Project Title: Assessing the Effectiveness of Elemental, A Sexual Assault Protection Program

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Background: Elemental is a sexual assault protection program that is grounded in sociological research and uses innovative pedagogical strategies to teach students how to recognize and keep themselves safe from sexually threatening situations.

Project Goals and Objectives: We had two, interrelated assessment goals for this project. First, we set out to use multiple waves of our longitudinal data to further assess the program’s efficacy for (a) increasing students’ awareness of sexual assault threats and (b) lowering incidences of assault among program participants. Second, we promised to use those results to assess Elemental’s contributions to the University’s overarching goals for student sexual assault protection programming.

Several objectives were associated with these two goals:
1) Examine the long-range impact of Elemental at 6 weeks, 6 months, and 1 year post-seminar.
   a. Determine the impact of Elemental on program participants’ knowledge of and attitudes toward sexual assault and personal safety relative to the control group.
   b. Determine the impact of Elemental on program participants’ incidences of assault relative to the control group.
2) Examine the robustness of our initial findings by completing similar analyses with the second cohort of program participants.
3) Based on the outcomes of objectives 1 and 2, situate Elemental within BSU’s sexual assault program offerings by providing a report to Freshman Connections, the Office of Victim Services, and the Office of Student Affairs.

Outcomes:

Program Efficacy (Goal 1, Objectives 1 and 2)
As noted in our grant application, our analyses of pre-test, post-test, and six month follow-up data from the first cohort of Elemental participants and a control group produced promising results. Program participants showed strong, significant changes in their level of comfort saying no and standing up for themselves; their ability to recognize threatening situations as well as set personal boundaries; their capacity to defend themselves in situations involving strangers, acquaintances, and intimate partners; and their understanding of sexual consent as well as alcohol and party dangers. These same measures were associated with significantly reduced chances of assault during the first six months of college among students overall (Holtzman and Menning, forthcoming). This is noteworthy and exciting because research on existing protection programs consistently finds that they have only short-term effects on students’ attitudes about assault and rarely impact rates of assault.

During this assessment project, we set out to test the robustness of these findings by including data from a second cohort of students. These analyses produced similar outcomes – program participants’ attitudes regarding sexual assault were impacted by participating in Elemental and those attitudinal changes were associated with a lower risk of assault for at least six month post-seminar. Importantly, however, we went beyond merely replicating the findings from the first study. We also examined several questions that we were not able to address previously.

First, we examined whether Elemental participants’ and control group students differed in their attitudes toward sexual assault and self-protection at the beginning of the semester, at 6 weeks after the start of the
semester, and again after six months\(^1\). Using a 17-item scale (alpha = .83 to .91, depending on the wave and subsample) measuring attitudes toward assault, boundary-setting, sexual consent, and the dangers of alcohol, pre-test data reveal that Elemental program participants initially have significantly lower scores on the scale than do students in the control group. This suggests that they tend to enter the program less prepared to address a potential assault than their peers (controlling for the effects of sex, academic year, previous assault, sexual orientation, racial-ethnic minority status, and martial arts background). However, at post-test (immediately following the conclusion of the seminar), Elemental students have significantly higher scores on the scale than do their control-group peers. By six weeks post-seminar program participants’ scale scores drop somewhat, but they stabilize and remain unchanged through six months post-seminar. Moreover, even with this slight attenuation, participants’ attitude scores remain significantly higher than their pre-test scores and higher than the scores of students in the control group. This suggests that Elemental program participation imparts long-term change in knowledge and attitudes.

Second, for this assessment we also examined whether Elemental participation lowers the risk of assault, independent of students’ attitude changes. More specifically, our earlier research suggested an indirect connection between program participation and risk of assault, such that the relationship was mediated by the attitude changes associated with students’ scale scores (discussed above). Here, however, we tested for direct effects of program participation on the risk of assault and found that program participation itself does, in fact, directly lower the odds of assault. These findings suggest there are benefits to program participation that are independent of attitudinal changes.

Importantly, then, these analyses not only highlight the robustness of our original findings on attitudes and incidences of assault among Elemental participants, but they also further define the changes that participants undergo as a result of the program. Elemental appears to bring students who start with lower understandings of sexual assault to a place where their understandings are higher than or at least on par with their control-group peers and this effect is maintained for at least six months following the completion of the seminar.

**Elemental’s Contributions to BSU’s Sexual Assault Programming (Goal 2, Objective 3)**

Campus sexual assault has been getting a great deal of press coverage recently. This is, in part, in response to increased federal efforts to combat campus sexual assault – efforts that are related to Title IX legislation, the Clery Act, the SaVE Act, and the recently-established White House Task Force to Protect Students from Sexual Assault. The Task Force is examining ways to lower rates of assault, exploring options for helping colleges keep students safe, and highlighting best practices among prevention programs. Moreover, the Clery Act and the Campus SaVE Act require universities to provide students and staff with programs addressing domestic and dating violence, stalking, and sexual assault.

