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Navigating the Grey Area: International College Students' Knowledge and Perceptions of Title IX

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ABSTRACT

International college students (ICS) in the United States (US) face challenges reporting and accessing services in cases of sexual harassment because they are not aware of the US laws that prohibit sexual violence. This lack of awareness, along with cultural barriers, may influence the odds of help-seeking among ICS in the US who experience sexual harassment. Minimal research to date has captured ICS' knowledge and perceptions of Title IX regulations in the US which protect people from discrimination based on sex and gender in educational programs. Our study examined ICS' knowledge and perceptions of Title IX through in-depth discussions with 13 ICS at a US university. Overall, ICS were not well-informed about Title IX and encouraged colleges to unpack the legal nature of Title IX for ICS who may not have encountered something similar to Title IX as it is "uniquely American." Practical implications for improving campus resources are discussed.

Keywords: college, international students, reporting, sexual harassment, sexual abuse, Title IX, university

Over 1,000,000 students seeking higher education in a different country attend a university in the United States (US) (Institute of International Education, 2023). Such students are often referred to as international college students (ICS), but they are frequently overlooked as a college student population, and their experiences are often underexamined within higher education research, particularly as it relates to victimization. In fact, ICS are more likely to experience sexual violence, abuse, and discrimination than domestic college students (Fethi et al., 2023; Forbes-Mewett & McCulloch, 2016; Ortensi & Farina, 2020; Pedersen et al., 2021; Coston, 2004). However, ICS who experience sexual harassment and sexual abuse may have more needs than their domestic counterparts due to a comparatively lower level of knowledge related to reporting, a higher level of

hesitancy to seek help, and higher odds of experiencing PTSD (Gelfand et al., 1995; Hyun et al., 2007). These factors require higher education to identify the barriers to reporting victimization and help-seeking among ICS (Koo et al., 2015).

Title IX of the Education Amendments Act was enforced by the US Department of Education's (USDOE) Office for Civil Rights in 1972 to protect individuals in education programs from sex- and gender-based discrimination (USDOE, 2021). Sex- and gender-based harassment encompasses sexual assault, among other forms of sexual violence, and discriminatory treatment of individuals based on sex or gender identity. These behaviors are what organizations that receive federal financial assistance have Title IX obligations to protect students from or respond to in cases when it occurs.

Title IX offices and the Title IX process at colleges can provide critical resources for ICS to avoid victimization and re-victimization and to reduce aggravated harms associated with sexual harassment and abuse. Although an increasing number of studies in the past decade have demonstrated limited knowledge and utilization of Title IX and other campus resources among the general college population (Smith, Swartz, & Irvin-Erickson, 2024), there are still gaps in the literature regarding ICS's knowledge of Title IX as an entity and Title IX regulations broadly as well as ICS's perceptions of Title IX and the barriers that reduce the odds of ICS reporting their victimization to the Title IX office. The current study aims to fill these gaps by examining knowledge and perceptions of the Title IX office and regulations among ICS at one university.

LITERATURE REVIEW

For ICS, a lack of understanding of the US legal system can lead to an inadequate understanding of how sexual violence is defined and responded to in the US and on college campuses specifically (Martin, 2015). In turn, ICS may be confused about whether their experiences would be considered a reportable form of sexual violence under Title IX regulations, along with lacking knowledge about their options for available resources to receive support (Orloff & Garcia, 2004; Raj & Silverman, 2002). Feelings of shame or not knowing if the behaviors they were involuntarily subjected to were sexual harassment or just indicative of the social norms representative of the US culture might reduce reporting among ICS (Forbes-Mewett et al., 2015). It is well-known that ICS are not likely to seek help for mental health reasons (Hyun et al., 2007; Nguyen et al., 2019), but ICS are often unlikely to disclose sexual violence as well (Brubaker et al., 2017; Forbes-Mewett et al., 2015). Sexual violence experienced by ICS may be downplayed if actually reported to universities or kept secret (Forbes-Mewett & McCulloch, 2016).

