STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION STUDENTS WRESTLE WITH REAL-WORLD CAMPAIGNS

By Sarah Leiser, First Year MEPC Student

Sexual assault and alcohol abuse on college campuses are hot topics in the media nationwide. As more incidents are reported, universities are looking for ways to support their students and help keep them safe. The Health and Counseling Center (HCC) at University of Denver, along with the Title IX office recently partnered with a graduate-level Strategic Communications course to conduct research so as to better address these issues.

University of Denver, like every other institution of higher learning in the United States, is required to teach all undergraduate students about alcohol harm reduction and sexual assault prevention as a part of Title IX compliance. While the most efficient way to ensure that all students obtain this information is through online training modules completed prior to the start of their first year, these one-size-fits-all approaches have not been proven to be effective with students. The HCC wanted to explore alternative approaches. Students in Associate Professor Renee Botta’s Strategic Communications course designed a project that would help the HCC decide if and how to upgrade their online education course on alcohol harm reduction and sexual assault prevention.

To tackle the project, the Strategic Communications class was split into four groups and each group was assigned two types of students or student publics, including students of color, first years, international students, student athletes, and more. The class groups set out to discover what their student publics knew about alcohol reduction and sexual assault prevention, as well as what they felt was lacking. The groups identified the unique needs of various student publics and explored how the HCC’s education program could address those needs.

Students in the class appreciated the project and the way it brought the real world into the classroom. As Carolyn Coles, a second-year Intercultural Communications student noted, it is
"helpful when coursework is directly applied to a project that impacts the greater community. It allows for situational information to be included, and students get a feel for how the coursework comes to fruition on the ground."

"Working on the HCC/Title IX project felt like we were doing something practical that had the potential to inform DU's efforts to prevent sexual assault on campus. It gave us a sense of purpose in class," added first year MA student in Media and Public Communication Tidenek Haileselassie.

A number of students were concerned to find that graduate students were not required to take the online education courses, even though grad students are equally at risk for alcohol abuse and sexual assault. The students hope that their work with the HCC will lead to greater consideration for the inclusion of graduate students in their educational programming.

Madison Snider, a first year Intercultural Communications masters student said, "I think our project provided an opportunity for us to benefit from a real client project and for DU to benefit from the skills of its students. We have so many resources and skilled students and faculty on campus that could benefit from this type of collaboration."