

Doing Consent Differently: A University Practitioners' Reflection on Delivering Large-Scale Respect and Consent Education

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Abstract

Sexual assault and sexual harassment (SASH) remain pressing issues on university campuses, making it imperative for higher education institutions to develop prevention strategies. Within this context, education plays a pivotal role in addressing the underlying factors contributing to SASH, while also providing crucial information about care and support pathways for survivors. This paper, authored by practitioners from the Australian National University's (ANU) Respectful Relationships Unit (RRU), reflects on the conceptualisation, implementation, and evaluation of a large-scale respect and consent education program. Tailored to ANU's context, the program utilised a multi-modal approach including an online module, face-to-face workshops, and residential hall pilots. Challenges, such as engagement and sustainability, were addressed through collaborative partnerships and continuous improvement efforts. Evaluation, conducted in collaboration with social scientists from the ANU Centre for Social Research and Methods (CSRM), provided insights for refinement and future directions. ANU's ongoing commitment to community engagement, innovation, equity, and evaluation underscores its dedication to fostering safer and more inclusive campus environments. Through collaboration and a shared commitment to prevention, ANU aims to make meaningful progress towards a campus free of sexual harm.

Keywords

Sexual assault, Sexual harassment, Sexual harm, Prevention strategies, Education program, Consent education, Multi-modal approach, Care and support pathways, Community engagement, Evaluation, Collaboration

Introduction

Sexual assault and harassment (SASH) on university campuses continue to pose significant challenges, necessitating proactive and comprehensive primary prevention efforts. In response to this pressing issue, the Australian National University (ANU) has embarked on a transformative journey to address SASH within its community. Building upon the *Change the Course* report released by the Australian Human Rights Commission in 2017, ANU initiated a series of institutional reforms aimed at fostering a safer and more respectful campus environment. Central to these efforts was the establishment of two distinct entities: the Respectful Relationships Unit (RRU), dedicated to primary prevention of sexual violence, and Student Safety and Wellbeing Team (SSW), focused on care and support pathways for survivors.

This paper, authored by primary prevention practitioners from the RRU, offers a reflection on our approach to conceptualising, implementing, and evaluating a sexual violence prevention education program, highlighting successes, challenges encountered, and lessons learned. Throughout this paper, readers will gain insights into our approach to developing and implementing a multi-modal education program that reflects the unique social and legal landscape of our campus and jurisdiction. A key objective was to cultivate a culture of respect and consent through a multifaceted educational initiative. Tailoring the program to the specific challenges and dynamics of the university environment aims to empower students with the skills and knowledge necessary for

navigating respectful relationships and consent. This paper further highlights the engagement of peer educators, and the integration of evaluation into the program. Additionally, the paper explores the challenges faced in facilitating discussions on complex topics surrounding consent and interpersonal relationships, as well as strategies employed to enhance participant engagement and retention.

As institutions of higher learning grapple with the pervasive issue of sexual violence on campuses, there is a pressing need to foster collaboration and knowledge-sharing to drive meaningful change. By sharing our experiences and insights, we seek to contribute to a broader conversation on effective SASH prevention efforts within the higher education sector. Through collaborative partnerships and a commitment to continuous improvement, ANU endeavours to create a campus culture characterised by respect, consent, and support for survivors.

A note on terminology used in this paper: the terms *sexual violence*, *sexual assault*, *sexual harassment*, and *sexual harm* are used throughout. Sexual violence is an umbrella term for any unwanted sexual experience. This includes sexual assault, which is unwanted sexual contact or threat thereof, and sexual harassment, which can be verbal, visual, or behavioural advances that are received in distressing or uncomfortable ways. Sexual harm refers to the lasting negative effects—social, physical, and psychological—that individuals and communities can experience in the wake of sexual violence.

Background

Like many Australian universities, ANU established a formal institutional response to SASH on the back of the landmark *Change the Course* report, released by the Australian Human Rights Commission in 2017. The report shone a spotlight on what student and staff advocates had been calling out for decades—universities have a serious problem with sexual violence. Notably, it laid out a major challenge to the sector: to be more accountable to survivors and drastically change the institutional cultures and systems that drive SASH. Then-Vice-Chancellor, Professor Brian Schmidt, accepted all nine recommendations in the report. Importantly, he committed to a university-wide strategy: the *ANU Sexual Violence Prevention Strategy 2019-2026* (SVPS), to address the drivers of sexual violence, with the purposely ambitious goal of being violence-free by 2026. The strategy prioritised education, prevention, and support for survivors. Additionally, it set out a plan to establish an online disclosure tool, improve reporting and response systems, train first responders, and establish peer-led programs to address community attitudes and behaviours.

