Re-Designing the Presentation of Information on Sexual Assault and Harassment to Students

An Interactive Media Business Proposal

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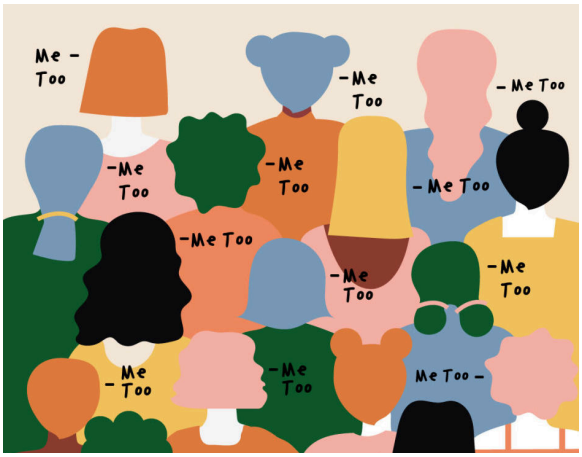
NYU Shanghai
Interactive Media Business



https://youmemindbody.com/mental-health/Coping-With-Sexual-Assault

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"Re-Designing the Presentation of Information on Sexual Assault and Harassment to Students"

Carol Li Zhang, Class of 2023

Keywords: Title IX, sexual assault, website design, information architecture

Abstract

Tackling the problem of how colleges and universities in the United States present their information regarding Title IX policies and procedures to students, the purpose of this project is to redesign and propose a new website layout and design that will be tailored to the needs of the student body. Upon conducting a comparative analysis across ten different universities and several interviews with members of the NYU community, it is clear that the effectiveness of university websites must be improved to alleviate the emotional burden imposed on students when interacting with digital presentation of the Title IX information. The presented solution is a website that will streamline the information seeking process to reduce the amount of time and energy required of students to locate the information that they seek. This will mainly be carried out by implementing visual elements into the presentation of information. The website includes icons, mind maps, and other visuals to improve the transfer of information to the user while promoting visual and mental engagement. The final website was created and published utilizing the platform Wix.

Introduction

The recent #MeToo movement has brought sexual assault and harassment issues to light in a number of sectors, including in education. While universities have long been considered "safe spaces," it is unfortunate that this is not always the case. Within the student population in the United States, around 26.4% of females and 6.8% of males have experienced sexual assault in some way [1]. This is especially troubling when the implications of these statistics are considered along with the rate of reporting at university campuses. With 77% of campuses reporting "zero incidents of sexual assault, including rape and fondling, domestic violence, dating violence and stalking," it begs the question of whether college campuses are truly as safe as they claim to be [2]. In order to further investigate and understand this issue, I began with a case study with New York University. The purpose of focusing on NYU was to allow a better understanding of how certain universities in the U.S choose to approach dealing with Title IX polices and procedures related to sexual assault and harassment. Title IX is a law that was passed in 1972 that defines certain policies and procedures that must be implemented by educational institutions within the U.S. It is under Title IX that students at U.S universities who experience sexual assault and harassment are entitled to care and support. This includes the option to file complaints and cases against other members of the community. As Title IX is the cornerstone of all U.S institutions' sexual assault and harassment policies and procedures, it is worth taking a look at exactly how universities both implement and present this policy to its community. After analyzing the Title IX process undertaken by NYU, the project was expanded to focus on the general Title IX process that is taken at the majority of colleges and universities in the United States.

Problem Definition

The audience that I am currently trying to solve the problem for is university students who may be in the position of wanting to report an incident to their university or law enforcement. The magnitude of the problem seems quite severe. From the numerous interviews that I have conducted, everyone that has interacted with a university website has indicated that they had issues with navigating the website and locating information. Several people also mentioned that simply having to read through the dense amount of information on the website affected how they felt about the reporting process and created a burden for them. It also seems that this is an issue across

many other universities across the United States. This is most likely due to the fact that all Title IX is a national law that has been generally applied to all universities that receive federal funding.

