Protecting Vaccination Efforts on Campus When Facing Aggressive Opposition

Vaccine confidence is a spectrum, not a light switch. Building vaccine confidence on a college campus takes time, effort, and a willingness to engage in sometimes challenging conversations. Many people, for a variety of reasons, have questions or concerns about vaccination, and college health professionals should respond to these questions and concerns in ways that build trust and meet the community's specific needs. In some instances, however, engagement on the topic of vaccines can escalate to harassment, intimidation, or even violence (aggressive opposition). Campus leadership has a responsibility to set an expectation for respectful and safe dialogue on this topic as with any other, consistent with their institutional policies.

When there are attempts to disrupt, overwhelm, or intimidate participants and organizers of vaccine confidence efforts, college health professionals have tools to preempt or remedy these disruptions. This document focuses on mitigating the impact of aggressive opposition to vaccination confidence efforts on campus. This document is not intended to limit the authentic exploration and discussion of health behaviors on campus.

In-Person Events

In-person events, including educational events or vaccine clinics, are a critical component of building vaccine confidence and facilitating vaccine uptake on campus. Examples of aggressive opposition to in-person events include:

- Blocking the venue entrances or exits
- Asking questions intended to misinform the audience or harass event organizers (e.g., asking "why do you promote these vaccines when they cause infertility?" as opposed to "does this vaccine cause infertility?")
- Heckling speakers and/or event organizers
- Passing out misinformation to attendees
- Shouting at and verbally abusing staff or attendees
- Filming interactions with staff or attendees to post online in ways that are misleading or threatening

Organizers can mitigate these disruptions by setting clear expectations for staff and attendees. Direct staff not to engage or debate with those aggressively opposing the event and to engage public safety or law enforcement when there are concerns for people's safety. Emphasize the importance of staying calm and being respectful. Other strategies for minimizing disruption include:

- Requiring pre-registration or limiting attendance to campus community members only, as institutional policies permit
- Reviewing and ensuring enforcement of campus codes of conduct
- Coordinating in advance with campus law enforcement to create a thoughtful plan to prevent and respond promptly to behavior that warrants intervention. Be sure all personnel are clear as to whether and how someone can be asked to leave the premises.
- Preparing all organizers, speakers, staff, and helpers for disruptions
- Asking attendees to submit questions ahead of time
- Designating an area for protestors that does not block entrances or exits

Virtual Events

Virtual events are excellent ways to reach campus audiences wherever they may be and are a necessity when circumstances call for minimizing indoor gatherings. Examples of aggressive opposition at virtual events include:

- Asking anti-vaccination activists from outside the community to attend en masse
- Spamming the chat box and comments with misinformation and/or questions intended to harass or intimidate
- Mass reporting the event recording for misinformation to the broadcasting platform (Facebook, Instagram, etc.)

Organizers can mitigate these disruptions in a variety of ways:

- Requiring virtual event registration with an institutional email (.edu) address
- Choosing settings that eliminate the possibility for attendees to annotate slides or otherwise derail the presentation
- Choosing a format that balances the need to moderate and engage participants. Webinars may offer fewer opportunities to harass or misinform the audience than in-person meetings. Q&A boxes with messages set to go to panelists only may offer more content management than an open chat.
- Enforcing the campus code of conduct
- Having moderators for the chat, comments section, and/or question box

- Asking community members to post genuine comments and questions
- Requiring attendees to submit questions ahead of time
- Recording the event rather than broadcasting live

Social Media

The popularity of social media platforms makes them great for sharing vaccine information but also susceptible to aggressive opposition tactics. Some examples include:

- "Fire-hosing" vaccine-related posts—posting as many times as possible as quickly as possible, often leading to hundreds if not thousands of comments
- Submitting false negative reviews for the vaccine supporter's associated organizations on Facebook, Yelp, etc.
- Calling the vaccine supporter's supervisor or employer to complain

Some ways to mitigate these disruptions include:

- Enforcing your campus' social media moderation/comment policy
- Reporting misinformation to the online platform
- Engaging with positive, accurate vaccination content from trusted resources
- Making use of moderation tools available on the social media platforms (hide/ban/mute notifications) if permitted by institutional policies
- Locking down privacy settings for individual accounts
- Reporting false reviews
- Asking community members to engage in ways that further productive conversations
- Requesting support from groups like Shots Heard Round the World

Individual Targeting

Aggressive opponents of vaccination may target individuals who publicly support vaccination to disrupt, overwhelm, and intimidate these individuals and their audiences. Some examples of such individual targeting include:

- Calling an individual's employer to complain about them
- Posting negative things about an individual online and/or on their social media platforms
- Calling on social media followers and/or fellow anti-vaccine activists to do the same
- Posting an individual's personal information, like home address or phone number, on a public space, known as "doxing"

Some ways to mitigate these disruptions include:

- Locking down privacy settings for individual social media accounts and posts
- Changing personal social media account names to be more difficult for outsiders to search for and identify
- Preparing employers and/or leadership for individual targeting
- Reporting false online reviews related to employer
- Reporting threats and harassment to the online and social media platform, screenshotting them to keep a record
- Avoiding direct engagement with aggressors
- Contacting law enforcement to report any threats
- Blocking/hiding/muting/taking breaks as needed for self-care

Individuals should regularly search their own names online to identify any platform that may share their personal contact information. Many "yellow book" type websites will remove information if asked.

Final Thoughts

Building vaccine confidence and enhancing access to vaccination services on campus is critical to advancing healthy and safe living and learning environments for students, staff, and faculty. These efforts also benefit the surrounding community. Campus professionals working to advance public health and vaccine confidence are encouraged to reach out to the CoVAC Initiative and Vaccinate Your Family for information and, if needed, support in doing this important work.