As part of this suite of reforms, the RRU was established in 2019. Initially, the unit was set up as a one-stop-shop, responsible for providing a space for survivors to disclose and access support while also delivering education and awareness-raising interventions to the wider community. It was a challenging start, with an initial focus on addressing a range of strategic and operational barriers associated with setting up a reliable and effective response system. Training and education were available, but delivery and engagement were inconsistent and leaned heavily on an online consent module from a third-party provider.

The need to improve the work that was initiated with the *Change the Course* report was made evident in the National Student Safety Survey (NSSS). This follow-up survey was conducted by the Social Research Centre and results were released in March 2022. The resulting reports¹ indicated that little had changed in the prevalence of SASH at ANU and across the sector more broadly. It

¹The national quantitative report was entitled *Report on the prevalence of sexual harassment and sexual assault among university students in 2021* (Heywood et al., 2022); the national qualitative report, *Qualitative research on experiences of sexual harassment and sexual assault among university students in 2021* (Nisbet et al., 2022).

was clear that more action and resources were needed, and a range of initiatives were launched at ANU to review and redevelop the work that was already underway. Notably, the RRU was reoriented to focus solely on prevention, and a new team, SSW, was established to respond to disclosures and provide case management to students. Additionally, an independent review of the SVPS was conducted, resulting in the first ANU *Student Safety and Wellbeing Plan 2022-2023* (SSWP). In line with a holistic, comprehensive, and ecological approach to sexual violence prevention (Moylan & Javorka, 2020), the SSWP was the start of a rolling action protocol to underpin the seven-year strategy. It outlined six key actions across training, residences, case management, regulations, procedures, and prevention. One of the key priorities in prevention was to review the University's online education programs and propose a new approach.

Designing a comprehensive education program

Sexual consent education has been recognised as a means for universities to ensure that every student has a basic understanding of key concepts, accessible support systems, and methods for prevention (Zapp et al., 2021). Until 2022, ANU, like many other universities, had relied on an online consent program from a third-party provider for several years. Face-to-face training in residential settings was added after the establishment of the RRU. The program was useful in the early days of the strategy when there was limited institutional knowledge and a lack of on-the-ground support. It provided basic but adequate content around consent, boundaries, and positive intervention. As an off-the-shelf product, it was a quick and accessible means to present essential information to a wide student audience. Upon review, however, several concerns became apparent. Firstly, the program flattened concepts related to consent, presenting them as unambiguous issues. It became clear that the existing program failed to account for the complexities of real-world scenarios where consent might be unclear or coerced. Effective consent education initiatives, informed by current research on best practices in sex and relationship education, adopt a sex-positive, intersectional, trauma-informed, and institution-wide approach (Burton et al., 2023). Such programs emphasise interactivity, inclusivity, and critical analysis of societal perceptions on consensual and non-consensual sexual activity (Burton et al., 2023). Moreover, they recognise the ambiguity and intricacy surrounding sexual consent, addressing the complexities of sexual negotiation and power dynamics (Kubota & Nakazawa, 2022; Schipani-McLaughlin et al., 2023). Additionally, the third-party program predominantly focused on hetero-normative intimate partner dynamics, neglecting the diverse experiences of the student body, therefore necessitating a more gender-inclusive and intersectional approach. We also identified the critical need to address the dynamics of relational power inherent within a university setting (Linder, 2018). Finally, considering that most incoming ANU students reside on campus, any new programming had to fully consider the social dynamics within residential communities.

There were additional concerns regarding the monitoring and implementation, as well as clear limitations to administering online learning as a standalone intervention. The external online module lacked a central owner, being hosted and implemented across various local areas in academic, professional, and residential settings. This led to inconsistencies in promotion, enrolment, and completion recording. Additionally, effective evaluation methods to assess the long-term effectiveness of the program in changing campus cultures were lacking.