It seems that this problem exists because universities are required to present a large amount of information regarding both Title IX and the university's sexual assault and harassment policies and procedures, yet the designers of the website and Title IX office do not stop to consider how the process of interacting with the information digitally could affect students' emotions and willingness to report. When conducting the initial comparative analysis with ten universities, this issue becomes increasingly obvious as they all had an equally dense formatting of information for their Title IX and sexual assault and harassment procedures web pages. Therefore, it can be inferred that this is an issue that is faced by many university students across the United States.

Motivation

I was initially inspired to conduct research and work in this area because of two reasons. First, my passion for the subject was ignited the moment I read Chanel Miller's impact statement. Chanel Miller is the woman who was sexually assaulted by the former Stanford student Brock Turner in 2015. Upon reading her impact statement, I was left with a deep impression of how difficult the process was for her and the emotional impact that it had on her life. The second event that left a deep impression on me was when I heard about a university student who committed suicide in Zhejiang, China because she was assaulted by her professor. When her story was revealed, the inaction of both the university and the student's parents left me frustrated and angry. These two events, along with the injustice of the broader issue of how sexual assault cases are dealt with on college campuses, has further spurred my desire to help find a solution to the problem.

Research, Prior Art, and Opportunities

I have not identified any forms of outside research or prior art that have influenced my project or research process. I am unfamiliar with any ongoing or previous projects that have attempted to solve this issue. However, I have read several research papers that have approached the topic in very specific ways, such as simply evaluating how effective training programs are at universities. I would not consider these research studies to be inspirations or influences, but rather background research that has helped me further understand the issue at hand.

The research that has influenced my project is the research that I have conducted for my DURF (Dean's Undergraduate Research Fund) and for a previous course, The Meaning of Leadership. Both experiences exposed me to university training and the current problems with the implementation of this training. My DURF project has also provided me with a general understanding of the issue at a national level, while the course, The Meaning of Leadership, provided me with the opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of how NYU specifically handles its sexual assault and harassment trainings.

Through my research, I identified three "opportunities" or problematic aspects of the current NYU system that I could target.

The first aspect that is problematic is the current training programs that NYU chooses to implement. As of right now, NYU has a training program called the Think About It module. It is required for all undergraduate students, at every NYU campus, to complete this online course module. The vast majority of students complete this module their freshman year, which is also often the last time that they interact with it, as students are only required to complete it once during their entire university career. However, there are also differences in training depending on which campus a student is enrolled at. At NYU Shanghai, each freshman is required to attend an in-person event that discusses possible scenarios during orientation week. This event does not exist for the NYC or Abu Dhabi campuses.

Disregarding these campus differences, the current university-wide training is ineffective because of several reasons. First, the lack of repetition means that the majority of students will forget the material once the training is over. Second, the online program does not promote retention of information, especially since students are able to skip through the videos.

The second aspect that is problematic is related to the administration and how they handle these cases. There seems to be issues with communication and administrative attitudes. For example, several students have stated that they have been met with cold attitudes and responses when interacting with administrators regarding their case. Another student indicated that a lack of communication between the administrators resulted in the delay of her case by several months.

Lastly, there is the issue of how information regarding the reporting process and students' rights is being presented. My analysis of the NYU website for Title IX policies and procedures during my DURF project has indicated low readability scores. This means that the information is presented in dense formats that can affect how well students can understand the material.

However, after conducting a meeting with my Capstone advisor, another opportunity was identified. This idea was to expand my redesign of the NYU website into a general website that could be used by all university students throughout the U.S since the Title IX process is very similar across the nation.

Project Introduction

My solution to this problem is to create a website. My final website splits the information into three categories, Record Your Story, Learn Your Rights, and Learn About the Process. Depending on the user's needs, they can choose which section of information to view. The purpose of this layout is to make it incredibly simple and easy for users to locate and access the information that they are looking for.

For example, if there is a student that would like to file a report with Title IX, but they are unsure of what the procedure will look like, they can go to the website and click on Learn About the Process -> University Process and reference the flow chart.

