Crisis Preparedness: A Multifaceted Approach

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Abstract

Disruptive student behavior is a global concern. Campus communities are expected to be safe havens for learning. Realistic threats to safety require a proactive institutional-wide approach to crisis prevention and preparedness. The Assessment-Intervention of Student Problems (AISP) is a model to evaluate student behavior and to foster effective strategies (Delworth, 1999). A review of current literature surrounding behavior management indicates a team approach is invaluable as “dangerous people rarely show all of their symptoms to just one department or group on campus” (Lake, 2007). Protocols empower campus leaders, faculty, and staff to create safe environments where students can thrive, develop to their fullest potential, and become global citizens. Therefore, it is important for university faculty and staff to work together to develop protocols that create such safe environments.

*Key words:* Crisis prevention, crisis preparedness

Introduction

Prevention and preparedness for crisis situations requires an increased awareness across the field education in general, and more specifically within the field of higher education. University presidents, administrators, faculty, and staff are called to action and must mobilize to respond to concerns of violence and safety across college campuses. Emergency management experts warn that if your campus has recently averted a crisis, then your institution is much closer to the next as, “the further you are from your last emergency…the closer you are to your next emergency” (Bookser, 2013, February). Campus crisis prevention and preparedness is threat or behavioral assessment in its purest form and is based upon sound guidance from experts such as the US Secret Service, the US
Institutions of higher education must deepen their knowledge of violence prevention, assess the campus climate, strengthen lines of communication, identify safety concerns, implement a threat assessment process, and utilize effective case management to respond to individuals who present with potential harm to self or others. According to Deisinger and Randazzo, universities must develop an orderly process that “enables centralized awareness of developing concerns through an active outreach program and consultative process” (December, 2012).

Campus safety and threat assessment require all members of the campus community to respond to this call to action as a means to prevent, avert, or minimize potentially dangerous or harmful events. The World Health Organization defined violence as: “The intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, mal-development or deprivation” (Krug, et al, 2002). Global statistics reveal that every minute nine people die from unintentional or violence related injuries (World Health Organization, 2010). Specifically, acts of violence may include campus shootings, homicidal and suicidal acts, physical and sexual assaults, acts of bullying and hate crimes due to gender, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation.

**The importance of threat assessment**

Worldwide, the acts and threat of school violence across universities and colleges has reached epidemic proportions. Colleges and universities first recognized the need to implement a process of threat assessment following the 1999 massacre at Columbine High School outside of Denver, Colorado in the United States. School officials, law enforcement, and the general public became shockingly aware that signs and information of this impending tragedy were known by many but shared by none. The disheartening awareness that perhaps the lives of individual teachers and students could have been spared at Columbine and the paralleled realization of the Virginia Tech tragedy caused the field of higher education to search for preventative approaches to enhance campus safety and minimize harm (Leavitt, Spellings & Gonzales, 2007). The reaction and desire to raise awareness and insure safety across campus environments is noted by the Commonwealth of Virginia’s response and 2008 enactment of legislation mandating colleges and universities to establish threat assessment teams.

Threat assessment models may differ from campus to campus but each share the singular goal of preventing campus harm through a simple but effective means to collect information, assess the presenting concern, and provide assistance to those who may be distressed. The nature of the threat assessment process balances a sense of support and concern for the individual who may be distressed against the safety of the campus community at large. Members of Crisis Response teams include university counselors, police, housing staff and other student affairs personnel who are professionals charged with promptly responding to information provided by faculty, staff, and students regarding a concern for the health and safety of the campus.
Institutional responsibility

The university has a responsibility to establish a process for effective reporting of concerns and strategies to eradicate any threat to the safety of an individual or the campus community (Carr & Ward, 2006). Threat assessment and response is vital as a means to prevent crisis events and is legally mandated in the United States as Jain v. State of Iowa determined that institutions have a “duty to provide reasonable supervision of students…and take reasonable steps to protect students” (Lake, 2011, p. 138). The Court found that colleges and universities must take action to implement steps and to insure that every reasonable action has been taken to protect the campus community. Such legislation should serve to raise awareness and reach beyond the U.S. territories, alerting all institutions of their responsibility to recognize and respond.