Finally, while some promising evidence exists regarding the effectiveness of online modules in improving knowledge, attitudes, and self-efficacy related to affirmative consent (Heard et al., 2023; Javidi et al., 2023), they should be seen as one aspect of universities' approach to addressing sexual violence (Heard et al., 2023). Initiatives are more likely to have lasting impacts if they are longer, more regular, and involve multiple points of contact with reinforcing messages (Carmody et al., 2009; DeGue, 2014).

With this in mind and considering the capacity of the RRU, a proposal was formulated to introduce a multi-modal consent and healthy relationships program targeting all incoming students. Specific emphasis was placed on those students living in residences. Complementing this, a series of face-to-face workshops, co-delivered by peer educators, were proposed to enhance and extend the online experience. Peer education has been highlighted as a promising model with respect to increasing healthy attitudes around consent (Richmond & Peterson, 2020). The proposed program comprised a one-hour module for all commencing students. It was compulsory for incoming residential students, along with a mandatory one-hour face-to-face workshop during Orientation Week. Additionally, a more intensive pilot curriculum was proposed to be conducted in three selected residential halls, consisting of three two-hour workshops (six hours total) spread over several months.

Rights, Relationships and Respect (RRR) online module

Developing and implementing the online module for all commencing students at the start of 2023 was a substantial undertaking. This commenced with a collaborative effort involving practitioners from the RRU and SSW teams, students, and other key stakeholders. Students' involvement in the development of consent education has been described as critical in ensuring that the topics and method of delivery meet their needs and are relevant to them (Burton et al., 2023).

The development of the online module was guided by five key aims. Firstly, the content was tailored to the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) and the ANU campus, ensuring its relevance to the local context. Secondly, a sex-positive approach was adopted, promoting healthy, consensual sexual experiences while avoiding a sole focus on heteronormative perspectives and using inclusive language (Burton et al., 2023). Thirdly, a holistic perspective was embraced, addressing broader issues such as gender inequality, power dynamics, and campus culture (Linder & Myers, 2017), with a focus on preventive measures including bystander intervention. Fourthly, the module was designed to be engaging and accessible, incorporating interactive elements such as quizzes, scenarios, and multimedia resources to enhance learning (Burton et al., 2023). Finally, clear and comprehensive information about support services and policies addressing sexual misconduct was provided, ensuring students had access to care and support pathways.

The final version of the module, entitled Rights, Relationships and Respect (RRR), comprised six topics:

1. **Respectful Relationships at ANU:** This topic delves into the dynamics of respectful relationships within the context of the ANU. It explores the values, norms, and expectations that shape interactions among students and staff and fosters an understanding of how to cultivate healthy and respectful relationships within the university community.
2. **Understanding Consent:** This topic provides a comprehensive examination of the concept of consent, emphasising its importance in all forms of interpersonal relationships. Students learn about the principles of enthusiastic, ongoing, and affirmative consent, as well as how to recognise and navigate situations where consent may be ambiguous or coerced.
3. **Understanding Sexual Violence:** In this topic, students gain insights into the dynamics of sexual violence including the cultures that drive it.
4. **Power and Relationships:** This topic explores the intersection of power dynamics and relationships, highlighting how imbalances of power can influence consent and contribute to instances of exploitation. Students examine societal structures, gender roles, and other factors that can perpetuate power imbalances and reflect on strategies for promoting equity and respect in their interactions.

5. **Care and Support:** In this topic, students are provided with comprehensive information about the support services and resources available to survivors of sexual misconduct at ANU and across the ACT. Topics include differentiating between disclosing and reporting instances of SASH and support options, empowering students to seek help and support when needed.
6. **Ongoing Conversations:** The final topic encourages students to continue engaging in conversations about respectful relationships and consent beyond the completion of the module. It emphasises the importance of ongoing dialogue and community action in creating a culture of respect and safety on campus.

As the module was rolled out to all commencing students, engagement was closely monitored to gauge its uptake. Patterns in student participation and completion rates were observed, enabling the identification of areas for improvement. By the end of 2023, over 7,000 students had completed the online course. One of the key learnings from this process was the importance of ongoing promotion and reinforcement of the module. Reminders were sent out via email, and in residences, staff followed up in person to ensure students were aware of, and encouraged to complete, the module. Furthermore, the need for flexibility in delivery methods to accommodate diverse learning preferences and schedules was recognised. The course was self-paced, allowing students to progress through the material at their own speed. Additionally, students had the option to receive support from RRU or SSW staff to complete the module. Students could also apply for an exemption from the course.