The purpose of this website is to promote the power of information and to allow students to take the Title IX process into their own hands and have more control over what happens to them. I hope that this website will prove to be a source of information that they can go to and that it will be accessible to everyone. Although it is only presenting the information in a simpler, more understandable manner, I hope that something small like this will be able to play a bigger role in reducing the emotional burden on students who are going through such a taxing, strenuous situation.

Risks and Barriers

In order to complete my project successfully, there were a number of risks and barriers that I had to account for. The main risks were associated with three main areas: technical skills, user testing, and implementation. The risks are listed below in order of most risky to least risky.

Your Ordered List of Risks:

1. Possible "contamination" of user testing groups
2. Lack of informative feedback from both user testing and non-user testing groups
3. Difficulty sorting through the large amounts of information regarding Title IX and sexual assault and harassment policies and procedures which results in the design of ineffective visuals
4. Technical complications in creating website
5. New website redesign is met with resistance from the administration and the proposed design is unable to be implemented

Besides the risks, there was also a concern that I had regarding my project. Specifically, I was oncerned that a website redesign would be too simple for a complicated topic such as sexual assault and harassment. To account for this concern, I reached out to administrators who dealt directly with Title IX to discuss my project.

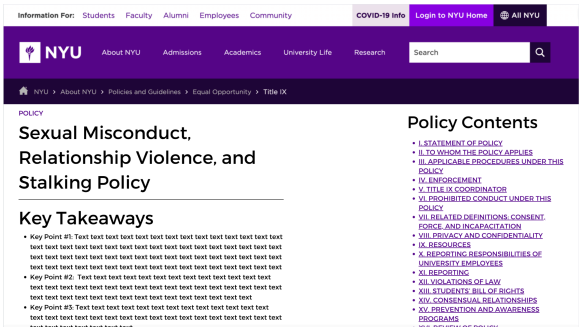
Work Plan and Research and Development Process

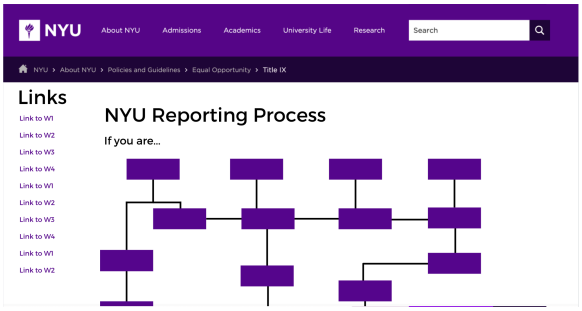
After deciding that my project would still focus on the presentation of information to students, I changed the target audience to no longer solely be NYU students, instead, it would be all university students in the United States.

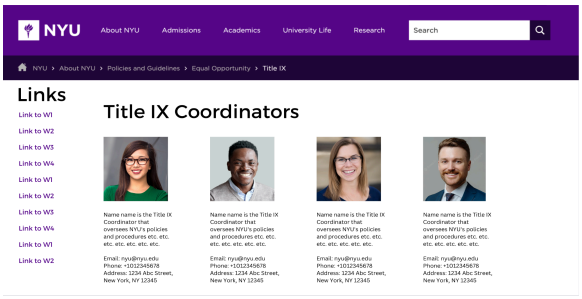
In order to build the content of my website, I utilized twelve interviews total. Four of the interviews were with administrators at NYU and the remaining eight were with students who have gone through the Title IX reporting process, had interactions with the Title IX office, or little to no experience with the Title IX office or the process. Based on these interviews and research, it was determined that all student interviewees encountered a similar problem. Specifically, there was an inability to effectively locate information regarding Title IX policy and procedures on the university website. The interviewees had issues with how dense the information was and the amount of time it took for them to locate the information that they were seeking. This issue is significant because of the repercussions that it can have on students' behaviors as difficulties interacting with the university website can lead to deterrence from reporting.

