

The Leadership Prize: APPLICATION

Section I: Preliminary Information

Title: The Value of Authenticity in Comprehensive Sex Education: Understanding the Role Authenticity Plays in the *Wise Guys* Educators Delivery of the Curriculum

Abstract: *Wise Guys*, an evidenced-based program in North Carolina, epitomizes the power of dedicated and engaged educators in delivering Comprehensive Sexuality Education to boys 11-18yrs. The primary purpose of this research is to investigate whether the *Wise Guys* comprehensive sexuality education program utilizes authentic educators and engaged pedagogy to effectively delivering the curriculum? The secondary research question then becomes: If *Wise Guys*, use engaged pedagogy and authentically to deliver the curriculum, how does this impact participant perception of the program, their perception and value of the educational experience, and their intention to engage in healthy behaviors (ie. safe sex, relationships, etc.)? Both qualitative and quantitative data collection will be used including semi-structured interviews with *Wise Guys* educators, a survey of students' perspectives, and an analysis of the training manual.

Section II: Problem Description and Personal Statement

Problem Description

Schools throughout the United States have inconsistently incorporated sexual health education within the K-12 curriculum. Learning about sexual health, particularly during early adolescence, is critically important as this is the time in life when habits form and risks are taken that can impact youth throughout their lifespan. While some aspects of adolescent sexual health have improved over the years, many areas remain of great concern. The 4th United Nations Sustainable Development Goal addresses how quality education is the basis for improving people's lives (United Nations, 2020). According to the World Health Organization (2004), without effective education, coupled with prevention and school-based intervention initiatives, the transition from childhood to adulthood can be a time of challenging mental and emotional issues (depression, anxiety, substance abuse, etc.), unhealthy relationship formations, and sexual health issues (unintended pregnancy, sexually transmitted disease, etc.).

The Sexual Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS) suggests the United States has failed to effectively communicate sexual health information and skills to all young people. Only about 38% of high schools and 14% of middle schools in the US teach all 20 topics that have been identified by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) as being essential to comprehensive sex education (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2019). In 2020 alone, 20% of the legislative bills related to sex education instruction in schools have sought to restrict vs. enhance the quality and quantity of instruction (SIECUS, 2020). Sexuality education is a necessary tool to improve sexual health among adolescents.

Sexual health education in the United States has taken two distinct paths over the years: abstinence-only sex education and comprehensive sex education. In the 1990's, the United States mandated an abstinence-only approach to sex education, with the goal being to decrease the number of unintended pregnancies and STI rates by discouraging sexual behavior (Hall, Komro, Sales, & Santelli, 2016). Unfortunately, over 20 years after this mandate, a 2011 study revealed that the United States ranked first among developed nations in terms of teenage pregnancy rates and STIs (Stanger-Hall & Hall, 2011). Abstinence-only education has failed to meet its intended

goal. A comprehensive approach to sexual health education was developed to meet the growing needs and poor health outcomes of adolescents (Stanger-Hall & Hall, 2011). In 1991, “The Guidelines for Comprehensive Sexuality (CSE) Education, K-12” were published (2004). These guidelines were developed by a national task force of experts and was based on the premise that “sexuality education is a lifelong process of acquiring information and forming attitudes, beliefs, and values about such important topics as identity, relationships, and intimacy” (Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States, 2004, p. 13).

A value-added approach can be taken by applying the concepts of authenticity and engaged pedagogy to comprehensive sexuality education. Scholars indicate that the gold standard for sexuality education should be to teach comprehensive sex education through authentic, honest, inclusive, and holistic pedagogy. Authenticity is defined as the degree to which a behavior is congruent with someone’s beliefs, attitudes, values, and motives (Jongman-Sereno & Leary, 2019). Integrating and expecting authenticity into evidence-based comprehensive sexuality education potentially provides a value-added experience for adolescents and has the potential to enhance the current CSE outcomes and improve the lives of American youth.