When ICS are also members of a minoritized group, students might be less likely to seek help on- or off-campus for any issues they experience, including sexual abuse or discrimination (Lee & Rice, 2007). Among ICS, there may be concerns regarding the reactions of the student's friend group on campus if they

report their experiences. ICS often report feeling isolated, especially among those who have experienced violence before (Orloff & Garcia, 2004), and ICS who do not have many connections with domestic students may fear being excluded by other ICS. ICS may also fear the reaction of their family if they report being a victim. This may be particularly hard if ICS that identify as women come from a country where violence against women is not viewed as problematic (Raj & Silverman, 2002). Furthermore, there could be a belief that men cannot be victims of sexual violence, and this can lead to shame or embarrassment among ICS who identify as men who have been victimized (Gorris, 2015). Research shows that ICS of color are more likely to face discrimination than white ICS (Lee & Rice, 2007), and LGBTQIA+ ICS often face challenges in the form of discrimination, homophobia, and heteronormativity (Nguyen et al., 2017).

There are potential tangible consequences that ICS fear in seeking help after an incident of sexual harassment or violence as well. For instance, ICS may fear that they will jeopardize their academic opportunity if they report an incident and become involved in a student conduct case or involved with local law enforcement (Raj & Silverman, 2002). It is not unthinkable that some students may hesitate to disclose sexual harassment or violence due to fear of deportation from believing their student visa may be at risk of termination due to student misconduct violations (Reina et al., 2014). Reservations about reporting sexual harassment or violence to authorities may also exist due to ICS' perceptions of their untrustworthiness or expected intimidation by authorities (Raj & Silverman, 2002). For students who are undocumented, even greater challenges to reporting exist as legal means for remaining in the US may feel limited and ever-changing. Seeking help may not feel "worth it" when concerns about what may happen after a report is filed could seem even more life-changing than being victimized.

METHOD

The data for this study comes from a larger study we conducted on college students' experiences of sexual harassment and abuse and help-seeking at a mid-Atlantic University in the US. In the current study, we used data from focus group discussions and one-on-one interviews with 13 ICS out of the 55 students who participated in the larger study.

For recruitment, we asked student organizations at the study campus to share the study information with students in their organizations. We also created recruitment flyers that were posted around campus, on social media, and placed in student resource offices such as the LGBTQIA+ resource center, women's center, and international student office. Lastly, we gained access to numerous professors' classrooms in several departments (e.g., Sociology, Women & Gender Studies). After we sent e-mails to professors in several departments, professors replied inviting us to their classes to give a research study pitch and hand out flyers to recruit students for the study. Overall, we spoke to 15 classes, each with between 20 to 150 students.

Data Collection

The data collection took place in the Fall of 2019. Focus groups lasted approximately 90 minutes and involved 4 to 10 participants, and one-on-one interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes. Participants received a $10.00 gift card. Interviews and focus groups were navigated using a guide with a list of main topics to be covered in discussions, such as knowledge of the Title IX office and regulations, reporting to the Title IX office, Title IX training, and campus resources. All research protocols were approved by the authors' University's institutional review board.

Analytic Strategy

We used a grounded theory approach for analysis. Our coding process consisted of three rounds of coding. The first round of coding established the initial set of descriptive codes. We used a "line-by-line" coding technique. Next, we developed a more detailed codebook with 350 codes, creating specific definitions for each initial code. The second round of coding used the codebook to conduct a more thorough analysis by creating hierarchical codes, which facilitated our conceptualization of themes in the data. The third round of coding included synthesizing the themes to discern participants' perspectives regarding Title IX.