With this specific focus in mind, I have created nine different sketches that could be used as possible redesigns of the website. These sketches were

created based on the knowledge that I have gained in other classes regarding data visualization, hierarchy of information, and I have referenced other university websites to understand what current designs have been implemented. These sketches were then visualized using Canva.







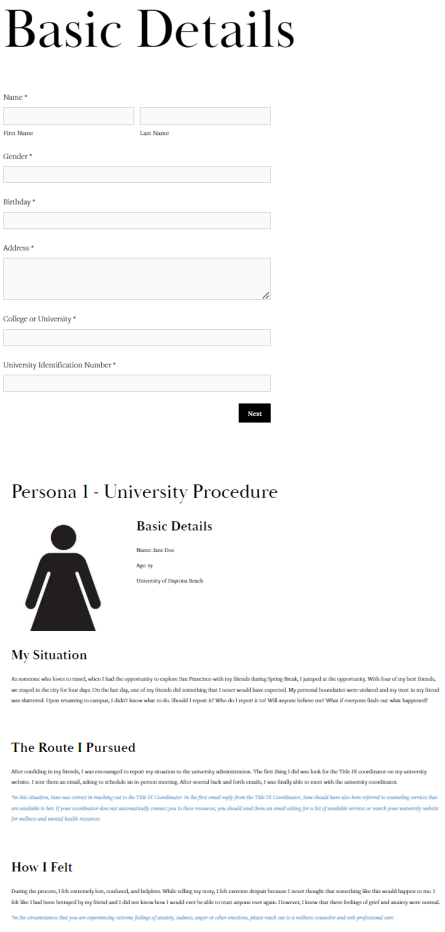
After the digitization of the three sketches, three preliminary design tests were conducted with three different users. The user responses were positive and I received feedback regarding what elements could be improved and what could be added. From the user feedback, I have concluded that I would move forward with the three sketches that have been digitized so far. The possible improvements that were mentioned the most were in regards to the visual elements. For example, one user indicated that they would prefer more visual elements. Overall, the users noted that the engagement levels of my designs are also high. The map format, specifically, allows the users to interact with the information and better understand the procedures. These responses are all positive as positive interactions with the web page indicates that the emotional burden of searching for information on the web pages has also lessened.

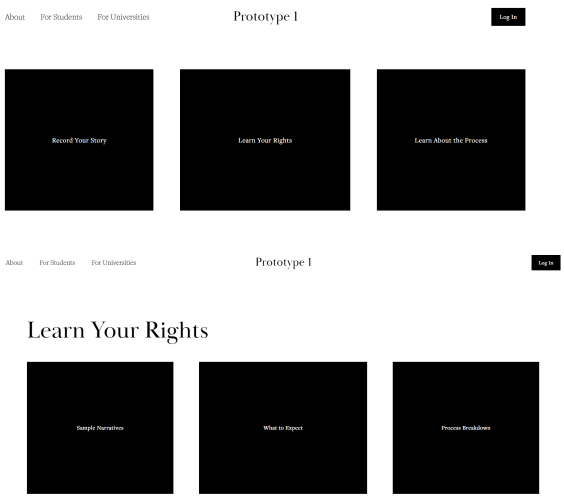
However, since I decided to change the target audience, I applied this general format that I originally created specifically for the NYU website, to a broader website that can be publicly accessed by anyone. The goal was to create an effective, visually appealing and engaging web page that allows students access to the policies and procedural information, as well as the option to digitally report their case.

After writing out my content using the information that I had gathered through my research and interviews, I tested the content with a Title IX Liaison and two

students who had previously gone through the Title IX process. The feedback was positive and so I was able to start building out my website then. In building out my website, I first utilized Squarespace. However, due to technical difficulties, I switched to Wix halfway through the process.

Below are images of the first prototype I created on Squarespace.