Enlivening Rights, Relationships and Respect

This one-hour workshop, delivered to approximately 1,500 residential students was designed to test and consolidate knowledge gained in the online module. The workshop, co-delivered by peer educators, aimed to equip students to support the development of respectful and positive relationships with their peers and build communities of consent in their residences. Students were invited to share and reflect on their learning via an interactive online platform using live polls, word clouds, quizzes, and multiple-choice questions. In the workshop, participants engaged in partnered activities (such as paper, scissors, rock games) to consider cultural communication complexities, and engaged in group reflections on the legal, ethical, and social complexities relating to sex and alcohol. Importantly, participants were supported to consider what “receiving a no” may look and feel like, and how to navigate this experience. Finally, to support learners to build their vocabulary in relation to seeking and giving consent, participants were asked, “What does consent look and sound like to you?”. Students submitted phrases anonymously to create a word cloud to later be printed as a poster for each residence. The key aspects of this one-hour workshop were included in Workshop 1 of the pilot program detailed below to ensure all residential students received a similar baseline of information.

Pilot program

The pilot workshop series comprised three two-hour workshops over the course of Semester 1, with participating halls selected purposively. Two were ANU owned and operated, one being self-catered and the other catered. The third hall invited to participate was a fully catered independent affiliate residence. Differences in cost, affiliation, catering status, and community reputations were considered to attract a broad spectrum of students from varying backgrounds. The pilot halls were also chosen based on the commitment demonstrated by their staff teams. Each residence had highly motivated staff leadership teams who eagerly embraced the opportunity to participate in the pilot project. Notably, one residence had previously sought support from the RRU on multiple occasions, driven by a genuine desire to influence and improve the culture within their residence. The

engagement and dedication of the staff teams were pivotal to the success of the pilot as the RRU relied heavily on their support in fostering an environment conducive to community engagement in our programs. Approximately 400 students across three residential halls participated. The workshops were developed to deliver comprehensive education on healthy sex and relationships. Topics included sex and relationships, understanding sexual violence, bystander intervention, and the opportunity to apply learning in real-world projects.

- Workshop 1: *Sex and Relationships* content included unpacking identity in relation to self (gender, sex, and sexuality), and identity in relationship to others (sexual citizenship, sexual projects, and consent). The workshop intended to situate new residents firmly in the ANU context and commence exploration of what healthy sex and relationships look like on campus. This session was designed to support students to build understanding of their personal sexual identity in relationship to others, reflect on their own citizenship in diverse communities, and explore the intersections of feelings, relationships, and identity. It built on the concepts of consent and communities of consent explored in the online module.
- Workshop 2: *Understanding Sexual Violence and Bystander Intervention* explored how harm can occur and what those behaviours may look like. The workshop unpacked how pornography may shape sexual imaginations and expectations, proactive and reactive bystander intervention, and responding to disclosures of sexual violence. The session intended to build understanding of gender-based violence in the Australian and ANU contexts, including exploring the drivers of violence in these contexts. This session was designed to support students to recognise socio-cultural norms such as rigid gender stereotyping, popular culture and media representation, porn, and controlling relationships that contribute to the drivers. We hoped this session would build understanding of individual roles and agency in cultural change processes, and support participant knowledge of bystander intervention strategies, and the associated impact on gender-based violence.
- Workshop 3: *Empowering Action Against Gendered Violence* provided participants with practical skills for culture mapping and identifying key issues and audiences. Participants had the opportunity to rapidly prototype real-world projects and initiatives that undermine or challenge the drivers of sexual violence, informed by the collective learnings of the previous sessions. The projects and initiatives created during the workshops were uploaded to a site and shared amongst all residential halls as project templates for action and inspiration.

Each workshop emphasised interactive engagement, incorporating tools such as digital immediate feedback, group activities, brainstorming sessions, "agree, disagree, unsure" activities, as well as games and scenario-based learning. Peer educators, who were trained and compensated, were integral to the implementation and development of the workshops. Workshop 1 was co-facilitated by peer educators, while Workshops 2 and 3 were collaboratively designed and co-facilitated by them.

