

WHY DO CAMPUSES NEED A BEHAVIORAL INTERVENTION TEAM?

(From the National Center for Higher Education Risk Management [NCHERM])

Colleges and Universities now need to prepare for non-traditional emergency situations such as the tragic Virginia Tech and Northern Illinois shootings. Behavioral Intervention and Threat Assessment models that manage and mitigate campus behavioral risk are to be considered an integral part of every school's emergency management plan. As recommended by the Virginia Tech Governor's Panel

IV-4 :

“Incidents of aberrant, dangerous, or threatening behavior must be documented and reported immediately to a college's threat assessment group, and must be acted upon in a prompt and effective manner to protect the safety of the campus community”

IV-6:

“Policies and procedures should be implemented to require professors encountering aberrant, dangerous, or threatening behavior from a student to report them to the dean”

“Guidelines should be established to address when such reports should be communicated by the dean to a threat assessment group, and to the school's counseling center” (Report of the Virginia Tech Review Panel, 2007).

This is just three of MANY recommendations that we see in this post-Virginia Tech era - which show a dramatic shift in our approach to campus violence. Instead of waiting for tragedy to occur and then reacting, we are taking an approach more succinctly described as 'proactive prevention.'

The Behavioral Intervention Team Model that has been created by NCHERM has been effectively adopted by schools throughout the country. The goals of the campus CUBIT(College/University Behavioral Intervention Team) team are numerous.

The team works to:

- Balance the educational needs of the student and the mission of the college
- Intervene early and provide support and behavioral response to students displaying varying levels of disruptive, disturbed, distressed and/or dysregulated behaviors
- Respond with support first and sanctions as a last resort
- Predict with accurate individualized assessment the potential for violent, homicidal and/or suicidal behaviors while avoiding stigmatizing mental health issues and stereotype-based profiling
- Enable adherence to a formalized protocol of instructions for communication, coordination and intervention
- Balance FERPA, HIPAA and counselor privilege with college need-to-know and emergency communication needs
- Centralize collection and assessment of red flags raised by student behavior and connect the dots of disparate problematic actions involving one student that may be known to various faculty, staff and administrators
- Engage faculty and staff in effective response with respect to disruptive and/or distressed students
- Coordinate follow-up to ensure that services, support and resources are deployed effectively
- Coordinate mandated psychological assessment, conduct actions, disability services, accommodations, hospitalization and/or medical leave/withdrawal, as needed, and eliminate fragmented care

An example of how a CUBIT Team might have been called upon in respect to Virginia Tech is below:

As early as the fall of 2005 at Virginia Tech, Seung-Hui Cho was causing alarm, but many faculty members overlooked the red flags. Why? They didn't see them as a serious cause for concern. They were minor. Take one example. When called on in class, and in taking roll, Cho often refused to identify himself, or when pressed, identified himself as "Question Mark." To ignore this behavior, or chalk it up to a student exploring his identity would be a common assumption. That's what Cho's professors did. However, a quick interview of Cho by someone who was trained in the skill set of behavioral intervention would quickly have revealed that Cho was not merely non-compliant, he would not have been able at the time to identify himself as Cho. He was experiencing dissociation, and on the CUBIT risk scale, was dysregulated. That is the highest risk for the potential of harm to self, not the lowest. If you identified that behavior correctly as the potential threat it was, your campus could have intervened as early as fall of 2005, and maybe April of 2007 could have been avoided entirely.

Behavioral Intervention teams are key in reducing the tendency for college and universities to keep essential information "silo"ed between departments. Individuals observe behavior and receive reports that need to be reviewed in an organized and accountable manner, triaging information and developing aftercare plans and treatment options for at-risk students.

Behavioral intervention teams, or more specifically the CUBIT model, address this problem of managing threat and at-risk behavior on campus. They are needed on campus to create an accountable and structured method to address reports of at-risk student behaviors.

In lay-terms, the CUBIT program creates something very similar to what was created after 9/11 in the department of homeland security. CUBIT teams process information and increase communication between various departments (housing and residential life, counseling, health services, police, judicial affairs). Weekly CUBIT meetings also have the added benefit of creating a fixed time for various administrators and college officials to meet and further strengthen their relationships.

CUBIT helps to mitigate the risk of lawsuits and liability for negligence and wrongful death. That said, the importance of implementing, maintaining and continually refining a Behavioral Intervention Team cannot be understated. Now is not the time to hide our eyes and fall victim to the belief that it 'won't happen here'. As campus professionals we are committed to the safety of the students that we serve and owe them nothing less than exactly what they deserve - a safe, healthy environment in which they can grow and thrive.