RESULTS

Most ICS were unaware of Title IX as an entity, both as a set of regulations and an official campus resource. Most ICS acknowledged the lack of information they recalled receiving regarding Title IX. Slightly over half of ICS recalled taking the mandatory Title IX training at the University. In line with this trend, a majority of ICS participants were unaware of how to make a complaint to Title IX and the location of the Title IX office. Interestingly, those few students who knew of Title IX recalled being required to take an online training pertaining to Title IX as part of the onboarding process for becoming a student employee on campus, which several ICS held as one of the only ways to make income with a student visa. The lack of training and low retention of knowledge through training made understanding the purpose of Title IX, the process of reporting to Title IX, and the implications of reporting to Title IX a bit murkier. ICS may have had a surface-level understanding of Title IX as students get information in passing throughout their educational journeys. Lacking detailed knowledge creates a grey area in understanding Title IX and what it can do for students, and this often leads to inaction among students, as Alexandria relayed:

> Here's the thing, right, like, Title IX is not the first thing a student is going to approach. It, it's too drastic. They don't want that on themselves, so, you know, even though they do take the trainings and they are completely aware of it, but the trainings don't really highlight this grey area, right? The trainings talk about 'sexual harassment, you know, sexual abuse, all of these things,' but these grey areas of 'Can a professor tell me, you know, stop talking to your family because your mother is not going to survive for long. Is that okay or not okay? The grey area is something that's not really talked about.

ICS like Alexandria kept coming back to this grey area in discussing their understanding and perceptions of Title IX because of the limited information they felt they had obtained about it during their schooling. This was troublesome to ICS as it presented confusion about what Title IX incidents encompass, the advantages and disadvantages of reporting, and how Title IX reporting may impact ICS's uniquely situated access to education through a visa.

According to ICS, there are reasonable remedies for the lack of knowledge that most students have about Title IX, particularly among ICS. Several participants recognized that ICS may not be privy to a set of regulations or a school resource such as Title IX in the US. Since Title IX is not a global set of protections, as Suri purports, "probably resources should be made available to ICS because they definitely have no idea how to navigate something like this. And Title IX is very uniquely American. A lot of countries don't have it." To this point, participants suggested that there is a need for improved transparency by the University in relation to the complaint process, whether emergency contacts will be informed, past sexual violence issues on campus, "universally understandable language," and ensuring Title IX information is easily accessible. To make information about Title IX more common knowledge among ICS, specializing and increasing training for ICS was discussed among participants. As Phillipe said:

> The more training and the more education, culturally, it should be out there and at least one or two, I don't know how many times, it should be given in a compulsory fashion, because the benefits outweigh the cost, in my opinion. All of them should be aware of the consequences, the definitions of sexual harassment, how to get help, even though they might not actually use it in their lifetime. But at least they know about this thing, even the suicide hotline, I didn't know about that, unless the [counseling services] told me about it. Why? Because I had the issue. But why wasn't there any training session about these resources?

ICS also recommended putting information in class syllabi, handing out packets of information at orientation, creating interesting videos that can be watched online, having in-person small-group discussions with other students, and more. One student, Anika, suggested that taking a step back to also learn about the broader American justice system may help with increasing ICS' knowledge about Title IX as well:

> I think that there is a great need as an international student, it might actually be applicable to other students here to educate them how the legal system works. So, for example, in these cases, the victims need to know how to actually gather and obtain evidence at the time being. So, he or she might have had a better chance of, you know, a stronger case. The thing is, you have to educate people how to defend themselves. Most of the time, your parents are not there, your friends are not there as well, you are on your own.

Lastly, the Title IX office could make ICS aware of their resources and where they are located. As Kailani put it:

> Just having more interaction with the students to say this is how we work, please don't feel like we're this island, like not a part of campus, if you want to come to us we're here for you to come to us, we know this happens on campus, so we need to take notice instead of ignoring it, and this is where you need to go if something like this were to happen to you.

Confusion About What Counts as Sex- and Gender-based Discrimination

There was some confusion about "what counts" as sex- and gender-based discrimination and what is thus reportable to Title IX. Antoine said, "I don't remember them off the top of my head, but I know sexual harassment, different gender discrimination, sexual abuse, all of these are some of the offenses that can be reported. But they all have that grey area. You know, you don't know which is what. It's hard to discern." As participants thought through specific interactions they would label as sexual harassment or abuse, it became challenging because the definitions were not fully understood nor agreed upon by all ICS. Furthermore, students were not knowledgeable about the process, which contributed to their confusion about the definitions and how they might approach a complaint process if seeking a resolution with the Title IX office. One student, Rashid, asked, "Does Title IX also protect some men?" or "Do we have to go to the police in order to go to the Title IX office?" For whom Title IX is meant to protect and how it is expected to do so produced more questions than answers among some ICS. In all, lack of knowledge equated to increased confusion among participants.