A local, community and school-based, comprehensive sexuality education program called *Wise Guys*, is believed to take CSE to another level by integrating the values and qualities of authenticity in the delivery of their program to improve the health knowledge, attitudes and behaviors of adolescents. *Wise Guys*, an evidence-based and interactive program, founded in North Carolina, is gaining national recognition for the exemplary sexuality health education they do with males ages 12 to 18. By focusing on teenage boys, the program tries to combat societal standards and perceptions of what masculinity and manhood are and what they are supposed to look like (Children’s Home Society of North Carolina, n.d.). The education is based around giving adolescent boys the chance to focus on themselves and gain a better understanding of their knowledge and attitudes related to sex and interpersonal relationships (Children’s Home Society of North Carolina, n.d.). The program is delivered to students by educators that have to undergo specific training to be certified to teach for the *Wise Guys* program. By having honest conversations between mentors and peers, *Wise Guys* tries to create goal-oriented and future focused young men that make healthy choices (Children’s Home Society of North Carolina, n.d.). The curriculum focuses on a range of topics including consent in relationships, character education, fatherhood, communication, family values, healthy masculinity, STD prevention and contraception, and sexuality education (Children’s Home Society of North Carolina, n.d.).

Research on the *Wise Guys* program has assessed the knowledge, attitudes, and behavioral changes of these young men as a result of participating in *Wise Guys* by administering pre and posttests to the participants (Herrman, Moore, & Rahmer, 2016). Some studies used a range of diagnostic tools like a Youth Advisory Group, focus groups, and a video-journaling project to gather teens’ thoughts (Herman et al., 2017). Through all these assessments and gathering of both quantitative and qualitative data, researchers were able to find that, in almost every case, boys reported feeling as if they were prepared to make decisions on their own and to talk to a parent or guardian about their sexuality and dating lives (Herrman, Moore, & Rahmer, 2016). Adolescents have repeatedly reported that they had a beneficial experience from participating in the *Wise Guys* program, and that they felt equipped to deal with components of their sexual health throughout their life. However, research on the authenticity and use of engaged pedagogy to deliver CSE, by *Wise Guys* educators, has not been conducted. The

evidence-based Wise Guys program may be “raising the bar” by delivering CSE with authenticity and engaged pedagogy, value-added components.

While studies have looked at the student’s perspectives, there is no current data or research to show the teacher’s perspective on authenticity and engaged pedagogy, the influence on the students, and on the effectiveness of curriculum delivery. Even though effectiveness of the program has been assessed, this is measured in the success of outcomes and rarely on the agents that allow them to get there: the educators. According to the theory of engaged pedagogy, educators are essential pieces in any learning environment, especially when the goal is sustainable success. The educators of the *Wise Guys* program are unique in that they go through extensive, curriculum specific training, in order to be certified to teach these boys. This is contrary to the majority of teachers delivering sex education in the United States. There is a gap in the literature in terms of how, if at all, authenticity of comprehensive sexuality educators plays a part in improving sexual health and overall health outcomes (knowledge, attitudes and behaviors) of adolescents.

The literature has shown that there are ways in which the current sex education programs in the United States can be improved upon to make them more authentic and beneficial for the students. The *Wise Guys* program may be a model of how integrating authenticity in training and education can improve comprehensive sexuality education and thus, improve health outcomes among adolescents. Since the *Wise Guys* program has not formally investigated the value of authenticity, the primary research question is: Does the *Wise Guys* comprehensive sexuality education program utilize engaged pedagogy in delivering the curriculum with authenticity? The secondary question then becomes: If *Wise Guys*, use engaged pedagogy and authentically deliver the curriculum, to what extent does this impact participant perceptions and value of the educational experience and intention to engage in healthy behaviors (ie. safe sex, relationships, etc.)? Anecdotally, there is a difference between CSE educators who *want* to deliver and ensure holistic comprehensive sex education, and those who are *required* to deliver CSE. It is important to understand how CSE can be delivered in ways that adolescents' value the experience and gain important knowledge, hopefully improving mental, physical, and emotional health outcomes.

Personal Background and Motivation

A motto, that I live my life by, and which has guided me through my life’s journey is a quote from one of Mary Oliver’s poems: “Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?” The answer that I consistently give to that question is: “I want to help make this world better than it was the day before.” That is why being a Public Health major was the perfect educational opportunity for me. As of right now, my ultimate goal is to be a physician’s assistant and to simultaneously continue my work with public health education. I find this project an integral step to achieving my educational, professional, and life objectives. This project gives me the opportunity to immerse myself in the field of public health, specifically with a community-based program aimed at improving the health outcomes of adolescents. I believe this experience will provide me valuable insights into the adolescent population as I pursue a career in medicine.

