

# Filling the Gap: Community College Students Expect Sexual Health Education on Campus

## Key Findings

- Community college students who have received comprehensive school-based sex education since the 9th grade are more likely to engage in health behaviors that reduce their risk for STIs/HIV and unplanned pregnancy.
- Only 15 percent of community college students sampled report having received comprehensive sex education.
- The vast majority—73 percent—of community college students believe their college should be responsible for providing sex education to all incoming students. Many community college students indicate that they are concerned about the lack of sexual health resources provided by their college.



Nearly **3 in 4** students think their community college has a responsibility to provide sex education to all incoming students.

## Introduction

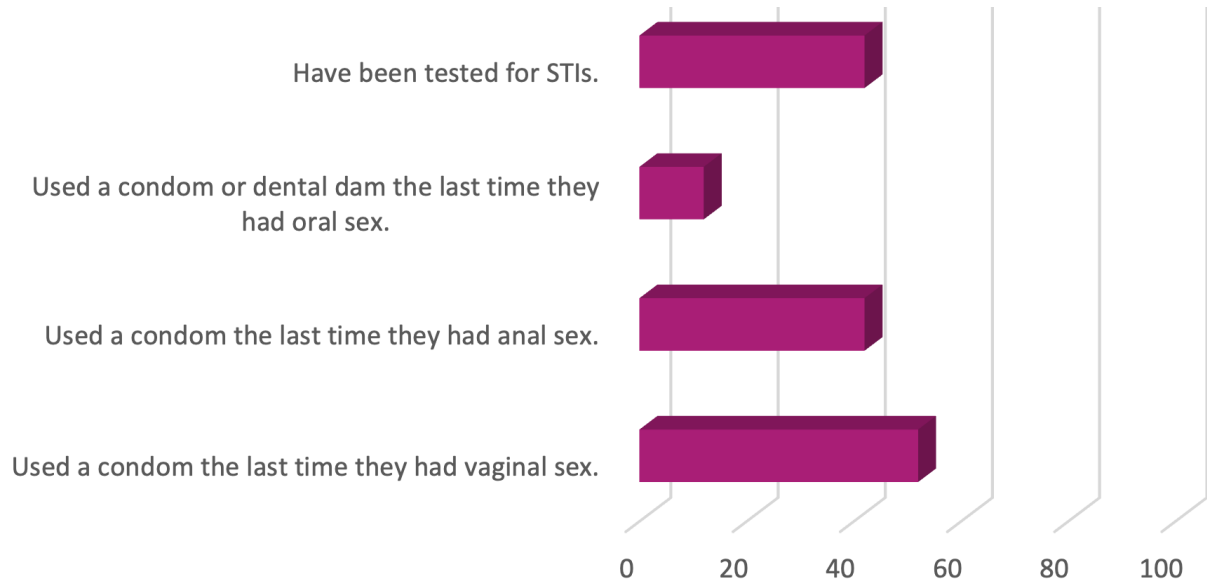
Promoting community college students' sexual and reproductive health is critical to their overall well-being. Sexual and reproductive health are also linked to students' educational and vocational success.<sup>1</sup> Decades of research point to the importance of comprehensive sex education for promoting health beliefs and behaviors that lead to healthier relationships and reduce young people's risk for unplanned pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (STIs), including HIV.<sup>2</sup> This brief illuminates the school-based sex education experiences of community college students, closely examining the link between the type of sex education students received and their sexual health. Gaps in the provision of sex education are identified, and students' expectations of their community college in closing these gaps are discussed.

This brief utilizes data collected as part of the Community College Health Study (CCHS), which included 1,647 community college students from 34 college campuses across the US.<sup>3</sup> Data collection occurred from 2021 to 2024. Students joined the study when they were 18–19 years old and completed surveys multiple times over the course of one year.

