



The Career College Information Source

Preparing for and Responding to the Threat of Violence

By Brian Summers, Student Resource Services

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We are all regrettably aware of the violence that has been taking place on college and university campuses throughout the country, or of incidents perpetrated by current college students. Virginia Tech, Pima Community College, and as recent as April 2013, Lone Star Community College, are all schools that have been impacted directly or indirectly by violence.

These incidents have also extended to the private/for-profit sector. On January 15, 2013, the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* reported an incident in which a student shot an administrator on the first day of classes. Stevens Institute of Business & Arts, which began as Patricia Stevens in 1947, is a for-profit

school located in St. Louis, Missouri. The alleged perpetrator was an intermittent student at the school, had a

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past history of violence and probation violations, and, it was reported, should have been in jail. It was also stated that the student had mental health issues.

It's important to understand that these types of events could occur at your school at any time. Whether



BRIAN SUMMERS is vice president of Student Resource Services, the leading provider of student coaching and counseling services for colleges and universities, and is responsible for overseeing all company operations. Mr. Summers has over 18 years of experience in the

counseling/mental health industry, and holds a Masters in Business Administration from Lindenwood University.

As part of his leadership role, Mr. Summers has presented on various topics important to

organizations throughout the country, with an emphasis on continuous innovation to meet the evolving needs of the schools and students that Student Resource Services supports.

Since 1991, **Student Resource Services** has provided coaching and counseling services to colleges and universities wishing to retain more students, reduce legal and liability risks, support accreditation, and provide students with the support that they need to be successful.

Contact Information:

Brian Summers
Vice President
Student Resource Services
Office: 866-641-4777, ext. 3062
Email: bsummers@studentresourceservices.com

your school is small or large, in a stand-alone building with security, or located in a shopping mall, all schools are potentially at risk.

The news today is full of violent acts, and many situations happen on college and university campuses. The mental health status of a potential student is not readily observed or known at the time of admission. There

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have been significant accomplishments in the development and proliferation of mental health medications over the last 15 years, and this has allowed many students to

successfully pursue their education. However, these students may not have access to appropriate levels of treatment or enough money to pay for vital medications, leading the student to stop taking their medications. In other cases, a student on medication who “feels better” may stop taking their medication of their own accord.

While the prevalence of mental illness in perpetrators of violence is high, acts of violence often extend beyond mental health concerns. Often, the personal lives and fragile relationships of students can also result in violent events. Even if the students themselves are not the perpetrators, others in their lives may bring violent behavior to your campus; for example, domestic violence often does not remain contained in the privacy of the students’ homes.

Categories of Risk

In order to begin evaluating how your school can best respond to risk and violence, we can examine three specific categories of potential violence that can impact your

school—violence perpetrated by a student on others at your school, violence by a non-student from outside your school, and self-harm by a student. While all three categories can have similar consequences, the approach to identifying risks, development of a safety plan, and responding to threats can be quite different.

The first category involves a current or past student as the perpetrator. The leading factor in many of these situations is often one, or a series of, interpersonal or school-related disputes. The student’s current status—whether they are a current or former student, and whether they are currently active if still enrolled—can be a factor when trying to identify whether there’s a risk to your school.

Another category of risk involves perpetrators that do not have a direct relationship with the school. In many cases, the perpetrator has a relationship with a student (or even a member of the school’s staff/faculty). Domestic violence falls into this category, as do other situations where an individual from outside the school is somehow

According to the 2012 National Survey of Counseling Center Directors released by the American College Counseling Association (ACCA):

- 39% of their clients have severe psychological problems.
- 22% of directors report that there has been a marked increase in student-to-student violence on their campuses over the past 5 years.
- 87% of directors believe that there has been a steady increase in the number of students arriving on campus that are already on psychiatric medication.

The summary of survey responses is available online at: <http://www.iacsinc.org/NSCCD%202012.pdf>

targeting their anger at the school, its personnel, or its students.

The third risk category is different from the first two in that a student's act of violence is driven inward, and they are at risk of harming themselves. While the physical impact of any act of violence might be limited to that one student, it can nevertheless be devastating for your school's faculty, staff, and students.

Warning Signs

In those cases where an active student is the perpetrator, there is a much greater chance that some warning sign will have reached a staff/faculty member or administrator in the form of observable behavior. It is important to pay attention to these warning signs, as these situations could result in violence on your campus, potentially resulting in multiple victims.

This type of student perpetrator often considers himself or herself as a victim or a target of abuse; they may see themselves as being "wronged" in some way. They can also frequently be described as very uncomfortable in their environment. They are often angry, disengaged, or disgruntled with most everything in their lives—both in the school environment and beyond. They can be a student who argues with the instructor at every opportunity, has outbursts in the class, or exhibits other behavior that challenges boundaries that are set at the school. Or, it can be a student who seems to be on track academically, but does not socially engage with anyone at the school, students and instructors alike. While there's no one "profile" of a student that is at risk of violence, awareness at your school—of aggressive or violent behavior, or of changes in behavior—provides an opportunity to proactively identify potential risks.

