

Strengthening Convictions for Comprehensive Sex Education

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Hello, Newcomb College Institute! My name is Julia Guy, and I am a Tulane junior studying Political Economy and Environmental Studies. This is my fourth session working as a research assistant for Dr. Clare Daniel, but it is my third as part of the Reproductive Rights and Reproductive Health internship program. My current project is a continuation of last summer's work, in which I am compiling a master list of school administration contacts across Louisiana to prepare an IRB proposal for a much larger project assessing the capacity for comprehensive sex education in the Bayou State.

As most of us know, comprehensive sex education is important for public health and reproductive justice for its most practical and autonomous reasons: young adults must know facts about reproductive organs, sexual intercourse and its implications, sexually transmitted infections, and contraceptive methods in order to more completely assess their reproductive options and make choices best for them and their situation. However, the most pressing current event of the past few weeks illustrated a need for CSE beyond one-sided teen pregnancy statistics or gender role-based STI prevention campaigns.

If the topics of sex and our bodies are breached at all in the American classroom, they are often laced with negative, shameful messages about the “proper” way to express sexuality and sexual behavior. Abstinence-only education often draws upon conservative, religious beliefs about morality to try to explicitly link sexual activity outside of heterosexual marriage as a degradation of self-worth. Combination programs take a step forward by including information about contraceptive methods, but they often list grim statistics about effectiveness and continue to state that oft-repeated illogical line: “Abstinence is the only 100% effective method to prevent pregnancy and STIs.”

Dr. Ford’s testimony two weeks ago was utterly heartbreaking. Period. However, the national reaction, from the explicit dismissal from my own Texas senators to the toxic comment threads on local news sites, not only angered me, it once again proved that something is gravely missing from what our students are learning about not just their bodies and sexuality, but how to appropriately and respectfully treat one another’s. True comprehensive sex education not only teaches the anatomy and process of sex but does so in a manner that presents all reproductive choices and situations as simply that: a choice. A personal choice, like all other individual or bodily choices, to be respected like any other. Of course, we should discuss consent and partner respect in the classroom; many existing programs of different types already do. However, removing stigmas and shameful messaging from how we teach about sex, and incorporating the positive, normal, and exciting parts for both men and women may help begin to bridge the gap so painfully displayed on our most solemn national stage this month.