The threat assessment process is a vital mechanism that can help the university to meet this fundamental obligation. Threat assessment models include the essential elements of education and communication encompassing all members of the campus community. University administrators must mandate that workshops and educational outreach be developed as a method to raise campus awareness surrounding impending acts of violence. Campus-wide educational programs must articulate both the University’s responsibility to ensure student safety, and educate the faculty, staff, and students of the warning signs surrounding violence, the importance of sharing information and the preferred reporting process. This objective is clearly stipulated by the American College Health Association goal statement that urges colleges and universities to take action to reduce injury, acts of violence, and related deaths through education, reporting, and the implementation of best practices to prevent violence and enhance safety (2005).

Members of the campus community must understand that safety is everyone’s concern and responsibility. According to Deisinger (December 4, 2012), reports of concerns should contain the critical elements of the case beginning with the identification of the subject who may take violent action; the identified target of the action; the environment where the action may occur; and any identified precipitating events or potential triggers of the action. All information, regardless of severity from the smallest concern to an eminent crisis, must be viewed as serious and in turn shared with campus administrators who are responsible for the safety and well-being of the campus community.

A simple, yet a highly effective communication protocol is the university-wide Care Reporting System implemented by the University of Pittsburgh at Johnstown (www.upj.pitt.edu/602/). Such an online system establishes a centralized reporting process and encourages all members of the campus community to submit non-emergency concerns regarding any aspect surrounding campus safety and security. The effectiveness of this process hinges on the campus community’s willingness to communicate and share information through the Care Reporting System. The value of communication cannot be overstated and is critical in building a campus-wide safety net, as communication is the first step to activate the crisis response process.
Individuals who use the Care Reporting System are guided to contact campus police rather than submit a Care report for concerns requiring immediate emergency response. All other concerns can be reported through the online Care Reporting System that is managed across various departments within the Division of Student Affairs. Once a report is submitted, the nature of the report directs the response. Cases of limited threat are assigned to specific support staff members who reach out to the student and offer services. Concerns of a serious level that require threat assessment are managed through the collaborative efforts of individuals and departments that include administrators, mental health professionals, campus police, student services, housing, and others across the campus community. This assessment team works together to gather the facts, draw conclusions, and implement case management in the best interest of the identified student of concern and the campus community.

Effective case management interventions incorporate techniques to de-escalate the subject who may take violent action; decrease the susceptibilities of the target; modify the environment to decrease potential escalation; work to de-escalate or contain the subject who may take violent action; and prepare to moderate any events that may trigger any negative reactions (Dunkle, Silverstein & Warner, 2008). Individuals who present as an immediate danger to self or others are guided towards treatment and often separated from the institution until they receive documented clearance to reenter the community.

**Identifying students of concern**

While it is said that the best predictor of future behavior is past behavior, developmentally students are blank slates and often unpredictable. This was noted by John Locke in 1693, in his essay, *Some thoughts concerning education*, when he referred to students as “Tabula Rosa’s” (1909). Students transitioning to college encounter many stressful experiences for the first time. For instance, traditional students are away from home for the first time; perhaps making their first significant life purchase (tuition, room/board, books); forming a new social identity and support system; taking responsibility for self-monitoring (and self-comforting) and undergoing an intense period of pressure to perform or succeed during a period of increased independence. How does one truly anticipate how individuals so lacking in life experience might respond to such situations? The best we can do is observe the campus community and provide individualized student support that allows each student to navigate the challenges necessary for growth (Sanford, 1967).

Another way to understand what might provoke student behavior is to develop an understanding of their development. Arthur Chickering’s Seven Vectors is the archetypal psychosocial theory of college student development (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Vectors 2, 4 and 7 are particularly applicable to this topic with vector 2 focuses on the skill of managing emotions; vector 4 concentrates on developing mature interpersonal relationships and vector 7 expresses proficiency in developing integrity.
De Becker (1997) in his book, *The gift of fear*, describes over sixty signals noting universal body movements and gestures first identified by Morris (1995) that are behavioral indicators and predictors of violence. Some of these “signals” include nostrils flaring with a sharp indrawn breath indicating anger or a jutting chin demonstrating aggression. Building on this research surrounding body language De Becker developed the JACA Model (Justification, Alternatives, Consequences and Ability) that has been found to be predictive of impending acts of violence. Perceived justification can be identified as being actually provoked, an imagined slight or an angry response only peripherally related to the issue at hand. Perceived alternatives refers to the options the actor believes are viable. The more limited the alternatives appear, the more likely the individual will turn to violence. Perceived consequences can be weighed in order to determine if the act will justify the likely penalties. Likely this explains why many perpetrators of campus shootings have ended their actions by committing suicide. They simply see no other acceptable consequence. Perceived ability refers to whether the individual believes they can successfully follow through on their plan to completion. Thus, many actors will plan their violence in great detail, even acting out some of the events in a rehearsal.