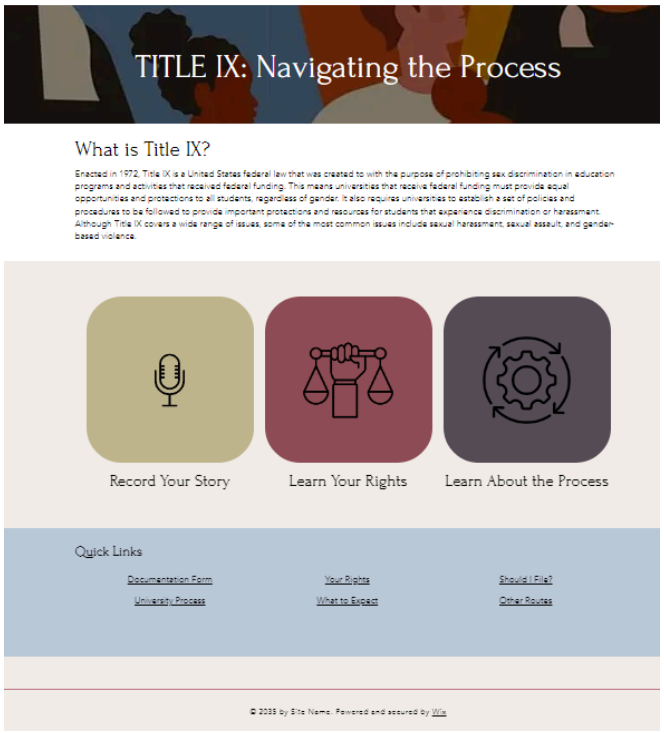
Upon switching to Wix, I was able to further build out my website and my content. First, in regards to the website design, I opted for a simple design that would clearly separate the information. This would make it easier for user navigation and information location. As for the colors, in my first prototype, I opted to stick with a black and white color scheme because I did not want to oversaturate the website with colors. However, I eventually decided that black and white would look too plain for the final design. So, for my final website, I chose a number of colors to create a theme. In choosing the colors, I wanted muted tones or darker colors that would not "scream" at the users. I wanted the website to convey a mature, gentle, comfortable feeling, so this is what I kept in mind as I chose the color theme for the final website. In the end, I ended up with a palette of the

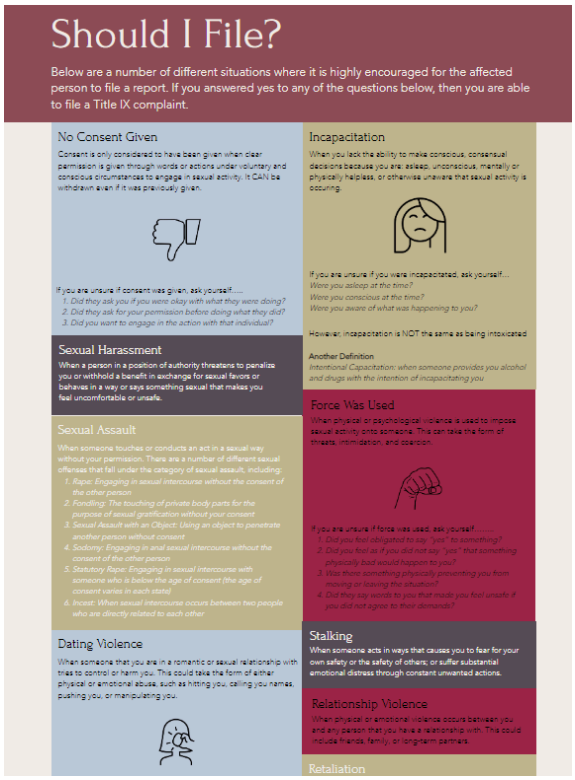
colors with the Hex Codes BFB48F, 564E58, 904E55, F2EFE9, and 252627.