Advantages, but Mostly Disadvantages to Reporting

Among ICS, there were sentiments shared surrounding why reporting still feels necessary even if the process is not well understood or the extent of being offered resources seemed questionable. ICS pointed out that reporting an incident to Title IX may "prevent more victims" in the future. ICS also discussed other advantages for victims to report to the Title IX office, as Gabby says:

> I feel like if you have a problem that's directly related to it, you're going to get more specified help. If you have a Title IX related problem, and you go to the Title IX office as opposed to just regular emergency services, you will probably get more specified help or directions with how to file a report or something.

As for disadvantages to reporting, ICS discussed feelings that may be associated with individuals reporting an incident to the Title IX office that would make the process challenging to endure, and that might deter someone from reporting in the first place. These included paranoia, overthinking, reliving trauma, and fear. The obvious disadvantages seemed to surround the feelings assumed to be associated with having experienced an incident, as well as the uncertainty around the reporting process in what it would entail, how long it would take, who would be involved, and so forth. Mi-sun explained why she would not likely report an incident to the Title IX office, as she said, "I feel like that prolongs the time of having to, like, reface the trauma or I guess what you're going through, and I'm not the type. I would much rather just kind of handle what I'm going through and try my best to forget, I think." Another student, Antoine, expressed his beliefs about why facing the reporting process in the Title IX office is off-putting to some students:

> I've worked for student conduct before, and none of the students really seem to want to speak with Title IX, and I think the minimal time for the entire process is 30 days or 60 days, and that's two months, so like you've reported it and let's say you reported it immediately which not most women or men do because of the not believing factor and it's not the norm and there's so much backlash to reporting and speaking up, so when you do and you go through that process as a student, it's long, it takes time, you're repeating yourself over and over again and reliving that mental state, so it's emotionally exhausting.

In a similar way, students considered whether being believed or being blown off by others, but especially by a campus resource, would or did make them feel less inclined to report an incident. One student, Alexandria, pondered, "It might not be taken serious, so like, for the victims or the person reporting, they might be reporting a relation and it being blown off in any kind of way. Will the person ever report again or wanting to ever seek up on it again?" For example, Uma worked on campus and reported feeling uncomfortable around a co-worker to her supervisor. However, she was not satisfied with the response of her supervisor because she felt somewhat ignored, as she relayed that:

> He said that he'll just talk to him. He didn't change my schedule, and nothing really changed, and I don't know if he ever spoke to him, but like it wasn't something that I could blatantly be like, "Don't speak to me." Like, because it was…first of all, he was a grown man. Like, I was a college student, and he was a grown man that came in from wherever he came in from to work, and it was just like, I felt very uncomfortable the whole time, so I always put myself like across the room.

Priya had a similar experience: "If I could start over and report again, I would have liked it if my department would have believed me earlier because my department took a lot of time to believe me." For Priya, the inaction of her academic department was a signal that she was not being supported adequately, which would have changed her initial decision to report to them:

> They asked me if I wanted to take a formal action against him. Unfortunately, I said no at that time, because I had already complained about him at the [DEI office], and at that time, my department offered me a TA and said that, 'We are going to look into it personally.' So, I said no to Title IX's formal action. If my department had said, 'We are not going to look into this,' I would have gone with Title IX's formal action.

The individuals or entities Uma and Priya reported to did not seem to believe them, and in turn, they continued to feel unsupported. Ultimately, their incidents went unresolved at work and at school.