The work of Borum, Fein, Vossekuil, and Berglund (1999) further expanded the field of study through the identification of specific acts of targeted violence. Targeted violence is defined as violent behavior in which the victim and the offender are identifiable prior to the act of aggression (Borum, et al, 1999). Tarasoff v. Regents of the University of California (Borum & Reddy, 2001) case is the most noted example of targeted violence on record where an individual of concern shared in a counseling session his intention to harm his girlfriend. The therapist negated the professional responsibility to alert the identified victim of her potential endangerment, which the court found, contributed to her death. This landmark case is often referred to as “duty to warn” noting a professional’s obligation to warn potential victims of specific acts of targeted violence. According to the United States Secret Service (Borum et al., 1999), violent incidents are not unplanned; beyond interactions between the attacker and the target, past stressful events and the current situation also come into play; and those who commit acts of violence usually express attack-related behaviors from developing the idea to following or approaching the target.

Meloy, Hoffman, Guldimann, and James (2011) provided a third theoretical approach which defined “warning behaviors” as a measure of an individual’s ability to potentially complete a violent act. These seven warning behaviors include: identification warning behavior where the subject presents with an unusual fixation with weapons, attackers or assassins; last resort warning behavior communicates that there are no other solutions except for violence; pathway warning behavior speaks to any activity that serves as preparation or implementation of an attack; fixation warning behavior is evidenced through an increased preoccupation with a victim; energy burst warning behavior is observed through an increased activity level pertaining surrounding the target; leakage warning behavior is communication to a third party of intent to harm and directly communicated threat warning behavior is a direct threat to harm the target or law enforcement (p. 265-66). The research validates the significance of these warning behaviors and notes that leakage warning behavior is frequently indicative of a violent act,
with directly communicated threats failing to be fulfilled, likely due to the advance notification of the event (Meloy & O'Toole, 2011).

Effectiveness of crisis preparedness

There are really only two ways to evaluate the preparedness of an institution: an actual disaster or participating in a drill. The Center for Disease Control in a Public Health Report (2010) commissioned an evidence based review to consider whether their preparedness measures were effective. This report was developed primarily as a source to inform government policy makers in making informed decisions regarding costs and benefits of this crisis preparedness for public health workers. However, the study did conclude that crisis preparedness requires a continued commitment to training and education. The same holds true for the field of education as there are no studies to date which conclusively demonstrate that these practices successfully impact crisis preparedness. Nonetheless, continued crisis response and preparedness is a proactive measure to foster safety across the campus community.

Crisis response protocol

The assessment

Dualistically, the university has the obligation to warn individuals who may be at risk for harm, and simultaneously maintain safety and security across the campus community. The Assessment-Intervention of Student Problems (AISP) model introduced by Ursula Delworth (2009), is a tool to assist universities in the classification, management and behavioral assessment of the at-risk college student. The AISP model serves to identify students of concerns as falling into one of three categories. (See Figure 1).

Delworth, furthermore, describes the disturbing student as lacking “skills in establishing close, age appropriate relationships, very self-centered but wants to establish relationships” (p. 13). The next category, the disturbed or distressed (Dunkle, Silverstein & Warner, 2008) student expresses “specific behavior that are out of sync with other students; often marked patterns of moving away from or against others…seems angry and destructive toward self or others” (p.13). The final category is the disturbed/disturbing student. This student expresses characteristics of being both disturbing and disturbed. An example of this is a student who has a roommate conflict that escalates beyond the issue at hand, becomes destructive and disrupts the entire community (disturbing) while later seeming to have no recollection as to what provoked the behavior (disturbed) (See Figure 2).
Distressed/Disturbing Student Observed

Team Leader Contacted
What is the behavior? What are the ethical/legal issues? Is the identified student in imminent danger? Is there a documented disability? How does the behavior affect the community? Any past documented incidents/behavior? Where is the behavior occurring? How do our local data inform us? What systems need to be involved?