The issue of sexuality education is particularly important to me because I feel like quality sexuality education can have a significant and positive influence on an individual’s life. However, the majority of education systems in the United States deprive students of the possibilities and power that delivering comprehensive sexuality education can have for sexual health outcomes, forming healthy relationships, and overall someone’s autonomy and security in themselves.

Through my time at Elon, I have been fortunate enough to immerse myself in a range of classroom environments that improve my ability to complete and succeed with my undergraduate research. These classes range from those within the Public Health major, Honors classes, and elective courses that I have taken. For starters, I took Public Health Research Methods the fall of my sophomore year. This class provided me with the tools and ability to perform research in the Public Health field, including how to perform ethical research, analyze data, write a strong research paper, and collaborate with a variety of people. These skills will all be essential in conducting my Honors research project and also make me feel confident that I am capable to take on this opportunity. Additionally, in my fall semester of my sophomore year, I took the Honors class, “Authenticity/Is There a True Self?”. The instructor, Dr. Franzese, challenged my classmates and I to think critically about how authenticity plays a role in a variety of situations, instructional settings, and workplace environments. This class planted the seed and I began thinking about how authenticity and sexuality health education should be connected, providing a basis for the beginning of my research, and later brought me to my preliminary work with Dr. Jennifer Kimbrough.

Working with Dr. Kimbrough while she was employed at Elon was an experience that gave me the background I needed to undertake this project. Her dissertation was about authenticity within health education. She was able to bestow a significant amount of guidance and foundational work to give me the resources and confidence to pursue this research, and also lead me to working with Professor Amanda Tapler for the remainder of my research. Professor Tapler has mentored many other research students and is currently mentoring two other Honors Fellows. Professor Tapler has done a wide range of work in the Public Health field, however, the work that is most pertinent to this particular research project is her expertise in sexuality health education and offering unique public health learning experiences including mentoring and research. Professor Tapler currently teaches the COR Capstone course on Human Sexuality. Professor Tapler’s extensive knowledge and passion for the subject matter further motivated me to take on this research project. Dr. Kimbrough now works with Children’s Home Society of North Carolina. *Wise Guys* is a program offered by the Children’s Home Society in Greensboro, NC. Additionally, Professor Tapler has worked closely with *Wise Guys* in the past when she worked at UNCG and as the Director of Health Education Planned Parenthood. Professor Tapler has been a consistent advocate of quality and comprehensive sexuality health education making her an integral part for the success of this project.

My ability to complete this project and passion for the work of *Wise Guys* has been tremendously strengthened by the guidance of Dr. Kimbrough and Professor Tapler. They have provided me with avenues and leadership skills and experience I need to be able to implement the findings from this research.

Section III: Plan for Intellectual Inquiry

In order to study the problem in-depth, the methods for this research will include a few different approaches to collect both qualitative and quantitative data for analysis. All methods and participants in the study will be informed of the definitions of authenticity and engaged pedagogy that are central to this research to make sure the research is grounded in shared understanding of key concepts. For starters, semi-structured interviews with the nine *Wise Guy*’s educators regarding authenticity, engaged pedagogy, and training will be conducted: five of the nine are current educators, while four are *Wise Guys* staff that have been educators. Questions like the following will be asked in order to assess how the educators themselves feel about their abilities to deliver CSE; how they are supported through training. and what role they believe

authenticity plays in the overall experience: Why are you choosing to teach adolescents about sexuality health? What are your motives? What do you think effects the way you deliver sex education? What role, if any, do you believe authenticity plays in the delivery of comprehensive sexuality education? These qualitative interviews will help the researchers begin to understand the role and value of engaged pedagogy and authenticity among *Wise Guys* educators delivering a CSE curriculum. The interviews will be analyzed for themes associated with engaged pedagogy and authenticity.