BSU has responded to these federal requirements in a number of ways. The University has a Title IX compliance officer, an office specializing in services for assault victims (OVS), a peer victim advocate program, a newly revised sexual misconduct policy, a sexual misconduct board, a newly instituted online training course that aims to increase sexual assault awareness for all incoming students and staff, and various seminar offerings through OVS, the counseling center, etc. These programs generally represent two types of strategies for dealing with sexual assault: those that aim to assist victims after-the-fact and those that aim to prevent assault in the first instance through educational activities (e.g. online training and seminars). These educational strategies are typically referred to as primary prevention. In addition to these educational approaches, sexual assault prevention can also include risk-reduction programming, or self-protection training. The University police department’s RAD (Rape Aggression Defense) program fits this latter model.

\(^1\) We did not examine 1 year follow-up data because the response rate was too low to use inferential statistics.
Elemental was designed to address these shortcomings. Elemental combines primary prevention and risk-reduction approaches within a single program, and it uses a more nuanced self-defense curriculum that deals with the realities of acquaintance assault and offers students verbal and physical, violent and nonviolent defense options. We believe it is this combined approach that is responsible for Elemental’s success rates (Holtzman and Menning, forthcoming). Given the data reported above, we can say that Elemental impacts attitudes for at least six months post seminar and it significantly reduces incidences of assault. Based on an extensive review of the literature, Elemental is the only program in the nation that can make this claim. Very few programs can demonstrate attitude changes beyond six weeks and no others have demonstrated reductions in assault.

Elemental, then, has an important contribution to make to BSU’s sexual assault prevention efforts. The program can work with and complement existing primary prevention efforts (e.g. online training and seminars) and risk-reduction efforts (e.g. RAD) while also significantly impacting students’ attitudes and incidences of assault. We (Mellisa and Chad) have offered Elemental on campus each fall for the last four years. These offerings have been possible because of support we received from Freshman Connections, the Office of Student Affairs, the College of Sciences and Humanities, the Department of Sociology, the Martial Arts Club, and Housing and Residence Life. Despite the number of offices that have assisted, Elemental has been seen as largely separate from BSU’s overall programming efforts. The program is not yet well-integrated into the University’s infrastructure.

Importantly, however, the program is gaining momentum at BSU and the opportunity to more fully integrate it now exists. Housing and Residence Life has committed to certifying five staff members to teach Elemental. And the program was offered for the first time this year as an Early Start course. These are important first steps for widening Elemental’s reach. We can further increase the program’s reach by more systematically marketing it to students and their parents. For instance, students could perhaps be encouraged at the end of their mandatory online training (i.e., the Think About It program) to consider supplementing their knowledge with a session of Elemental, or students and their parents could be made aware of the program during Orientation and encouraged to enroll in an upcoming session. Regardless of the approach utilized, it would be beneficial if a number of offices on campus could coordinate with Elemental to find an effective integration strategy.

Integrating Elemental into BSU’s offerings would not only benefit the students that would be served, but it would benefit the University as well. Elemental is gaining national attention. Not only were we invited to the White House in April, 2014, but we have now both been asked to serve on national-level working groups that are addressing various aspects of campus sexual assault. These working groups grew out of a Summit on Campus Sexual Assault that was sponsored by Dartmouth University this summer, and their purpose is to bring together experts from across the US who will work together for the next year drafting policy recommendations for universities and federal agencies. Chad is a member of the Research and Assessment group and Mellisa is the Chair of the Prevention and Education group. Elemental is being considered by these groups as one model of effective primary prevention and risk-reduction programming. The program, thus, has the potential to reach a national audience in the near future.
As a program that originated at BSU (it grew out of a Virginia Ball Center Seminar taught by Chad in Spring, 2011), its success and associated attention benefits the University. Relatedly, because we partnered with Vizi Courseware (a BSU-owned company) to create the certification, teaching, and student review materials associated with the program, Elemental’s commercial success benefits the University as well. There is much to be gained by capitalizing on Elemental’s growing momentum, further promoting that momentum, and finding ways to reach as many BSU students as possible with the program.

**Artifacts:** In the grant application we promised to not only complete this final report on our efforts, but to produce a more comprehensive report for distribution to several offices on campus (including Freshman Connections, the Office of Victim Services, and the Office of Student Affairs). A copy of this report will be forwarded to the Office of Institutional Effectiveness by campus mail.

**References**


Holtzman, Mellisa and Chadwick Menning. (Forthcoming). “A New Model for Sexual Assault Protection: Creation and Initial Testing of Elemental.” *Journal of Applied Social Sciences*. For a copy of the “online first” version of this article, visit: [http://jax.sagepub.com/cgi/reprint/1936724414536394v1.pdf?ijkey=H8ZEpodVrSHdcLo&keytype=ref](http://jax.sagepub.com/cgi/reprint/1936724414536394v1.pdf?ijkey=H8ZEpodVrSHdcLo&keytype=ref)