Gendered Barriers

In other ways, ICS pointed out the grey area in reporting based on gender dynamics. A couple of participants indicated that they knew of someone who lost years of their graduate program progress from having to switch advisors or research centers due to gender discrimination against women by other graduate students or their advisors, perhaps rooted in "sexism," as suggested by mostly men in the sample. As Priya pointed out, "For some reason, being a female made it harder to get my voice heard." Women pointed out more often that a disadvantage of reporting is that it would be particularly emotional for them to do so. For ICS that identified as men, the stigma associated with reckoning with the idea of being a victim is another gendered consideration. For instance, Theo pointed out the mental gymnastics required of men to consider reporting an incident to the Title IX office in terms of what men may be feeling:

> It could be a mental thing too, like, you don't want to accept that your problem is actually like sexual assault or harassment. Especially for guys. We don't want to, a lot of guys don't want to admit that, you know, I just got sexually harassed, so… you're weak.

To Theo, men may feel less willing to report an incident to the Title IX office because admitting being victimized appears weak—likely due to gender stereotypes associated with masculinity and the assumption that men are less likely to be sexually victimized.

False Reporting

On the other hand, ICS discussed issues surrounding "crying wolf" about being sexually victimized and the potential problems false reporting may cause. However, the students' sensitivity regarding victims was also apparent—so much so that students described the potential "grey area" associated with not only experiencing sexual victimization but also reporting to the Title IX office and its repercussions for the students involved. For Micah, considering both parties involved in a Title IX complaint is important because traumatization is likely, as they noted:

> It is a little traumatizing. This is something that might overwhelm them, I think. Like, if you are an innocent party, and you get accused and you get in trouble for it, that's something that I'm sure is troubling and traumatizing, but on the flip side, if you're the victim, and you're accusing the guilty party, and you know that they are guilty, you are fully certain, and then they get away with it, that's going to be incredibly traumatizing for you.

Recognizing the trauma associated with reporting an incident to the Title IX office, Micah described situations that would exacerbate the negative feelings associated with the reporting process.

Title IX Reporting Expectations

Students also had expectations for how they thought the University should handle cases under Title IX, and Kailani best iterated the most common expectation: "I want them to take action about the situation." Since ICS were not as knowledgeable about Title IX, they referred to reporting experiences they or their friends made in the past to the international student resource center, counseling services, or Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) office whether related to racial discrimination experienced, visa needs, or other issues. For instance, after reporting discrimination to the international student resource center, Phillipe remembered his experience did not meet his expectations as he recalled, "They were like, you know, 'How about you just take a break from your Ph.D. and come back?'. And that's not the answer I wanted. I wanted you to tell me what am I supposed to do. I don't know, give me a sense of…but they're like, 'No, this is the only option you have currently'." Similarly, several ICS explained their poor experiences with counseling services on campus and their struggles as students working on their education in a different country. Participants expressed discontent with the resource office staff in that they were not similar to them in terms of ethnic or cultural background and, in turn, seemed dismissive of their unique experiences as ICS. To ICS, the expectations they had of campus resources

to address their concerns were not insurmountable but rather quite attainable. As Anika put it, "It is common sense. Like, when, when a survivor comes to you, you don't say, "Oh, why did that happen? Why didn't you do this?" You say, "What do you need? How can I help you?" And things like that." ICS desired and expected to be heard, believed, and supported to come to a suitable resolution—just like any person who has been victimized.

Just Listen

ICS also felt that their experiences presented a unique intersection between being students and holding a visa, which often meant they felt unheard in university spaces. Therefore, in explaining their expectations for how the Title IX office should respond to students after filing an incident, they desired to be listened to greatly. After Daiyu was asked what they desired, they flatly said:

> Listening. People don't listen. People don't listen to you. You know, when you first bring it out, you know, people ask you a lot of questions, which, to be honest, in that frame of mind, you don't want to answer them. You do not know how to explain to them you know how uncomfortable you are walking onto someone who you know who may be… you're suffering basically, so at the end of the day, when you reach out to someone for help, it would be nice if they listened, right then and there. Stop asking you a lot of questions.

Daiyu and other ICS understand the necessity to "get to the bottom of it," but also wanted to be heard first, then supported, and lastly, advocated for to be able to come to a resolution. Priya recalled her experience and how not being listened to made her feel:

> I was so frustrated by then that when they ask me to keep repeating what happened, I couldn't do it. And at that particular point of time, I just wish they would just listen to me and not be like, you know, 'Are you sure this is what happened?'. You know, questions like that. They would just be like, 'I get you.' Just listen.