Tentatively, questions specific to engaged pedagogy, authenticity, and relationships with teachers and trainers, will be added to the pre- and post-test surveys. These surveys are currently conducted by the *Wise Guys* programs and with parental consent of the participants. The pre-test is given by *Wise Guys* before the students go through the program in order to assess baseline knowledge of sexual behavior, and attitudes towards relationships. The post-test is after these boys and young men complete the *Wise Guys* curriculum. This survey has already been approved and received parental consent for those participants who are minors. The survey is also given to every student that goes through the curriculum, optimizing the ability to gather data. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, *Wise Guys* classes are happening virtually and have been smaller in size. Therefore, the sample population will depend on when data collection occurs and for how long. Engaged pedagogy and authenticity will be defined for participants. Participants will be asked questions such as: Do you believe the *Wise Guys* delivered the CSE program with authenticity?; What are examples of engaged pedagogy/authenticity that improved the teaching-learning environment in CSE?; What are examples of engaged pedagogy/authenticity that detracted from the teaching-learning environment in CSE?; How authentic delivery of CSE impacted their learning, attitudes, and behaviors?; etc. These questions will be provided in appropriate formats to gather relevant data. For some of the questions, students will be given a 5-point scale, with 1 being “strongly disagree” and 5 being “strongly agree” to assess how strongly they believe a statement aligns to the experience they had. In other cases, questions might be fashioned as true or false statements. The survey will be formulated in conjunction with one of the data analysts from the *Wise Guys* program, Carli Miller, who is in charge of the evaluation of the *Wise Guys* program. I will be working closely with Miller throughout the data collection and evaluation process.

Lastly, this research will review the current training manual used by the *Wise Guys* program to assess whether or not engaged pedagogy and authenticity are embedded in the training. Using an online coding tool, the training manual will be reviewed for word choice and phrases that overlap with authenticity and that resemble and align with engaged pedagogy. This information could identify a value-added component (authenticity) of the evidence-based, CSE curriculum provided by the *Wise Guys* program. Additionally, this could provide important information about whether or not engaged pedagogy is in fact embedded in the *Wise Guys* CSE training.

To ensure my engagement and qualification throughout the next three semesters of this research, I will meet with Professor Amanda Tapler once a week during each semester to discuss progress, next steps, and to get her expertise during the duration of the project. Monthly meetings will be set in place with Dr. Kimbrough, who works for Children’s Home Society of North Carolina to be informed of any essential developments with the *Wise Guys* program and guidance in navigating the data collection and analysis process, as Dr. Kimbrough has extensive experience with the research process. Carli Miller and I will also meet so she can teach me the skills I need to collaborate in the evaluation of the data. Aside from meetings and training that

are directly relevant to the project, I will be partaking in a course load over the next three semesters that involves classes within the Public Health major and in my minors that cover topics and skills that can make me a more knowledgeable individual and better researcher. The Elon curriculum constantly challenges students to think critically and thoughtfully about issues, and taking an array of classes over the remainder of my time at Elon will indirectly benefit this project. I also plan to do my public health practicum in India my senior J-Term to gain more practical experience within the field. This course load, as well, will include two credit hours of Honors research during the Spring of 2021, the Fall of 2021, and the Spring of 2022. Also, one credit hour of research will be taken during the Summer of 2021 and one credit hour will be taken during J-term of 2022. Taking these credit hours will give concentrated time to focus on the development and completion of my project.

Once the final paper has been completed and the research has been approved, the plan is to present the findings at multiple conferences in the Spring of 2022, including SURF. Some of the conferences that are being considered are the National Conference of Undergraduate Research (NCUR), the National Sexual Health Conference, and a SHAPE America conference. Conferences focused on sexuality education will be prioritized as they provide opportunities for collaboration, presentation of research findings, and professional development. Additionally, a presentation of the findings will be made to the Children's Home Society of North Carolina, and key stakeholders associated with the *Wise Guys* program.

Section IV: Feasibility, Budget and Timeline

Feasibility Statement

The project has been deemed feasible and having great potential to be a successful project by the Honors Advisory Council (HAC) from the first round of submissions of the proposal for the project. Research questions for the project were formulated with the timeline in mind to ensure quality and timely work can be produced. The problem proposed on addressing the authenticity of the educators of the *Wise Guys* program can be addressed over the course of the next few semesters to be completed and ready to present by the Spring of 2022, especially with the partnership with key people on the *Wise Guys* team. Working closely with members on the team will provide relationships that allow strong communication and assistance throughout the process, commitment and pressure to stick with deadlines, and access to software that will make data analysis more efficient and less costly. Amanda Tapler (Research Mentor) is also committed to the success and timeliness of the current research. She has and will continue to make sure the scope of the research remains feasible throughout the process. Furthermore, at least 2 credits of research hours will be taken every semester, including in the Spring of 2022 to dedicate time and resources to the completion of this research. Time during the Summer of 2021 will also be utilized for data analysis and working on the final research paper. Between the partnership, mentor leadership, and time commitment, this project will efficiently and effectively address the central problem within the timeframe.