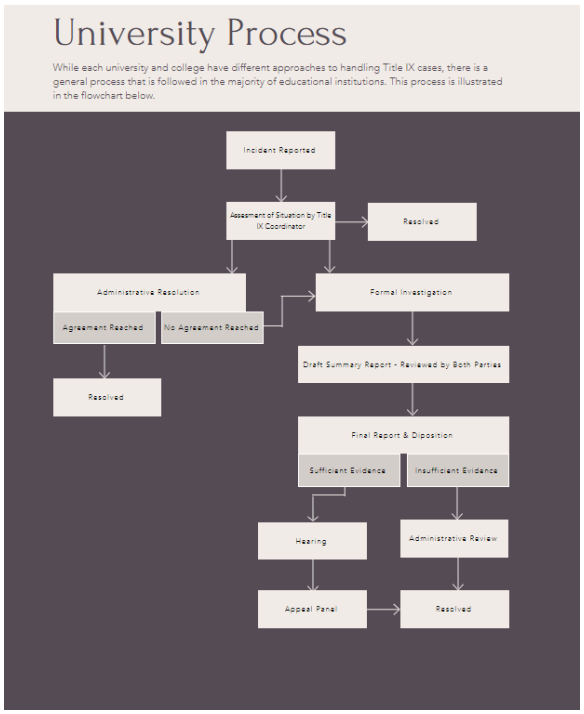
In terms of content, my final website has the three main categories of information that it will offer. The first is Record Your Story. The purpose of this category is to allow those who are considering reporting an opportunity to think through the situation and what happened before they meet with a Title IX Coordinator. The form can also be used after they meet with a Coordinator or can also serve as a form of preparing them for the meeting. In Learn Your Rights, there are two sections. The first one lists a general list of rights that each student should be aware of and the second is a list of definitions and situations where it is encouraged for students to file a report. Lastly, in Learn About the Process, a flow chart is provided that walks through the university process for the student so that they know what to expect.

For example, if a student is not sure of whether or not their situation applies under Title IX, they can go to the website, click on Should I File? and check to see if their situation is described below. If it is, then they have the affirmation that they should file a report.

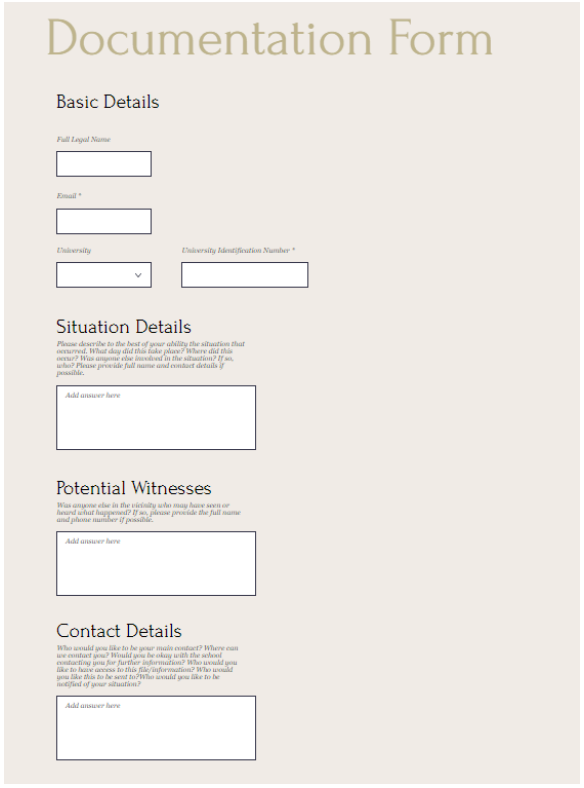
Below are images of my final website design.




