

Identifying Potentially Dangerous Students

State Council of Higher Education for Virginia

A series of violent acts committed at American colleges and universities has prompted an examination of campus safety practices. In 2006 the Virginia State Crime Commission released “27 Best Practices for Campus Safety,” many of which were cited again by the 2007 Virginia Tech Review Panel. While the details may vary slightly, both panels call for a multi-layered approach that includes the identification of potentially dangerous students. Because of daily interaction with students, faculty and staff are the first line of defense in this effort.

Active involvement in threat assessment by members of the campus community is the best method of preventing a serious act. In nearly every instance of violence on campus there is a pattern of actions, writings, and utterances by the perpetrator that is a clear indication of trouble ahead. In many campus tragedies there are significant indicators that are missed, observed and dismissed, or observed and unreported.

Not every unexplainable activity or action is cause for alarm. At the same time, it is the collection and analysis of the reports of these activities that may be indicative of future problems.

This brochure has been developed to provide a framework for faculty and staff from which to identify students with a significant potential for dangerous behavior.

Federal Privacy Law and How it Affects Reporting

The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) is a federal law that protects privacy interests of student’s “education records,” and prohibits a college or university from implementing a policy or practice of disclosing the education records of students, or personally identifiable information contained in education records, without the student’s written consent. However, FERPA generally does not prevent universities from releasing those records when necessary in responding to serious health and safety concerns. No consent is required in order to disclose education records to appropriate officials in cases of health and safety emergencies if necessary to protect the health and safety of other individuals.

It is important to note that nothing in FERPA prohibits a school official from sharing information that is based on that official’s personal knowledge or observation and that is not based on information obtained from an education record. Therefore, FERPA would not prohibit a professor, administrator, or other school official from letting a parent, police officer, or other school official know of his concern about a student that is based on his personal knowledge or observation. FERPA is not a confidentiality law so much as it is a records privacy law. Of course, sensitive information should still be shared carefully and appropriately, but it need not be withheld from others simply because it concerns a student.

Common Characteristics of Potentially Violent Students

While faculty and staff are not expected to formally assess the potential danger of students, it is important to be aware of factors that might serve to elevate the risk of violence. The following behaviors may indicate instability and the potential for violent acts:

- A social history of being an outsider or having suffered significant rejections or torment from peers.

- Evidence of past violent behavior.
- Severe discomfort in social settings.
- A history of encounters with police or other authorities related to threatening or violent behaviors.
- A record of substance abuse.
- A history of stalking, harassment, or surveillance of other individuals.
- An identification with, or praise for, perpetrators of violence.
- A preference for websites, movies, music lyrics, and other media with violent themes and degrading subject matter.
- A fascination with weapons.
- Justification for violence, such as “an eye for an eye.”
- A belief that violence is the only way to achieve goals.
- A lack of acceptance of blame in any situation.
- Desire to avenge the wrongs done to others.
- Dramatic changes in personality.
- Escalation of behaviors in frequency or level.
- Talk of suicide, suicidal thoughts, or hopelessness.

Identifying Disturbing Content in a Student’s Academic Work

Freedom of expression is a central tenet of a liberal arts education. However, the following examples in the content of academic work should raise serious concerns about a student’s psychological state and signal the need for intervention:

- Incoherent or bizarre writing.
- Overuse of profanity.
- Disclosure of previous abuse and trauma.
- Artwork depicting real or imagined traumatic events or violence.
- Explicit sexual violence.
- Threats of violence to be perpetrated.
- Disturbing content which is inappropriate to the assignment.
- A preponderance of dark, negative, or jarring images and themes in the student’s work.
- Themes of rejection, entitlement, grandiosity, attention seeking, or revenge.
- Characters whose actions are disproportionate to the events in the narrative.
- Content so extreme or profane that it does not serve any reasonable purpose.
- Content that is a dramatic departure from the student’s social demeanor.
- Presentations that create concern for personal safety among fellow classmates.
- Characterization of the student as an avenger.

Other Considerations

- A dramatic event in a student’s life is often a precursor to destructive behavior. A study by Harvard University found that 35% of youth suicides occurred within 24 hours of a traumatic event.
- Do not underestimate “gut” feelings of concern about a student. Intuition can be a valuable tool in recognizing potential problems and preventing violence.

Keeping Perspective

While it is important to be prepared for potentially dangerous situations, it is just as important to keep such threats in perspective. The most recent Bureau of Justice Statistics report indicated that, among all the occupational groups examined, college faculty had the lowest violent crime victimization rate (over thirty times less than junior high teachers and forty times less than mental health professionals). Despite the impression created by high-profile attacks on college campuses, institutions of higher education are relatively safe and protected environments.

Notifying the Proper Authority

Members of the community are in the best position to identify changes in behavior that may indicate a path towards violence. The key to identifying potentially dangerous students is having a sufficient number of people report concerns so they become actionable. Often in the wake of a tragedy, the resulting investigation finds numerous people were aware of the potential of violence, but found no central place to voice their concerns. As a result they were not acted upon.

In response to the lack of consistent reporting policies, the Virginia General Assembly passed legislation in 2008 (§ 23-9.2:9) that requires all public institutions of higher education to have threat assessment teams. Private colleges and universities are also encouraged to create such teams and many have already done so.

Familiarize yourself with your institution's policy regarding notification of the threat assessment team. In the absence of a threat assessment team on your campus, contact the student counseling center, Dean of Students, or campus security office if you have concerns about a student.

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