Discuss:

Sexual violence prevention education aims to reduce the occurrence of sexual assault by showing participants the realities of this violence while dispelling myths and encouraging positive intervention and response strategies. I chose to research the current level of targeting or inclusion of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) identified people in sexual violence prevention at the University of Illinois because I am a violence prevention educator and have noticed the lack of education that targets LGBT folks in a few different places. The main part of sexual violence prevention education involves workshops on rape awareness, sexual harassment, building healthy relationships, healthy sexual relationships, alcohol and sexual assault, bystander intervention, and more. These workshops are mandatory for certain groups on campus, such as incoming freshmen or in some courses, but are also done by request in dorms or for groups of faculty or other employees. I began doing facilitations while working with a rape crisis center in Massachusetts. There I found that the extent to which LGBT folks are included in prevention education tends to be the statement, “it happens to them too”. I was curious to find out if the violence prevention programs at the U of I had any better ideas of how to reach out to marginalized communities. I believe that the goal of such programs should be to provide awareness of the realities of sexual violence to people in general, not just heterosexual identified people.

I hoped to interview people who are involved in violence prevention and LGBT organizations on and around campus to obtain multiple perceptions of what current sexual violence prevention consists of and collect some ideas of what might be done to include the needs of the LGBT community in the future. I ended up doing three interviews. I had a few other potential interviewees in mind but the process of contacting, scheduling, and
performing interviews took longer than I expected. It was a good learning experience, though, and I now know the time and work it takes to initiate and transcribe interviews. Ross Wantland was very helpful in suggesting other people I might interview. He let me know about some faculty/staff who are involved with student ally training and the U of I diversity committee as well as a student who facilitates workshops and is a member of an LGBT ally group. I had also planned to expand my research to include prevention programs in the surrounding community and interview people from organizations such as Rape Crisis Services but only completed three interviews with people on campus.

While all three informants concluded that more could and should be done to include LGBT folks in violence prevention, their analyses were situated through different lenses. The first interview was with Ross Wantland, the Coordinator of Sexual Assault Education at the Women’s Resource Center on campus. He trains and directs undergraduates to facilitate the First Year Campus Acquaintance Rape Education Program (FYCARE) as well as teaching the Fraternity Peer Rape Education Program (FPREP). All incoming freshmen are required to attend one two-hour session of FYCARE. FPREP is a yearlong course for fraternity men to become trained as allies and sexual violence prevention educators. Another person that I spoke with was “Pat”. He is an undergraduate student and a member of Men Against Sexual Violence, went through the FPREP class, and is a facilitator for FYCARE and other violence prevention workshops. My final interview was with “Liz,” an undergraduate student involved with the LGBT organization, Colors of Pride. I wanted to interview someone from an LGBT organization in order to add another perspective to my data. “Liz” was unsure of how well informed she was and, therefore, hesitant about how much she could help my research but I found that she was extremely
One concern that came up throughout the interviews was that a workshop that targeted LGBT folks would make them feel uncomfortable for being singled out because of that identity. Despite the negative or ignorant attitude towards non-heteronormative relationships or instances of sexual assault, it is important to create a safe space for LGBT identified people to work through the difficult issue of violence that affects their community both from outside and within. Such a discussion of violence within a community is extremely difficult to initiate because of concerns that acknowledgement of a problem will cause that problem to be attributed to that group’s identity by outsiders. All three interviewees were interested in finding a way to have this productive, safe space without a feeling of special or different treatment. “Liz” and Ross considered education within the LGBT community important while “Pat” emphasized the need for campus organizations with different mission statements and focuses to work together. Finding a way to address the needs of a community, including the hurtful discussion of violence within a particular group, without alienating or disempowering people, is a complicated task.

In order to get an idea of what violence prevention already exists and how effective it is I asked all three informants what their involvement with and perception of sexual violence prevention on campus was. When I asked Ross if any of the portions of the current programs targeted LGBT folks and what he thought of these sections he mentioned that the lack of LGBT inclusive material was a problem that he had thought much about. He recalled two scenarios in the FYCARE workshop that include LGBT issues. The first scenario asks: what would you do to support a male survivor of sexual assault who came to
you for help? The common reaction to this question among a group of men is to laugh. The problematic aspect of this goes beyond the idea that a man being raped is funny. The facilitators tend to assert at this point that, if the perpetrator was another man, just because this man was raped doesn't mean he is gay. Ross reminds us, “it doesn’t mean that he’s straight either”. There is a continued assumption that the perpetrator was a woman and the man was heterosexual in the first place. The support of this survivor ends up relying on his heterosexual status. Ross also notes that the men’s response as far as support goes is deeply rooted in “codes of masculinity”. The men tend to say that they will provide a list of resources and other help for a female survivor but want to just give a male survivor a phone number and not have to talk to him anymore. Their ability to be emotionally supportive is tied to what other men, and women, will think of them if they do so. Here it seems that the way men are socialized to handle situations where they might show emotions other than anger has everything to do with the way they interact with survivors and also in bystander situations. If someone is being assaulted or, even on a smaller level, harassed, the likelihood that a witness will do anything depends on how many people are around them. A bystander is more likely to intervene in a situation where they are the only witness because they can’t say, “oh, someone else will do something”. In the case that a male bystander is with a group of men, he is less likely to call out a sexist remark or harassing comment than if he were by himself. In these ways, how men are socialized to adhere to “codes of masculinity” and stay within the “man box” have direct consequences on their attitudes towards what is acceptable and the extent of their responsibility when it comes to witnessing sexual violence. This is also applicable to the ways that everyone in our heteronormative, homophobic society are socialized to deal with situations involving
LGBT folks or issues. I asked “Pat” some of the same questions as Ross and he came up with some of the same scenarios that were meant to include LGBT folks but ended up perpetuating the assumption of heterosexuality.