Should I File?
Below are a number of different situations where it is highly encouraged for the affected person to file a report. If you answered yes to any of the questions below, then you are able to file a Title IX complaint.
No Consent Given
Consent is only considered to have been given when clear permission is given through words or actions under voluntary and conscious circumstances to engage in sexual activity. It CAN be withdrawn even if it was previously given.
If you are unsure if consent was given, ask yourself.....
1. Did they ask you if you were okay with what they were doing?
2. Did they ask for your permission before doing what they did?
3. Did you want to engage in the action with that individual?
Sexual Harassment
When a person in a position of authority threatens to penalize you or withhold a benefit in exchange for sexual favors or behaves in a way or says something sexual that makes you feel uncomfortable or unsafe.
Sexual Assault
When someone touches or conducts an act in a sexual way without your permission. There are a number of different sexual offenses that fall under the category of sexual assault, including:
1. Rape: Engaging in sexual intercourse without the consent of the other person
2. Fondling: The touching of private body parts for the purpose of sexual gratification without your consent
3. Sexual Assault with an Object: Using an object to penetrate another person without consent
4. Sodomy: Engaging in oral sexual intercourse without the consent of the other person
5. Statutory Rape: Engaging in sexual intercourse with someone who is below the age of consent (the age of consent varies in each state)
6. Incest: When sexual intercourse occurs between two people who are directly related to each other
Dating Violence
When someone that you are in a romantic or sexual relationship with tries to control or harm you. This could take the form of either physical or emotional abuse, such as hitting you, calling you names, pushing you, or manipulating you.
Incapacitation
When you lack the ability to make conscious, consensual decisions because you are: asleep, unconscious, mentally or physically helpless, or otherwise unaware that sexual activity is occurring.
If you are unsure if you were incapacitated, ask yourself...
Were you asleep at the time?
Were you conscious at the time?
Were you aware of what was happening to you?
However, incapacitation is NOT the same as being intoxicated
Another Definition
Intentional Capacitation: when someone provides you alcohol and drugs with the intention of incapacitating you
Force Was Used
When physical or psychological violence is used to impose sexual activity onto someone. This can take the form of threats, intimidation, and coercion.
If you are unsure if force was used, ask yourself.....
1. Did you feel obligated to say "yes" to something?
2. Did you feel as if you did not say "yes" that something physically bad would happen to you?
3. Was there something physically preventing you from moving or leaving the situation?
4. Did they say words to you that made you feel unsafe if you did not agree to their demands?
Stalking
When someone acts in ways that causes you to fear for your own safety or the safety of others, or suffer substantial emotional distress through constant unwanted actions.
Relationship Violence
When physical or emotional violence occurs between you and any person that you have a relationship with. This could include friends, family, or long-term partners.
Retaliation


University Process
While each university and college have different approaches to handling Title IX cases, there is a general process that is followed in the majority of educational institutions. This process is illustrated in the flowchart below.
Incident Reported
Assesment of Situation by Title IX Coordinator
Resolved
Administrative Resolution
Formal Investigation
Agreement Reached
No Agreement Reached
Draft Summary Report • Reviewed by Both Parties
Resolved
Final Report & Disposition
Sufficient Evidence
Insufficient Evidence
Hearing
Administrative Review
Appeal Panel
Resolved

Your Rights
Listed here a number of rights that the majority of universities are required to ensure for those who choose to report to the university Title IX office.
Right to Confidentiality
Information shared by students will not be and cannot be revealed to any other individual without the explicit permission of the student
Supportive Measures
University will provide reasonable and appropriate support to the student
Right to Privacy
Privacy of students will be protected to the best of the University's ability and information will only be shared with a limited group on a "need to know" basis
Emergency Removal
May remove a student if determined there is an immediate threat to individual safety
Protection from Retaliation
University will take action to protect reporting students from threats
Coordination with Concurrent Legal Proceedings
If the case is reported to law enforcement, the University will work to provide students with resources to the best of its ability
Advisor of Choice
Reporting students can choose to have a single Advisor of their present during the hearings
Conflict of Interest
If it is believed that there is a conflict of interest, an objection can be made to the Title IX Coordinator
FERPA
Due process will not be compromised to implement FERPA


Documentation Form
Basic Details
Full Legal Name
Email *
University
University Identification Number *
Situation Details
Please describe to the best of your ability the situation that occurred. What day did this take place? Where did this occur? Was anyone else involved in the situation? If so, who? Please provide full name and contact details if possible.
Add answer here
Potential Witnesses
Was anyone else in the vicinity who may have seen or heard what happened? If so, please provide the full name and phone number if possible.
Add answer here
Contact Details
Who would you like to be your main contact? Where can we contact you? Would you be okay with the school contacting you for further information? Who would you like to have access to this file/information? Who would you like this to be sent to?Who would you like to be notified of your situation?
Add answer here

