

## Discussions of HIV Risk Reduction, Stigma, and Barriers to Testing among College-Aged African American Women

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**Background/Objectives:** There is a need to develop culturally appropriate ways to address the HIV prevention and testing needs among minority women attending Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). Focus-group discussions (FGDs) can be used to gain insight on the culture, perceptions, and concerns female students have about HIV testing. The information can assist in developing strategies for addressing challenges in promoting HIV testing in this population. Our objectives were to determine the HIV prevention needs of young minority women attending HBCUs by identifying barriers to safe sex practices and HIV testing.

**Methods:** As part of an Office of Women's Health-funded peer-led HIV prevention program targeting minority women attending HBCUs, we recruited 32 minority women between the ages of 18 and 22 years by word of mouth, flyers, and campus peer-led outreach. We developed a focus group guide and pre- and post-test to assess any changes in HIV awareness and intent to change behavior. An experienced facilitator explained the purpose of the FGD and obtained signed consent forms from all participants. Discussions were audiotaped, transcribed verbatim, and coded. We conducted thematic analyses to identify recurring issues related to 1) HIV stigma, 2) barriers to safe sex practices, and 3) barriers to HIV testing.

**Results:** During 3 FGD, women freely discussed the social, family, and campus environments that influence sexual behaviors and HIV testing. Perceived barriers to testing included location of student health services, fear of discrimination, and lack of trust in confidentiality. Participants agreed that the gender-role expectations, lack of communication between men and women, and religiosity were obstacles to safer sex practices. All agreed that interventions encouraging open discussion would be most beneficial for dismantling stigmatizing beliefs on HBCU campuses.

**Conclusion:** The need to reduce or eliminate stigma was identified, underscoring this as a priority for HBCU campuses. This information is the basis of further research to identify how best to stimulate open dialogue, provide gender and culturally sensitive outreach, and improve existing health services.

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