## The Safer Sex Practices of Community College Students

Data demonstrate that many young adults are engaged in sexual activity by the time they attend college.<sup>4</sup> Analyses from the CCHS show that among 18–19-year-old community college students, 58 percent have had oral sex, 16 percent have had anal sex, and 54 percent have had vaginal sex.<sup>5</sup> These data also show that, unfortunately, many young adults attending community college engage in behaviors consistent with increased risk for STIs and unplanned pregnancy (Figure 1), including inconsistent use of protection/contraception (e.g., condoms) and not getting tested for STIs.<sup>5</sup>

**Figure 1. Percentage of Sexually Active Students Engaging in Safer Sex Practices**



**Source:** Reina Evans-Paulson et al., "An Examination of the Sexual Health Behaviors and Cognitions of Young US Community College Students with Respect to the Intersection of Gender and Sexual Identity," *Journal of American College Health* (2024): 1-10, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07448481.2024.2378294>. These data are from the CCHS, which occurred from 2021 to 2024 and enrolled 18–19-year-old students from community college campuses across the US.

**Note:** Response options for questions about participants' safer sex practices were: yes, no, unsure. If participants indicated they were "unsure" for a question about a particular safer sex practice, their data were not included in analyses for that behavior.

## Defining Comprehensive Sex Education

There is significant variability in the information about sex and relationships that students receive from their high school and college. While some students receive no information at all, others receive instruction on a spectrum ranging from abstinence-only or abstinence-plus programs, also known as sexual risk avoidance (SRA) programs, to comprehensive sex education.

**Comprehensive sex education** provides developmentally appropriate, medically accurate information on a wide range of sexual health and relationship topics and helps young people to develop *skills* for engaging



in healthy behaviors, fosters respect for others, and takes an approach that aims to educate and empower young people to make the sexual decisions that are right for them.<sup>6</sup>

While abstinence-only instruction may mention topics like condoms/contraception, it is typically done so in a way that exaggerates the failure rates and risks of these methods, often in shaming contexts to emphasize and promote abstinence prior to heterosexual marriage.<sup>7</sup> The content found within SRA, abstinence-only, or abstinence-plus programs varies by state and local educational agency, with some jurisdictions allowing and/or requiring additional medically accurate information about safer sex topics (e.g., contraception).<sup>8</sup>

Community college students participating in the study reported whether they had received sex education from their school since the 9th grade and, if so, which topics were covered as part of this sex education. Using these data, participants were statistically categorized as having received no sex-related instruction or abstinence-only, abstinence-plus, or comprehensive sex education (Figure 2).

**Figure 2. Topics Covered in Different Types of School-Based Instruction on Sex and Relationships**

| No sex education | Abstinence-only | Abstinence-plus  | Comprehensive  |
|------------------|-----------------|--|--|
|                  | Abstinence      | Abstinence   | Abstinence   |
|                  |                 | Information about condom efficacy and condom use<br>Health consequences of unsafe sex<br>Consent<br>HIV transmission | Information about condom efficacy and condom use<br>Health consequences of unsafe sex<br>Consent<br>HIV transmission   |
|                  |                 |  | Goal setting (pregnancy, HIV)<br>Other contraception<br>Substance use and sexual risk<br>Preventative care<br>Communication (pregnancy, HIV)<br>Limiting partners<br>Media influence on sexual behavior<br>Family and/or peer influence on sexual behavior<br>Creating healthy relationships<br>Gender roles<br>Sexual orientation |

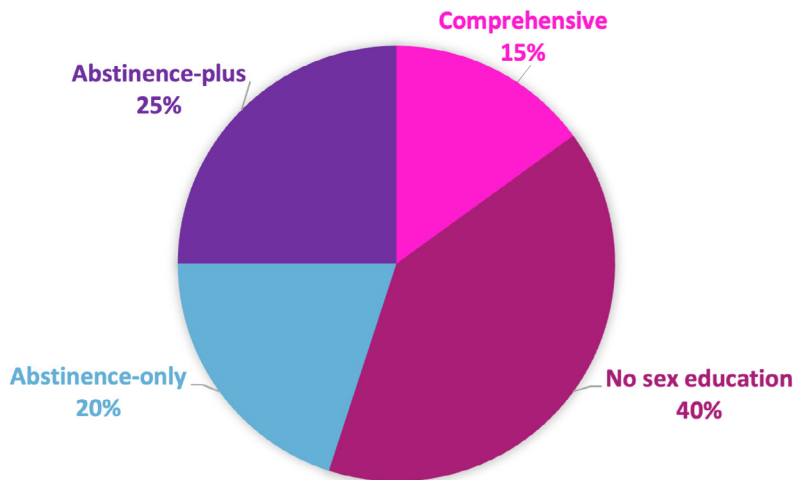
**Source:** Tracy M. Scull, et al., "Moving Toward a More Comprehensive Standard for Sex Education: A Latent Class Analysis and Examination of Young Adult Sexual Health," *The Journal of Sex Research* (2025): 1-14, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00224499.2025.2475549>. These categories were derived using data from the CCHS, which occurred from 2021 to 2024 and enrolled 18–19-year-old students from community college campuses across the US.

