen curriculum in 2016, clinical provider visits have risen by 111%. STD screenings, and STD cases diagnosed at the student health center have also increased significantly.

“Well-suited facilitators are imperative to the process because they are able to speak the lingo and understand what is happening in the freshmen’s world,” said Dr. Padonda Webb, the Clinical Director of the NCA&T student health center. “They are able to connect while remaining professional – keeping the crowd engaged while sharing valuable information.” The buy-in from the campus community is a significant factor. Campus administration, including faculty and staff, strongly support the *Healthy Relationships* workshop. The course is now a requirement for all freshman at NCA&T, for which they receive academic credit.

“The shift in culture begins at the top. When time, space, and resources are dedicated, it sends the message that this is important. The students see that the administration take the workshop seriously and ultimately understand this is a priority for them. This is about their health, and in some cases, their lives,” said Poromon.

And it’s a formula that has paid off. This kind of impact on student health serves as proof that well-designed policy can work, and offers a model for other colleges scheduled to adopt the program. Ultimately, providing this level of commitment to sexual health “says to the community and other colleges that sexual health is vital, and allows students to gain a wealth of knowledge that will span a lifetime,” said Webb.

Peer Facilitators: Campus ‘Lifestyle’ Coaches

It was after 2 AM in the morning, and for Se’Ron Leary, a peer facilitator—now the Peer Facilitator Coordinator for NCA&T’s Healthy Relationships and HIV Pre-exposure Prophylaxis (PrEP) Ambassador programs – it was bedtime. But he had just received a call from a freshman who had participated in one of his workshops. It was a stressful situation: the student’s ride from a party – previously the designated driver, but no longer sober – stranded the student and three others at the party with no ride home. For Leary, there was no hesitation: he drove to meet all four students and delivered them safely to their dorms. “In the workshops, we try to create an actual relationship with freshmen so that they have someone they can contact,” he said. This bond can be extremely helpful in social situations where designated drivers go missing, or in circumstances involving sexual consent or other personal safety issues. Ideal peer facilitators are student leaders willing to go above and beyond to guide other students and to set an example for living a well-balanced, positive, goal-oriented campus life. Having an affinity for public health outreach is a plus too. And knowing that he empowers other students to define and control their own sexual identity is nothing Leary takes lightly. “This is my passion in life,” he said. “To be able to educate others about health and wellness, and to know that my work touches the lives of others far beyond those I speak directly with is a responsibility I welcome -- I’m glad to be able to essentially save other peoples’ lives with shared knowledge.”

Did You Know?

PrEP – Better than an ounce of prevention...

Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis (or **PrEP**), is medicine that people at high risk for HIV can take daily to protect against HIV infection. With **PrEP**, HIV risk from sex can be reduced by more than **90%** when taken daily as prescribed.

Learn MORE at [cdc.gov/std](https://www.cdc.gov/std)

- [Impacts of STDS on Youth](#)
- [STD Protection Fact Sheet](#)
- [The Lowdown on How to Prevent STDS](#)