Communication

Among students' expectations of an appropriate response from Title IX staff was communication—particularly transparency through that communication. For instance, Gabby expressed, "I know Title IX offices can get busy, but you're in a position to find time to sit with a student and hear their grievances and just have that, you know, transparency during the process about what they can do for you and what they can't and if they can't, where you can go to get more help." The

transparency of the Title IX reporting process itself was critical for students to feel confident in its adequacy to meet their needs following a reportable incident, as Uma pointed out:

> I think because 'investigation' sounds so ominous, of like what that means, who you're talking to, what's going on, so I think… That's why I think communication would be very key because yeah, if your investigation needs to go longer, I understand, but like, also like, hoping to see results. Just to make sure that you're actually investigating, and I don't feel like I'm wasting my time reporting to you.

As Uma said, one of the needs that several students expected the Title IX office to communicate about was the timeline for the reporting process specific to one's case. Anika exclaimed the importance of communication immediacy from staff in that she "would expect within a few business days, even if it's just we got your claim, it's being processed now, we're working on it, and I would expect update emails at least." To students, communication was a common courtesy to remain informed about the status of a complaint, effectively whether anything was being done about it. Women in the sample more often expected action, resources, and support than men. Their sentiments reflected the concern: Am I being supported how I would expect to be in a time of distress? Gabby's expectations included a sense of urgency, as she stated:

> I don't want them to sound like they're dragging their feet or that they have more important things to do. If something just happened, and I'm immediately reporting it, I expect that sort of behavior to be reciprocated. I want them to understand that it's urgent and that I need urgent help as well.

Similarly, another student, Alexandria, said, "This procedure takes way too long, and it needs to be a little bit better. I feel like the people who are sitting over there, you know, they need to ask better questions." Communication was a signal to students that signified actionable support, even if it was only reflected in words from the start. Being "ghosted" by a resource office after going to them for help represented abandonment from the University, which was meant to protect them in the first place, but even further, to ensure they were being supported in the aftermath of sexual violence.

Centering International College Students' Experiences

ICS are a unique student population as they travel across the world to obtain an education at US universities requiring education visas. Yet, they are often segregated from the rest of the student population on college campuses. Theo expressed that at the University of study, the "slogan is 'the most diverse

university,' but they want to capitalize on that idea, but I think they just want to keep repeating that instead of just investing in and developing programs in that direction, that's what I'm saying. If this were just a university, for example, I don't know. To empower women, to improve engineer, whatever, that's okay, but one of the main models of them is just diversity, and in my opinion, they haven't provided the infrastructure for international students." The specific needs of ICS often go unmet without the resources to meet them where they are at. Antoine noted that upon the start of his first semester, ICS were offered one-on-one opportunities to speak with a peer leader to help them navigate school, but the plan was not fully thought-out and, in turn, somewhat unhelpful:

> We had a designated student officer for each student according to their last name, you can contact whenever you need it over here you can only walk in doing the walk-in hours and wait to see somebody who might be different person the next time, so they're not familiar with your case. That, I think, needs a little bit of improvement.

While this ICS-specific program was not exactly a success, resources meant for all students did not seem particularly useful for ICS either.

Culturally-competent Support

For most ICS who had knowledge of and previous experiences with using campus resources, it was most often counseling services. Students with previous experiences with counseling services had pretty strong opinions about their interactions with the service staff and whether they felt supported or not. Drawing on these experiences, students indicated what they did not like about those interactions and, in turn, what they would prefer from another campus resource office, like Title IX, if they were to report an incident. One student, Micah, recalled a fairly positive experience with counseling services initially, but as time passed, they felt like the staff did not actually understand them because most of the staff were white. Specifically, they noted:

> I think it was good to just share my opinions, they were very helpful for me adjusting here, but later on, it was, the problem I had, at the beginning, it was perfect, to be honest, to have someone listening to me. But later, because I come from a different culture, the person who you were talking to has a different personality and different perspective. They might not be a suitable fit for your problems. I mean so, if [counseling services] were more demographically distributed, for example, we have many international students here, but most of the staff there are white and American. So they might have a hard time understanding what we are going through. At the beginning, it's perfect, but the more actually it goes on, I don't find it very fruitful.