**Note:** This figure shows how sex education categories (no sex education, abstinence-only, abstinence-plus, and comprehensive) were defined for analyses in the CCHS. Categories were statistically derived from student-reported topics covered in school-based sex education, which can vary by state, education agency, and classroom. Abstinence-only and abstinence-plus programs are also sometimes referred to as sexual risk avoidance programming.

## Very Few Community College Students Have Received Comprehensive Sex Education

Unfortunately, many community college students (40 percent) have not received **any** school-based sex education since the 9th grade,<sup>9</sup> and only 15 percent of students have received comprehensive sex education (Figure 3).

**Figure 3. Types of Sex Education Community College Students Received Since the 9th Grade**



**Source:** Tracy M. Scull et al., "Moving Toward a More Comprehensive Standard for Sex Education: A Latent Class Analysis and Examination of Young Adult Sexual Health," *The Journal of Sex Research* (2025): 1-14, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00224499.2025.2475549>. These data are from the CCHS, which occurred from 2021 to 2024 and enrolled 18–19-year-old students from community college campuses across the US.

Students were particularly unlikely to have received instruction on the following important topics:

- The influence of family and peers on sexual decisions.
- How to access reliable health information and services.
- Communication related to preventing STIs.
- How to correctly use condoms.
- Gender roles, gender identity, sexual orientation, and gender expression.

## Comprehensive Sex Education Is Linked to Better Sexual Health Outcomes Among Community College Students

The information about sex and relationships that students had received previously was statistically related to their sexual health behaviors later as community college students.<sup>9</sup>

Compared to students who received no instruction, abstinence-only, or abstinence-plus, **students who received comprehensive sex education:**

- Were more likely to use condoms (if they have sex).
- Talked more often with their sexual partners about STIs.
- Were more likely to have been tested for STIs (if they were sexually active).

Importantly, consistent condom use protects against STIs, including HIV, and unplanned pregnancy. Young people who talk with their partners about sexual health are more likely to engage in safer sexual health practices.<sup>10</sup> Additionally, when sexually active people are tested regularly for STIs, they can be connected to treatment if they find that they are STI positive, which can both reduce their risk for future health complications and stop the spread of STIs to future sexual partners.<sup>11</sup>

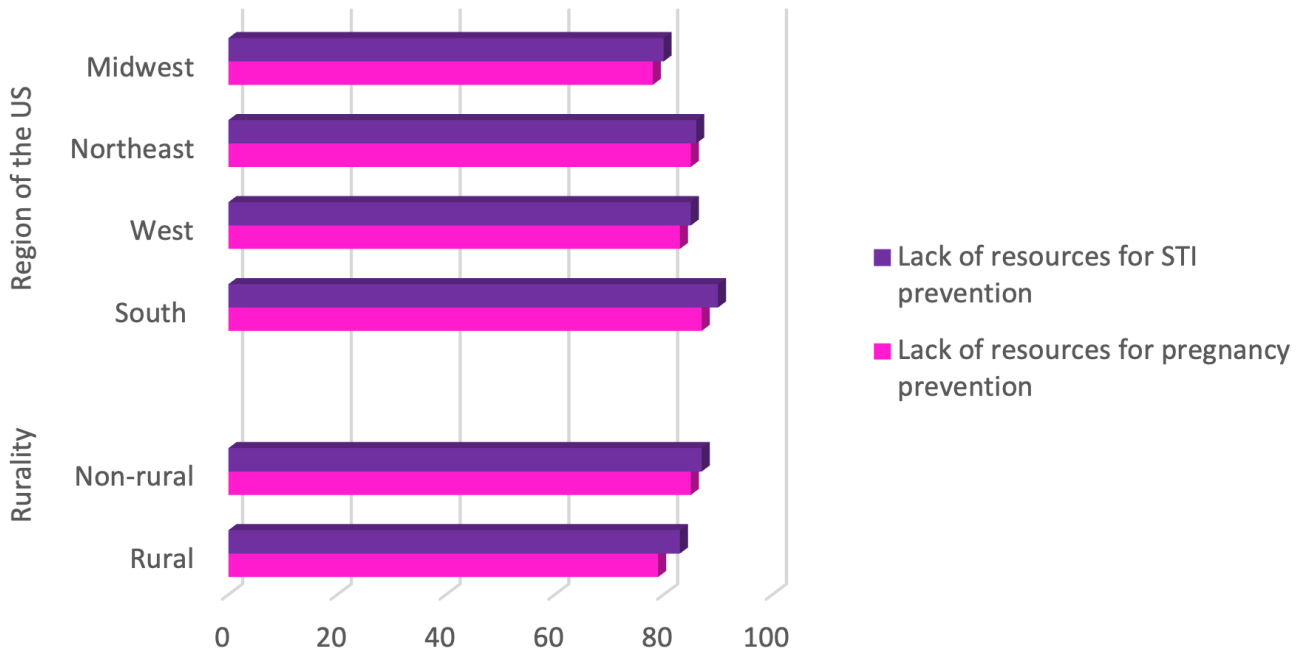
## Resources at Community Colleges: The Student Perspective