Mental Health (Disturbed)

Student Conduct Process (Disturbing)

Systems: on or off campus mental health professional (MHP).

Roles/Responsibilities: MHP assesses for safety and offers treatment recommendations to appropriate conduct officer. Observe legal and ethical parameters, getting releases of information for various systems, unless imminent danger situation. Educate community about mental health issues.

Systems: Conduct officer, disability specialist, law enforcement, and legal counsel, or others as appropriate.

Roles/Responsibilities: keep process focused on behavior, educate about due process, gather all information and determine appropriate interventions. Determine if other systems need to be involved, including parental notification. After information is collected, determine appropriate intervention(s) and communicate to student.

Figure I: AISP model (Delworth, 2009)

Figure II: Disturbed/Disturbing Matrix (Dunkle, et al., 2008)
The response

There simply is no one best response. In a campus environment, the sharing of information is the key. Typically, responses fall into one of two best practices: either Behavioral Intervention or Threat Assessment (Sokolow & Lewis, 2009). Many campuses have both.

The Behavioral Intervention Team is often made up of a variety of campus faculty and administrators. At Indiana University of Pennsylvania, this team is referred to as CART (Concern and Response Team) and it’s standing membership includes academic deans, the director of University Police, the chair of the counseling center, the executive director for the center for health and well-being, the executive director for housing, residential living and dining, the director of student life and the director of residential living. The group is convened by the Vice-President of Student Affairs biweekly (http://www.iup.edu/page.aspx?id=66653). The campus community can report students of concern through a variety of methods including anonymous reporting, faculty or staff consultations with their deans or supervisors and reports that come through the Campus Officials Reporting (COR) structure. COR is a method of documenting and following up on alleged crimes that have not been reported to the authorities. While the BIT and COR groups are standing multi-disciplinary groups, a TAT (Threat Assessment Team) is a more specialized ad hoc committee that commences to address very specific situations. (www.iup.edu/WorkArea/linkit.aspx?LinkIdentifier=id&amp;ItemID=133135).

Often the Threat Assessment Team is made up of a subset of the behavioral intervention group and may pull in other areas such as specific faculty, disability services and other faculty and staff who have specific knowledge of the situation or student of concern. Many campuses have teams that include human resources and leadership from collective bargaining units if their team, in addition to working with student issues, also works with faculty and staff issues (Deisinger, Randazzo, O’Neill & Savage, 2008).

The intervention

The intervention with the student varies depending on the severity of the problem, the information at hand, the accessibility of the student and the options. Most campuses have guiding documents that should be reviewed with their institutional attorney. It may be helpful to review the student discipline policy, the academic integrity policy, the involuntary withdrawal policy, the emergency campus notification tool (such as a text notification system or a campus alarm), leave of absence protocols that include an individualized plan for re-entry to the community, a knowledge of disability law, a policy regarding mandated assessment and/or treatment, to name but a few. Once a policy is developed, adopted and published, it is imperative that it be consistently followed. It is also important for institutions to identify community resources. An institution of higher education should have a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with local hospitals, law enforcement and health agencies to define the parameters of a collaborative relationship. All such resources should be clearly communicated to faculty, staff, students and parents (The Jed Foundation, 2008).
Campus readiness

It is irrefutable that colleges and universities must continually seek resources to keep their campuses safe. No one likes to think about threats of violence and in fact, personal fables cause us to believe that “it” cannot happen to us, our campus or our community. It is therefore critical to educate and mentally prepare a campus wide team that understands that successful crisis management is dependent upon all team members and their ability to respond appropriately in time of crisis. Activities surrounding reflective practice that include ongoing and frequent workshops, tabletop drills, and assessment activities can serve to sensitize the team, ready the team for action, and ultimately increase the effectiveness of the team during periods of crisis.

Summary

Campus safety is everyone’s concern. Best practices across the field of higher education require colleges and universities to provide a standard of care that strives to insure the safety of all students. Threat assessment teams are one effective means of early intervention to prevent, avert, or prepare for a potential crisis. Campus safety is everyone’s concern. Alert your campus leaders of their responsibility and the need to implement a campus wide reporting system, to designate a threat assessment team and to ultimately build a campus wide safety net for the benefit of students, faculty and staff.
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