Due to experiences like this with counseling services, several ICS resorted to relying on each other instead, as they could relate to what one another was going through while trying to obtain an education submerged in a culture varying from their own. Rashid explained, "I went through a lot just through my mental health, and I was like, 'Okay, like, I need help, and although like, I need their services that they were providing, like I didn't know how to approach that,' and so it took a lot of like, talking to students who have actually been through the process themselves where I was able to get help." Without the support of his ICS peers, he would not have felt ready to seek out campus resources on his own.

One reason why ICS may rely so heavily on one another for support instead of campus resources is that services provided by the University may be severely lacking—or, at the minimum, inadequate to address ICS' specific needs. When Anika went to file a complaint with Title IX, she simply put, "There is not a lot of resources for international students," which means ICS are at a distinct disadvantage during a time of need following experiences of sexual violence without the necessary services to support them. One ICS, Suri, shared a response she received when attempting to garner support after an incident, "Are you sure this happened? Are you sure it wasn't this that happened?" This was particularly difficult for Suri as she revealed why being an ICS exacerbated the harms caused by the incident she experienced and the challenges she faced during the reporting process:

> When I was in my first year here, I went through a lot, and unfortunately, I could not find resources that would support an international student because I am an international student. I had to search for those resources and really dig deep, and even when I approached a lot of the offices, I did not get much help.

Even though Suri attempted to use the University's available resources, she still did not get adequate support. As ICS, there were several needs that participants expressed would be important to consider if reporting an incident of sexual violence to Title IX.

Legal Fear

An issue unique to ICS that several participants discussed revolved around visas and green cards that may be jeopardized by a Title IX complaint. ICS concerns regarding their legal right to stay in the US were often mentioned as relevant information to the Title IX complaint process, especially whether a prior report could become known to people, including offices outside the University, and that could put them at risk of being deported. As Mi-sun questioned, "We don't know about what's going to be done to our information, so, maybe, for me personally, for international students, I might get a green card later, but the officer who will go through my documents might actually have access to this information, and it might be used against me." In considering this potential scenario, she continued,

"So I'm not sure about what's going to happen to this information later," effectively solidifying her unwillingness to report or be involved in Title IX processes. In addition, the decision to quit school or drop out among ICS was not so simple of an option considering their visa requirements, even if staying enrolled meant facing additional repercussions following an incident. Kailani reflected on her experience after being sexually harassed by a professor, knowing others had experienced similar situations with the same individual:

> I was an international student, so I have a lot of stake, a lot of things at stake here. I have my visa, I have a lot of things. You know, I cannot simply one day get up and be like I quit. There are certain things that he said to me, and I knew it was wrong. When I went [to Title IX], I got the courage. It took a lot to get the courage to actually go and report him because I was the first one.

For Kailani, the reporting stakes weighed on her significantly, but the obligatory feeling to report outweighed the stakes because she felt she needed to do so as the first individual to come forward.

Other ICS reported considering their student statuses alongside a desire to report harmful interactions they experienced to the Title IX office, but a sense of fear was discernable among them. As Priya said:

> We come in with a sense of fear. Most students have a visa in this scenario, and they want to keep their visa, right? And professors know how to take advantage of that, to be honest. Like, they know, 'Oh, she is an international student, and I can make her do more. I can make that person to do more because I can say things like, you know. 'Your visa might be at risk,' which is not allowed, of course, but most professors, in some way or the other, do end up saying that.