Many community college students have not received comprehensive sex education, which begs the question: Who is responsible for filling this gap?

New analyses from the CCHS show that the vast majority of community college students are concerned about a lack of resources for preventing STIs (86 percent) and preventing pregnancy (84 percent) at their school. This concern was consistent across students from colleges in rural and urban areas and different regions of the country (Figure 4). A particularly high percentage of students from schools located in the South expressed concern over a lack of resources for pregnancy prevention and preventing STIs at their school.



**Figure 4. Percentage of Community College Students Concerned About a Lack of Resources at Their Schools for Preventing Poor Sexual Health Outcomes**



**Source:** These data are from the CCHS, which occurred from 2021 to 2024 and enrolled 18–19-year-old students from community college campuses across the US.

**Note.** The rurality of each college was determined based on classifications used in <https://nces.ed.gov/collegenavigator/>.

The aforementioned research in this brief highlights how sex education can be an effective strategy for preventing unplanned pregnancy and STIs. Importantly, new analysis of data from the CCHS shows that many students (73 percent) think their community college should be responsible for providing sex education programs to all incoming students.

## Policy Recommendations

To help meet the expressed needs of students and support their health, academic success, and overall well-being, federal and state policymakers and community college leaders should take steps to make comprehensive sex education more accessible to community college students.

- **Establish policies and increase public investment in inclusive community college sex education.** Federal and state policymakers should invest in dedicated resources for sex education programs at community colleges to help address the information, knowledge, and resources gap that students experience from the lack of sex education they receive in high school. Such sex education programming should be inclusive of the key topics often omitted or intentionally excluded in students' high school sex education programming, including sexual orientation, gender roles and identity, gender expression, family and peer influences, accessing reliable health services, STI prevention communication, and correct condom use. Further, community college leaders should prioritize securing funding and explore opportunities to invest in and dedicate resources to sex education programming that includes these critical topics for their students.
- **Institutionalize sexual and reproductive health as a basic student need.** Community college leadership and systems should make sexual and reproductive health education a core expectation on their campuses by adopting and sustaining sex education program offerings in the classroom and throughout student support services as the standard. Campus leadership should host regular forums where ideas around effective resources and strategies may be exchanged and incorporated throughout the college campus.

## Conclusion

Like their four-year college peers, community college students have the right to lead sexually healthy lives while pursuing their educational goals. However, community college students are less likely than four-year college students to have access to sexual health promotion resources.<sup>12</sup> Beyond STI/HIV and unplanned pregnancy prevention, comprehensive sex education is critical to promoting the sexual and reproductive health and well-being of young people.

Unfortunately, very few 18–19-year-old community college students report having received comprehensive sex education. Furthermore, these students believe their colleges should be responsible for providing sex education and are concerned about the lack of resources provided by their colleges to support their sexual health. This illuminates an opportunity for policymakers and community college leadership to meet students' expressed needs and promote their overall well-being by investing in and providing inclusive sex education programming.

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## Endnotes

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