User/Audience Testing Plan

The audience that I am currently trying to solve the problem for is university students who may be in the position of wanting to report an incident to their university or law enforcement. The pain points that the users encounter are related to having to digest a large amount of information under emotional stress, being unsure of what to do when they encounter these situations. Because of these issues, I will be measuring the success of my project through two main metrics: 1. The ability of students to locate information effectively (specifically measured in the amount of time it takes for them to find the information that they are looking for on the website) and 2. Whether or not the website reduces the emotional burden of the Title IX process to a certain extent.

The first metric, the reduction of time to locate information, was conducted through controlled user tests. This testing involved timed tests. First, the users were provided a prompt and given the link to a randomly selected university website. The users were then timed to see how long it would take them to locate the specific information in the prompt. Next, users were provided the same prompt and given the link to my final website. They were then timed again to see if there was a difference in the length of time that it took for them to complete the prompt. The purpose of having timed tests is to understand how long it takes the users to locate certain information and whether or not my website made a difference in their ability to locate information. There were two rounds of testing with three people in each round for a total of six total user tests. In each user test, there was a drastic difference in the time that it took each user to locate specific information.

The second metric will be measured through surveys and, if possible, interviews with the users. While interviews allow for a deeper understanding of the impact of the website on an emotional level, surveys that ask users to indicate their feelings on scales (such as 1-10 or high to low) would also suffice. This feedback would also be especially helpful if I were able to interview and survey students who have had to go through the Title IX process. This would allow me to draw a comparison between the experiences.

Reflection

The first learning experience that I will take forward with me is regarding the technical skills that I have learned this semester related to design. I have learned how important website design can be in processing information and how the hierarchy of information and web page layout can affect the engagement of the user. The skills that I have learned in using website creation are also skills that I believe will be incredibly valuable to me for next semester and for after graduation.

The second learning experience that I will take forward is also related to website design; however, it is more of a revelation than an acquired skill. The revelation that I had regarding website design is related to the importance of visuals. Before conducting this project, I had little idea how much we rely on visual cues and visual information. After creating my website redesigns and testing them, I realized that not only does visual design help people better understand the information being presented, but that it also improves the retention of information.

The third learning experience came from my experience with conducting interviews this semester. Although I have conducted interviews in the past, this is the first time that I have conducted so many interviews on a sensitive topic such as sexual assault and harassment. As a result, I had to be incredibly careful with how I treated each interview and I tried my best to make each interviewee feel as comfortable as possible. I think that this awareness and adaptability are very important in any context, not just interviews. So, I think that this opportunity to practice this skill was an invaluable experience for me.

The fourth takeaway that I had was that small things can make a big impact. Although creating a website that simplifies information can seem like a small task, it can actually create a much bigger difference and impact than it seems. So you should never underestimate the small things.

The fifth lesson that I learned was that everyone has more shared experiences than you expect. What this means is that while everyone has unique experiences, there are actually quite a few aspects and areas that we all share or have in common. And it is because of these shared experiences that allow people to create websites, such as this project, that can reach a wider audience and benefit a greater number of people.

Lastly, I think that it is important to understand that you should never be afraid to work with sensitive topics. Throughout the project, I ran into multiple issues, whether it was finding students and administrators who were willing to be interviewed or just receiving surface-level responses from the people that I needed more information from. However, I think that it is because of these challenges that show when a topic is truly worth taking on.

References

[1] Campus sexual violence: Statistics. RAINN. (n.d.). Retrieved December 16, 2022, from https://www.rainn.org/statistics/campus-sexual-violence

[2] *An underreported problem: Campus sexual misconduct*. AAUW. (2022, May 12). Retrieved December 16, 2022, from https://www.aauw.org/resources/article/underreported-sexual-misconduct/