



FEMINIST MAJORITY FOUNDATION

## CHOICES CAMPUS LEADERSHIP PROGRAM

WORLD'S LARGEST PRO-CHOICE STUDENT NETWORK

# SEX-POSITIVITY: EDUCATE, EMPOWER, SELF-DEFINE!

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## WHAT IS SEX-POSITIVITY?

Sex-positivity is the belief that consensual sexual expression is both healthy and important in contributing to a safe and inclusive campus climate. Sex-positivity is grounded in comprehensive sex education, exploring and deconstructing gender norms, and promoting body-positivity and self-love. It fosters safe spaces in which different identities and sexual expressions are valued and bodily autonomy is paramount. Sex-positivity transforms our relationship with ourselves, each other, and our communities and can impact policy.

## CONSENT

Consent is the expression of a mutual desire between parties to participate in a sexual activity. Sexual activity without consent is sexual violence. Period. Consent is fundamental in creating a sex-positive space. It is vitally important to respect other people's consensual choices when it comes to their identity and body.

Consent can be withdrawn at any time and it is given without coercion. Someone saying "yes" because they are too afraid to say "no" is not what consent looks like. Someone changing their mind about a sexual desire and then being forced to engage in it anyway is not what consent looks like. Consent isn't always spoken, but it should never be assumed. The absence of a "no" is not a "yes!"

Minors, people who are mentally incapacitated or unconscious, and people under the influence of drugs or alcohol are unable to give consent.

## SELF-DEFINED SEXUALITY

Sex-positivity celebrates healthy sexual relationships, diversity within those relationships, bodily autonomy, and empowering individuals to control their own sex life (or lack thereof). You define what is right for you – there is no "right" way to engage in sex and express your sexuality as long as everything involves consent, empowerment, and respect.

## BREAKING DOWN GENDER MYTHS

Gender roles are the behavioral expectations placed on

people in relation to the gender binary. It's important to remember that gender is a social construct, and if someone doesn't fit into the societal expectations for what their gender (or lack of gender) looks and acts like, that is perfectly okay! Critically examining gender roles and participating in behaviors and expressions that make you happy is extremely sex-positive! It is important not to put other people in boxes when it comes to sexual expression, and everyone should be able to express their gender in a way that empowers them.

## SAFE SEX

### COMPREHENSIVE SEX EDUCATION

Empowering folks to take control of their sexuality starts by making sure they know how their bodies work and how to keep them safe.

According to the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS), comprehensive sex education is characterized by teaching age-appropriate, medically accurate information on topics such as sexuality, human development, decision-making, abstinence, contraception, and disease prevention. Comprehensive sex education provides students with factual information on abortion, masturbation, and sexual orientation, and they are encouraged to explore their own values, goals, and options. These curriculums also cover consent, healthy relationships, communication skills, and bodily autonomy. Sex-positive, comprehensive sex education does not intertwine sexual identities and choices with character and is supportive of students' safe and informed exploration of gender and sexual expression. SIECUS defines the following curricula as not sex-positive:

- **Abstinence-Based:** Programs that emphasize the benefits of abstinence but also include information about sexual behavior other than intercourse and contraception and disease prevention.
- **Abstinence-Only:** Programs that emphasize abstinence from all sexual behaviors and don't include information about contraception or disease prevention.
- **Abstinence-Only-Until-Marriage:** Programs that emphasize abstinence from all sexual behaviors



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outside of marriage and often present marriage as the only morally correct context for sexual activity. If contraception or disease-prevention methods are discussed, failure rates of these methods are typically emphasized.

- **Fear-Based:** Abstinence-centered programs that are designed to control young people's sexual behavior by instilling fear, shame, and guilt in them via negative messages about sexuality, distorted information about condoms and STDs, and biases about gender, sexual orientation, marriage, family structure, and pregnancy.

Comprehensive sex education has been proven time and time again to lower rates of unprotected sex, unintended pregnancy, and sexually transmitted infections (STIs). According to research conducted by the Journal of Adolescent Health, teens who receive comprehensive sex education are 50% less likely to experience pregnancy than those who receive other types of sex education. Despite tremendous evidence that comprehensive sex ed leads to a healthier youth population and that abstinence-only programs are ineffective, the federal government has invested billions of dollars on abstinence-only programs over the past 20 years.

