

Universities Must Train Students to Be Leaders in Reproductive Rights, Health and Justice

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Engaging students in reproductive justice issues provides a platform for them to exercise their agency and contribute to societal progress.

As institutions committed to fostering critical thinking, social responsibility and knowledge production, it is imperative that [colleges and universities](#) marshal their resources toward reproductive justice, in today's post-*Dobbs* world.

For many college students in the United States, especially those in abortion-ban states, the recent restrictions on abortion access have created a drive to get involved in reproductive health—but many universities are simply not doing enough to support students in these efforts.

It's become increasingly clear that reproductive health is not a distant concern for college students—it's deeply intertwined with their lives. On campuses across the nation, students navigate relationships, sexual health and decisions about their reproductive futures. Woman students made up [59.5 percent](#) of all university students in the 2020-2021 school year, and in 2020, [27.9 percent](#) of all abortions were performed on people aged 20-24.

Given these statistics, many students capable of being pregnant are adding another [factor](#) to their college decision: “Can I access abortion where this university is located, and how is the university supporting their students seeking this care?”

Ensuring that students have access to comprehensive reproductive healthcare—including sex education, contraception, abortion and prenatal/postpartum services—is essential for the overall well-being of students and universities alike.

Reproductive rights are also a retention and recruitment issue: Between 2003 and 2013, about 61 percent of U.S. community college students who had children after enrolling in college did not finish their education, [research](#) shows. Seventy-two percent of presently enrolled college students say that the state's laws governing reproductive health have at least some influence on their decision to continue attending, another recent [study](#) found.

Effects of Reproductive Rights, Health and Justice Internship

Colleges and universities have historically been catalysts for social change, nurturing student activism and empowering young leaders to challenge injustice. Engaging students in reproductive justice issues provides a platform for them to exercise their agency and contribute to societal progress. [Recent research](#) into the effects of a donor-funded reproductive rights, health and justice internship program at [Tulane University's Newcomb Institute](#) provides insight into one potential way for colleges and universities to show their commitment and make an impact on this landscape.

The program places students in paid internships with community organizations and faculty members working on reproductive rights, health/justice initiatives or research. It develops sustainable community partnerships in New Orleans and provides students with equitable opportunities to cultivate social justice leadership.

Out of the students in the internship program surveyed:

- 85.71 percent agreed that the program inspired them to get more involved in social justice issues.
- 88.75 percent agreed that it furthered their understanding of how to engage with institutions and systems of power to create change.
- Almost 94 percent agreed that it increased their understanding of the complex interlinking of social inequalities (according to race, class, gender, sexuality, ability, etc.) and developed their senses of social justice and empathy toward marginalized communities.

A survey of the internship sites revealed that community organizations overwhelmingly feel they benefit from the program as well.

Similar programs could help universities positively impact their communities while simultaneously supporting their students' goals. By offering programs that empower students, universities not only align themselves with their students' values, but foster professional skills and career development, giving students an advantage on the job market.

Such initiatives not only benefit the students involved but also have a ripple effect, fostering community partnerships, raising awareness and ultimately contributing to the advancement of reproductive justice on a larger scale.

As universities strive to cultivate well-rounded, socially conscious graduates, they should harness the power of their fundraising apparatus and donor base to create opportunities like these, increasing student success and impact.