The \$7,500 granted through The Leadership Prize will allow for greater potential for personal academic success and the completion of the project. According to the Elon website, as of now, one credit hour costs \$551. Out of the \$7,500, \$1,102 will be used to pay for one credit hour of research over the Summer of 2021 and another credit hour of research over J-Term of 2022. Additionally, \$2,398 will be allocated for tuition during the Fall 2021 semester. The remaining \$3,500 of the budget will be used towards the traveling and hotel costs associated with attending multiple conferences to present the findings from this project, and to purchase a token

of appreciation, such as a gift card for dinner, for the members of the *Wise Guys* team that were worked closely with over the course of the project.

Timeline

Semester	Hours of Research	Work to be completed
Spring 2020	1 hour of Public Health Studies Research	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Literature Matrix 2. Arrive at a research question 3. Have Rough Draft of Literature Review
Fall 2020	2 hours of Honors	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Honors Research Proposal for October 16th 2. Honors Research Proposal revisions 3. Logistics meeting with <i>Wise Guys</i> program 4. Literature Review 5. Proposal to Elon's Institutional Research Board
Spring 2021	2 hours of Honors	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Continuous Meetings with <i>Wise Guys</i> 2. Start Data Collection 3. Conduct Interviews 4. Recruitment for the student survey 5. Analyze Training Manual
Summer 2021	1 hour of Honors	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Finish any necessary data collection 2. Begin data analysis
Fall 2021	2 hours of Honors	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Thematically code interviews 2. Analyze data from the student survey 3. Begin writing 4. Presentation of Progress for Honors
Winter 2021	1 hour	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Work on Honors Thesis 2. Write results and discussion section of paper
Spring 2022	2 hours of Honors	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Attend and present at selected conference(s) 2. Complete Honors Thesis

Section V: List of sources

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2019). *School Health Profiles 2018: Characteristics of Health Programs Among Secondary Schools*. Atlanta: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.
- Children's Home Society of North Carolina. (n.d.). Wise Guys-a Children's Home Society of NC Program. *Educational programs and training*. Retrieved on October 10, 2020 from <https://www.chsnc.org/wise-guys>.
- Hall, K. S., Sales, J. M., Komro, K. A., & Santelli, J. (2016). The state of sex education in the United States. *Journal of Adolescent Health, 58*(6), 595-597. Doi: 10.1016/j.jadohealth.2016.03.032.
- Herrman, J. W., Moore, C., & Rahmer, B. (2016). Focus on teen men: Evaluating the effectiveness of the *Wise Guys* program. *Journal of Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Nursing, 29*(1), 37-43. Doi: <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcap.12133>.
- Herrman, J. W., Gordon, M., Rahmer, B., Moore C. C., Habermann, B., & Haigh, K. M. (2017). Assessing the effectiveness of *Wise Guys*: A mixed-methods approach. *American Journal of Sexuality Education, 12*(4), 395-408. Doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/15546128.2017.1393647>.
- Jongman-Sereno, K & Leary, M. R. (2019). The enigma of being yourself: A critical examination of the concept of authenticity. *Review of General Psychology, 23*(1), 133-142. Doi: 10.1037/gpr0000157.
- Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS). (2004). *Guidelines for Comprehensive Sexuality Education: 3rd Edition*. Washington, DC: SIECUS.
- SIECUS: Sex Ed for Social Change. (2020). *2020 Sex Ed State Legislative Mid-Year Report*. Washington, DC: SIECUS.
- United Nations. (2020). Quality education. *Sustainable Development Goals*. Retrieved on October 10, 2020 from <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/education/>.
- World Health Organization. (2004). *Prevention of Mental Disorders: Effective Interventions and Policy Options*. Geneva: World Health Organization.