Only 24 states, including the District of Columbia, require sex education in public schools, and only 20 of those require sex education to be medically, factually, or technically accurate. President Obama had slashed the budget that supports abstinence-only sex education during his presidency. However, a lot of work remains to ensure these federal changes are protected and that progress is made at the state and local levels in providing young people with comprehensive sex education.

### CONDOMS AND CONTRACEPTION

Making condoms and contraception accessible is a critical aspect of empowering people to control their own sexuality. When used correctly, condoms – including male condoms, dental dams, and female condoms – are very effective in preventing the spread of sexually transmitted infections (STIs). However, to prevent pregnancy it is critical that

condom use be paired with other forms of contraception such as the pill, implant, ring, or IUD. It is common, especially among younger populations, for condoms to be used inconsistently and incorrectly, which contributes to a failure rate of between 12% and 18% for preventing pregnancy.

It is important for all people to have access and knowledge of these resources. To learn more about condoms and contraception, check out [plannedparenthood.org](http://plannedparenthood.org) and [bedsider.org](http://bedsider.org). To push for better birth control access on campus, check out our Birth Control Access Campaign!

### FIGHTING RAPE CULTURE

“Rape Culture” is a term that describes an environment in which sexual violence, sexual assault and coercion are not only prevalent, but normalized. These beliefs are perpetuated through multiple means including misogynistic language, objectification, glamorization of sexual violence and aggression, victim-blaming ideologies within societal laws, the media, the glamorization of sexual violence, and our everyday lives. “Rape culture” exists within and maintains a society that disregards the rights and safety of all people, blames the victims for their own assault, and sets sexual violence as a standard to be expected, rather than combatted.

Sex-positivity fights rape culture by emphasizing consent, valuing bodily autonomy, and empowering young people to make informed decisions. These elements work together to deconstruct slut-shaming and victim-blaming – harmful elements of rape culture that permeate many elements of our society.

Sex-positivity also combats rape culture by ending the social cycle of guilt people might experience when engaging in sexual activity, examining harmful elements of hyper-masculinity, fostering safe spaces for survivors, encouraging people to view others as full humans with bodily autonomy, and deconstructing harmful power dynamics within relationships.



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## FOSTERING SELF-LOVE

An important element of sex-positivity is the practice of loving yourself holistically - physically, emotionally, and spiritually. Body-positivity is about developing a healthy, loving relationship with your body, in all of its uniqueness and perfect imperfections.

The National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders (anad.org) found that 91% of women surveyed on a college campus had attempted to control their weight through dieting and 58% felt pressure to be a certain weight. All people in our society are affected by the unrealistic and often unhealthy standards of western beauty, but young women are disproportionately affected.

It is estimated that 95% of people suffering from an eating disorder are between the ages of 12 and 25, and 85% are young women. Anorexia, bulimia, binge eating disorder, and other specified feeding or eating disorders (OSFED) are caused by a combination of sociocultural, psychological, and biological factors; they do not discriminate by socioeconomic status. Marginalized groups are more vulnerable to eating disorders, but are less likely to be diagnosed and treated.

No one should feel ashamed of their body, and our culture shouldn't be pushing unrealistic beauty standards on women and girls. We should encourage women to define their value by finding what makes them feel strong, healthy, and empowered - not by what society says they should look like.

## SEX-POSITIVITY ON CAMPUS HOST A SEX TALK

Facilitate a conversation on your campus to talk about sex and sex-positivity with students and experts in order to debunk myths, share lived experiences, and broaden understandings of other experiences. Start by facilitating a safe space conversation within your group. Explore how to incorporate sex-positivity into your other activist endeavors.

Once your group feels comfortable, facilitate a broader sex-positive conversation in which the general student body is

invited. It may be helpful to seek out a sex-positive speaker to moderate a conversation in which students have the opportunity to learn and bring their ideas to the table.

Reflect after these experiences on where to go next. What have you learned from facilitating these conversations? Are there ways that the administration at your university can support sex-positive ideas on campus? Arrange a meeting with your administration to work with them in order to advocate for sex-positive changes on campus!