In designing the content, we drew upon Hirsch and Khan's (2020) *Sexual Citizens* as a foundational framework to introduce participants to the concepts of sexual citizenship and sexual projects. These concepts were utilised to explore consent within the context of participants' own expectations and experiences surrounding sexuality. By grounding the discussions in these concepts, we aimed to support participants to understand their own expectations around sex and their sexual experiences, and how sexual partners may hold expectations that may be similar or different. This activity was designed to provide the context and scaffolding to understand how participants could practice sexual consent, recognising their own bodily autonomy and the equivalent right in others. However, it became evident that being unfamiliar to many participants, these concepts were received as quite academic and abstract, leading to challenges in meaningful engagement. Subsequently, practitioners

adjusted the workshop structure to begin with fundamental discussions on consent before delving into more complex topics. This revised approach facilitated a smoother transition for participants, allowing them to explore the nuanced concepts of sexual citizenship and sexual projects with greater ease and comfort. From our perspective as practitioners, introducing these new concepts led to invaluable reflections and insights into our audiences. Students could be primed with theoretical understandings of consent in their sexual relationships, but still lack confidence in navigating consent in practice and considering their own motivations and expectations for their sexual experiences.

Facilitating this content for such broad and diverse audiences presented some challenges. While it was evident that some students possessed a solid understanding of key concepts (for instance, domestic students often demonstrated a strong theoretical grasp of consent), others were encountering these ideas for the first time. A few evidently found the open and direct approach of facilitators discomfoting. Addressing these disparities was complex in a group setting where the aim was to establish a collective baseline understanding of the concepts.

Another notable challenge encountered during the implementation of the program was the difficulty in sustaining engagement and retention across all sessions. While initial attendance was promising, maintaining consistent participation over the course of the program proved to be a significant hurdle. Factors such as conflicting schedules, competing academic commitments, and student fatigue may have contributed to fluctuations in attendance rates. Additionally, some participants may have felt overwhelmed by the depth and intensity of the discussions, leading to disengagement in subsequent sessions. To address this challenge, practitioners worked with the residences re-engage participants, including personalised outreach and reminders. Despite these efforts, sustaining high levels of engagement throughout the program remained a persistent challenge, highlighting the need for ongoing evaluation and adaptation of outreach strategies to optimise participant retention.

Nevertheless, co-facilitating the workshops with peer educators was a notable success, despite the challenges described above. The peer educators effectively engaged with the audiences, sharing their own insights and reflections on the content and guiding discussions with participants. Practitioners ambitiously introduced new content, which was refined and adapted based on audience experiences and facilitation dynamics, and the peer educators adeptly responded to this evolving environment.

Evaluation

Evaluation serves as a cornerstone in the delivery of programs within university settings for several compelling reasons. Firstly, it provides an evidence-based framework to assess the effectiveness of prevention initiatives. Given universities' role as centres of learning, relying on knowledge and evidence, evaluating programs becomes essential to gauge their effectiveness in fostering safe and inclusive environments. Secondly, evaluation facilitates informed decision-making regarding programming and resource allocation, ensuring interventions are efficient and effective. Lastly, it fulfils institutions' duty to stakeholders by transparently communicating outcomes in addressing sexual violence. While this paper does not share the evaluation findings, these will be available in the forthcoming final evaluation report, expected in April 2024.

In light of these imperatives, the necessity to evaluate the RRR program was clear from the outset. We formed a collaborative partnership with social scientists from the Centre for Social Policy Research (POLIS) under Prof. Meredith Rossner's leadership. Their expertise in subject matter and research methodologies significantly enriched the evaluation. The methodology comprised both quantitative and qualitative measures, including a large-scale survey and qualitative analysis of

learner responses to course activities. This approach allowed gathering quantitative data for statistical analysis, and qualitative narratives to delve into participants' experiences.