Fear often wins among ICS due to safety, not just for themselves but also their families. In relation to Title IX, which is often not an entity in other nations, ICS have to learn about and potentially navigate an entirely new system in the event of discrimination or victimization based on one's gender or sex. This was emphasized by Daiyu, who pointed out that Title IX presents a learning curve "for international students who come from different nations that don't have something like Title IX. It works differently in other countries, like China; it's expected that people tell someone like a professor or someone, but there is no official office for it." Women in the sample pointed out a sense of fear among ICS more often than did men. Feeling like they are often alone or one of few ICS who experience sexual violence requires substantial support and validation. For example, Kailani retold her feelings after experiencing victimization:

> The way he was controlling me was wrong. But, you know, there is a sense of fear because, like, 'Am I thinking this? Am I going crazy?' you know, those kinds of questions always come with you. But if I would have heard someone else's story, be like, 'Oh my god, there were told the same thing, I'm not crazy.' It would have been really good.

Due to victimization, obtaining support is vital, although having the additional fear of potentially losing one's visa because of victimization may leave ICS feeling like their education is in jeopardy. In those instances, ICS expressed a desire to have at least someone, a resource, that not only could help them work through the victimization experienced but also understand their unique position as an ICS. Essentially, ICS wanted "a person that they can go to when they feel like, you know, I mean international student, you know my problems. I have visa problems. I have this and that, but I'm being abused by my professor." Additionally, they need a person who can walk them through the process and answer a complex question given visa problems, "What am I supposed to do?" Drawing too much attention to one's victimization complaint can make ICS feel overanalyzed and therefore at risk of losing a visa, but that leaves them in a double bind of "You don't want to feel like you're under a microscope" in order to get support, but also do not want to feel like sacrificing a resolution for a complaint in order to keep an education visa.

According to participants, reducing fear involves making campus more inclusive to their specific needs. This means tailoring resources to ICS' experiences, offering them outlets to talk through the challenges of being an ICS, and ensuring their education visas are secure in the event of an incident that is reportable to Title IX.

DISCUSSION

Overall, ICS were not well-informed about Title IX regulations or processes and expressed there was an obvious need for additional training and/or refresher courses about the topic, but that the university should attempt to reduce the grey area in how Title IX is meant to protect students and unpack the legal nature of Title IX for ICS who may not have encountered something similar to Title IX as it is "uniquely American." They also indicated the disadvantages of reporting sexual violence far outweighed the advantages. ICS discussed the grey area of the rules themselves, causing uncertainty in what "counts" as sexual violence, the expected potential for a negative response from individuals within and outside their social network, and the inherent emotional toll that reporting would require them to navigate. In terms of ICS' expectations following a potential or prior report, being listened to topped the list. Lastly, ICS explained what should be taken into account when considering the ICS population, particularly if universities were to center their needs on crafting resources meant to support students generally but also following sexual violence victimization. This aligns with prior research that shows ICS experience more negative symptoms following sexual violence victimization than domestic college students (Fethi et al., 2023). Specifically, ICS emphasized the need to stop segregating them as a student group and rather make existing campus resources and service staff more culturally aware and sensitive to their needs, and most importantly, sympathize with their fear of the legal ramifications of reporting and curb those fears with information of what

the process would actually entail if reporting an incident to Title IX and the steps to follow.

Limitations

The limitations of this study include challenges with the methodology (e.g., recruitment success). After students initially expressed interest in the study and researchers attempted to contact them to participate, there was a lack of response about scheduling an interview or focus group with some students, resulting in a limited sample size, particularly among ICS. While we took an inclusive approach to the research, we acknowledge that the resulting sub-sample size of ICS could not possibly produce every ICS' knowledge of or experience with Title IX.

Implications

Prior studies have consistently found there is a lack of knowledge about Title IX among college students at the undergraduate and graduate levels (e.g., Smith, Swartz, & Irvin-Erickson, 2024). Universities should be proactive in providing Title IX-specific education to all students but pay special attention to ICS in that their baseline knowledge about American cultural norms, US laws, and university mandates may be lacking—and investing in building their knowledge is essential for them to be successful college students in a new country. There is also a need to educate and train administrators, staff, and faculty about the rights of ICS in relation to student visas, along with the unique cultural factors to consider in supporting ICS. Additionally, creating partnerships and protocols with campus resource offices designed to support students, especially ICS, may also improve efforts to respond sensitively and effectively to ICS' needs following an experience of sexual violence.

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