## SUPPORT YOUR LOCAL CLINICS

Comprehensive women's health clinics typically provide not only much-needed care, but also access to sex education and safe sex resources. You can build a relationship with your local reproductive health clinic by volunteering, escorting, and interning. Clinics often love working with students, and can even come to your campus to help educate people about sexual health!

By working with your local clinic, you can also help destigmatize the relationship that many people have with seeking reproductive health care. For more ideas on how to support local reproductive health clinics, check out our Adopt-A-Clinic campaign.

## SUPPORT COMPREHENSIVE SEX ED

Locally appointed officials and school boards often shape sex education curricula; learn more about the curriculum in place in your community and put together a proposal for local decision makers to improve it! Launch a petition and organize to raise awareness in your community about the proposal and attend local school board meetings to advocate for your changes.

## HOST A SAFEZONE TRAINING

SafeZone training (gayalliance.org) is meant to develop, enhance, and maintain environments that are culturally competent and supportive to LGBTQIA individuals. Get your feminist group SafeZone certified and encourage your university community to do so as well!



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## CELEBRATE LOVE YOUR BODY DAY

Love Your Body Day ([now.org/now-foundation/love-your-body](http://now.org/now-foundation/love-your-body)) is an annual campaign created by the National Organization for Women to celebrate people's bodies as they are. Join the celebration on campus by:

- Posting body-positivity notes on mirrors in the dorms.
- Hosting a screening of a body-positive movie and having a body image discussion afterward.
- Encouraging people on your campus to share what they love about their bodies on social media.

## HOST A SEX-POSITIVE GAME NIGHT

Many young people don't know the facts about safe sex practices. See if you can get condoms and dental dams from your school's health center or a local women's health clinic and host a sex-positive social event on your campus to educate and spread awareness while also demystifying STIs, contraception, healthy relationship practices, and myths about gender! Try downloading or making some Condom Bingo cards or hosting a sex-positive trivia night.

## GLOSSARY

**Gender:** The socially constructed idea of what "masculine" and "feminine" people look, act, and feel like.

**Gender Binary:** The social dichotomy that polarizes the masculine and feminine and allows for little in-between.

**Heteronormativity:** The belief that people should fall in line with the binary identities they're assigned. It also operates under the assumption that heterosexuality is the only existing or normal sexual orientation.

**LGBTQIA Spectrum:** A range of sexual and gender identities including folks who identify as:

- **Asexual:** A person who does not feel sexual attraction toward any group of people.
- **Bisexual:** A person attracted to people who identify with varying genders.
- **Cisgender:** A person who does identify with the gender they were assigned at birth.
- **Lesbian:** A woman who is primarily attracted to other women.

- **Gay:** A person who is attracted primarily to a person of the same gender.
  - **Genderqueer:** A person who identifies outside of the gender binary.
  - **Intersex:** A person whose anatomy or chromosomes at birth defy definitions of "female" and "male."
  - **Pansexual:** A person who is attracted to people regardless of their sex, gender, or gender identity.
  - **Queer:** A reclaimed term sometimes used by members of the LGBTQ community to identify their sexuality or refer to that community.
  - **Transgender:** A person who doesn't identify with the gender they were assigned at birth or the gender binary.
- Monogamy:** A relationship practice in which people partner with only one person at a time.
- Polyamory:** A relationship practice in which people may partner with multiple people in varying ways.
- Privilege:** A position of social or cultural power someone is born with (i.e. white privilege, heterosexual privilege) or otherwise obtains (i.e. education or wealth).
- Self-care:** The act of taking steps to honor your physical, emotional, situational, or spiritual well-being.
- Sex:** Socially constructed biological labels based on secondary sex characteristics (i.e. "female" and "male").
- Slut-Shaming:** When people are made to feel bad, guilty or inferior for their actual or alleged sexual behavior.
- Victim-Blaming:** When victims of crimes are made to feel responsible for what they've experienced. This occurs frequently in conversations about sexual assault, in which survivors are often asked "what they were wearing" or "why they chose to walk home alone" as if their behavior could have ever warranted sexual violence.