The other, more queer, scenario that Ross listed is used in the women’s section of the workshop. The women are told that their girlfriend, Laura, is being emotionally coercive around sex and are asked how they might try to escape this situation. The women tend to think that this is a typo. They ask: “wait, am I Laura? Is it my boyfriend? Who am I? Am I the guy?” Ross says that the women even try to bargain with the facilitator, wanting to pretend that Laura is a man, and the facilitators usually go along with this. Despite having some workshops with the facilitators regarding language, some of them, when speaking about the LGBT community, say “the homosexuals”. This kind of distancing places LGBT folks as almost inhuman and reflects the homophobia that is so prevalent in our society. I even found that “Pat” was conflating some terms in a way that would be considered offensive by some people. In order for violence prevention to be effective for groups that are usually ignored, this kind of exclusionary language must also be changed. Ross also mentions that facilitators will often say “ok ladies when you’ve got a guy who’s talking you up how do you blah blah blah…” or, “ok guys, you know when your going to have sex with that girl…” The assumption of heterosexuality in these scenarios and the general workshop on the part of the participants and facilitators elides the experiences of LGBT people and they can easily end up tuning out, thinking, “this isn’t my problem, it's a straight problem”. Ross mentions that this is applicable to other communities as well such as men of color and any other marginalized groups. If these groups are ignored and begin to disown problems that are relevant to their community the
I asked “Liz” what her perception of sexual violence prevention education was from the standpoint of someone with the needs of LGBT folks in mind. She thought that the current programs, we spoke mainly of FYCARE, were not inclusive of LGBT folks at all. This unique view of the FYCARE workshops was important to my research because the exclusion of a group is difficult to see from the perspective of those facilitating the workshops, such as Ross and “Pat”, and cannot be accurately assessed by someone who doesn't also belong to the community in question. This brings up my own ability to adequately research this topic considering that I don't identify as LGBT. I have biases because of my involvement with sexual violence prevention education, although I hope that my view is a little more broad because I was trained elsewhere and do not have as much invested in the FYCARE program as facilitators who actively educate through that curriculum. I also have certain privileges because of my white heteronormative identity that I try to keep in mind while interviewing and assessing research. I am not able to understand certain aspects of my informants’ experience or perspective on the issue at hand and I try not to make assumptions or speak for them.

All three interviewees had some good ideas about what might be changed to make education efforts more effective. As far as future efforts of inclusion go Ross would like to see sustained, within community efforts to address these difficult topics. He did point out, though, that such work is vulnerable because it is sensitive and hard to maintain in a college atmosphere where students usually leave after four years but wants to emphasize
the importance of persevering. This challenging element of education on a college campus could be aided by wider community efforts, which is another reason to expand this research and speak with someone from Rape Crisis Services.

“Pat” found that collaborative efforts between many different groups could be very successful in getting goals accomplished and used the Allies for a Women’s Center group as an example. He thought that is was difficult to get groups with different mission statements and focuses to work together but realized the effectiveness of such efforts. He also asserted that challenging homophobic comments doesn’t make men less masculine.

“Pat” thought that things were improving as far as people’s knowledge about non-normative groups and was hopeful about the future of the anti-violence movement. This is a more optimistic, or perhaps ignorant, view of the current situation judging from what I heard from “Liz” about her experience feeling excluded by the workshop but his suggestions for the future are definitely valid.

“Liz’s” suggestion was to not single out a certain group but to try to include and educate everyone, regardless of their identities. She wanted to emphasize that women assault other women and LGBT violence within relationships needs to be acknowledged as real. She also said, of sexual violence prevention education in general, instead of telling women to not walk at night and to carry their rape whistle, educators should be talking to those who perpetrate sexual assault. She ended with the statement that education should be “For everybody. Straight, gay, everybody”. Further research that could be done around this topic would be interviews of people involved in student ally training and the diversity committee on campus as well as people who do violence prevention work in the community through organizations such as Rape Crisis Services. Further research might also
delve deeper into the future possibilities of the inclusion of LGBT people in sexual violence prevention education as members of the community, educators, and advocates.

When searching for previous research related to my topic I found studies that looked at domestic violence within LGBT couples and general violence against LGBT people but no specific examinations of sexual violence against LGBT folks or efforts to prevent such violence. The IDEALS student research website was particularly short on any studies involving LGBT issues. The two that I found most relevant were written by students at Illinois State University and dealt with LGBT discrimination or residence hall safety, including sexual assault, but not both or how they might be related. More broad academic research focused specifically on intimate partner violence within LGBT couples. Even when statistics of sexual assault, LGBT domestic violence, and general violence against LGBT folks were next to each other on the page, as in the Campus Violence White Paper, there was no discussion of either the role that sexual violence plays in LGBT domestic violence or how people might be sexually assaulted because of a queer, or perception of a queer, identity. The acknowledgement that this type of sexual violence exists or can exist is necessary before it can be effectively prevented. Workshop participants cannot take seriously an issue that they do not believe is a reality. The first step in improving sexual violence prevention that addresses the needs of people with any identity is to acknowledge the reality of such violence and combat the oppression that puts marginalized groups in a situation to be ignored or targeted for violence in the first place. In the case of sexual violence against LGBT identified people this means deconstructing homophobia for workshop participants and facilitators. The use of common, non-offensive language is part of this. Outside of Champaign-Urbana further research should also
examine successful programs of violence prevention within the LGBT community in order to discover how different programs might be integrated into a single type of sexual violence prevention education that would address the issues of everyone instead of having to create specialized workshops for certain groups.