The design and implementation of the evaluation were multifaceted, requiring careful planning and overcoming various hurdles. Obstacles were encountered, such as time constraints, bureaucratic processes, and low engagement with some aspects of the data collection efforts. Despite this, strategic planning, collaboration, and a flexible and responsive approach enabled us to navigate these challenges effectively. Through the evaluation process, we gained valuable insights into how students engaged with the topics covered in the RRR program and the effectiveness of the program delivery methods. We also gathered extensive feedback from participants, allowing us to identify areas for improvement and refine our approach. Furthermore, this evaluation has underscored the importance of continuous improvement in program development. By analysing the feedback and data collected, we have been able to identify strengths and weaknesses in the program and make adjustments along the way. This iterative process of refinement has been instrumental in enhancing the overall effectiveness of the RRR program. Additionally, the insights gleaned from this evaluation have allowed us to formulate new questions and identify areas of focus for future evaluations. By building upon our current findings, we can further deepen our understanding of the impact of prevention initiatives and identify new strategies for addressing sexual harm on our campus. This ongoing cycle of evaluation and improvement will ensure that our efforts remain relevant and impactful in creating safer and more inclusive environments for all members of the university community.

The forthcoming final evaluation report will detail the program's success and areas for improvement as well as highlight the narratives that provide depth and context to our findings. Qualitative insights have allowed us to explore issues more deeply, providing a more holistic understanding of the program's implementation. Overall, the evaluation process has been insightful, reaffirming its pivotal role in prevention initiatives' success. Our commitment to evidence-based practices, collaborative partnerships, and continuous improvement has been strengthened through this process. Moving forward, the lessons learned will inform our approach and contribute to the broader discourse on preventing sexual violence in higher education institutions.

Future directions

While we are still a long way off seeing sexual violence eradicated from our campus, ANU has fulfilled many of the commitments outlined in the strategy. We feel confident that significant strides have been made in establishing comprehensive programs and initiatives, and there remains an ongoing commitment to further enhance the safety and well-being of the university community. As of March 2024, the University has a fully established, trauma-informed disclosure and response system and 11 full-time expert staff dedicated to preventing and responding to sexual assault and sexual harassment across the RRU and SSW teams. ANU has also published annual data on disclosures and formal complaints related to SASH since 2022. However, as we look to the future, we acknowledge that much work is still to be done. Looking ahead, several key priorities and considerations arise:

1. **Sustainability and continuity:** Ensuring the sustainability of prevention efforts is paramount. Further embedding prevention strategies within our institutional frameworks will foster a culture of ongoing commitment and investment in this critical area.
2. **Community engagement and collaboration:** Building upon the collaborative partnerships forged during program development will foster a sense of shared responsibility and collective action. Cross-sector collaboration with government agencies, the tertiary education sector, community organisations, and industry partners will be essential in addressing the complex and multifaceted nature of sexual violence.

3. Innovation and adaptation: Embracing innovation and staying attuned to emerging best practices in sexual violence prevention will be vital to advance our prevention efforts. By continuously evolving approaches and methodologies, we—as practitioners and the sector more broadly—can remain responsive to the changing needs and dynamics of the community. In this context, we have fully embraced co-design with peer educators who are now redeveloping the programs alongside practitioners. Additionally, work is currently underway to provide tailored education and engagement to higher degree by research (HDR) candidates and their supervisors.
4. Equity and inclusion: Upholding principles of equity and inclusion must remain central to our prevention efforts. Work is underway to enhance and contextualise content for international and culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) students, recognising the importance of tailoring prevention efforts to meet the diverse needs of the student population.
5. Evaluation and learning: Maintaining a robust evaluation framework is essential for ongoing learning and improvement. We recognise the importance of contributing to the emerging evidence base in sexual violence prevention through rigorous research and evaluation efforts. By systematically assessing the effectiveness of programs and initiatives, areas for enhancement can be identified. Approaches can then be refined accordingly, while also sharing learnings with the broader academic and practitioner community to advance knowledge and inform best practices.

By embracing these priorities and commitments, we aim to continue driving meaningful progress in preventing sexual violence on campus.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the journey of delivering a large-scale respect and consent education program at ANU has been a multifaceted and transformative endeavour. Through collaborative efforts and a commitment to emerging best practices, significant steps have been taken to address the pervasive issue of sexual violence within the university community.

Moving forward, ANU remains committed to fostering safe, inclusive, and respectful campus environments. By prioritising community engagement, innovation, equity, and evaluation, we aim to build upon the foundation laid by the RRR program and continue making meaningful strides towards the goal of creating a violence-free campus. As the University navigates the complexities of sexual violence prevention, we are reminded of the importance of collaboration, resilience, and a shared commitment to creating positive change.

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