The second category of perpetrators mentioned is the non-student who has a relationship with a student or staff/faculty member. With students arriving and leaving throughout the day and evening, it can sometimes be difficult to identify suspicious or unknown individuals on campus. In order to respond effectively, it must be the responsibility

of individuals on your campus (staff and faculty, as well as students) to identify potential risks. Student behaviors that should be considered indicators

of potential risk include overall, often radical, changes in behavior, depression, anxiety, "acting out" of emotions, and a general lack of focus.

These behaviors shouldn't be ignored or taken too lightly, as they can sometimes escalate, and even become deadly. There are many situations where a perpetrator knows where they can find their intended target at any given time. If their target is at school, it puts everyone there at risk. If there is violence in the relationship or the student is trying to break away, the perpetrator can suddenly appear on your campus with a gun or other weapon. It is in these situations where the perpetrator is focused on harming their intended victim, and can harm anyone that gets in their way.

Finally, the third risk category is made up of students who are at risk of harm to themselves. While they may not intend to harm others, the impact of their actions can be just as devastating—especially if they harm themselves while at school. As with the other categories, it is important to identify potential risks by looking for

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changes in behavior, or warning signs that the students may be considering hurting themselves. Again, these signals should not be taken lightly; just as important, however, is that you have the appropriate plan and resources in place to deal with these types of situations.

What You Can Do: Campus Planning and Prevention

While every school's resources will vary, there are a few key steps that will allow every school to more effectively plan for, respond to, and prevent violence:

In developing your school's plan, the team should consider early intervention as well as event response.

- 1) Build your team
- 2) Develop a response plan
- 3) Identify appropriate resources
- 4) Complete a vulnerability assessment
- 5) Review, practice, and update your plan
- 6) Encourage a culture of open communication

The first critical step is to **develop your team**, made up of staff/faculty (and, potentially, local resources such as the police department) that will be responsible for collaborating on managing risk at your school. This multidisciplinary team should consist of individuals that are in the best position to implement risk management policies and procedures at your school, actively respond to risk, and participate in ongoing review of your school's preparedness. Depending upon your school's resources, this could include individuals from administration, campus security, student services, legal/compliance, building maintenance, department heads, local police, or public relations. When in doubt, it's better to

be more inclusive at the beginning of the process, and allow the group to become more focused as plans are developed.

In **developing your school's plan**, the team should consider early intervention as well as event response. While appropriate response procedures to violence or other disasters are necessary, appropriate and effective identification and response to a potential issue on campus will always be preferable. The plan should account for a variety of different circumstances, including (but not limited to) the categories of risk previously identified. In order to prioritize the development of the plan, it can be helpful to determine what kind of events would hit your campus the hardest, what would be the effects of these events, and how you can most effectively respond (both proactively and reactively).

A critical component of your school's plan is to **identify appropriate resources**—on campus, in the community, and otherwise. Resources should include those that are necessary to respond to risks or threats, such as local law enforcement and mental health professionals (either on-campus, in the community, or through contracted services). In addition, resources to support students in need of additional assistance, mental health or otherwise, on a more proactive basis can help to prevent escalation of student issues into more serious incidents. The school's staff, faculty, and students should all know how to access these resources at all times.

An early step in preparing a response plan for risks of violence on your campus is to perform a comprehensive **site vulnerability assessment**. An on-site examination of your locations should include a thorough inspection of the perimeter, parking areas, exterior

of the building, interior of the building and an evaluation of safety and security protocols currently in place. Security assessment and law enforcement professionals can be consulted to provide a comprehensive review and give recommendations on site safety. In most areas, local police are willing to provide this service, or may refer you to qualified professionals that can do so. These resources can also assist you with developing a site evacuation plan.

Another valuable tip in preparing for the event of a campus threat is to provide local law enforcement with a site map of your campus/location. Doing so allows local law enforcement to know the layout if something happens on campus. This will help police and dispatchers respond more effectively, especially if a caller is upset and cannot provide reliable directions.

A valuable part of any planning is the development of a threat assessment team. Violence is a process and an act, and attacks are generally preceded by distinctive behavior. Threat assessment teams with a multidisciplinary approach yield the best results to review and respond to these behaviors. The functions of such a team are to identify the person, address the level of risk and then determine the actionable risk management required. As part of the evaluation, the team should seek out and learn as much as possible about the student, including background information, details about their current situation, and possible contributing factors from their life outside school. The recommendations and follow-up actions of the team should be developed in consideration of the magnitude of the potential threat that the student poses.

Once you've completed your detailed plan for your school, you should **review, update, and practice**

your plan on at least an annual basis. The plan should not be seen as a static document; it should evolve over time as your school's needs change. Practicing—whether through drills or other exercises—will make your team much more effective in responding to issues. Practicing may also lead to questions regarding the school's plan or policies, which can lead to important discussions regarding changes that may need to be made.

Lastly, your school should focus on **building a campus culture of open communication**. This will make you more likely to hear about at-risk students or risk situations. In far too many situations of campus violence in the recent past, there have been those who have seen warning signs but did not communicate their concerns. This hesitation may be a result of any number of reasons, whether due to a lack of a good process for voicing concerns about risks, being unsure of the validity of the threat, or not wanting to get a student into trouble. It is important to take potential threats or related concerns seriously, while understanding that not every report of a potential risk will be legitimate. If staff, faculty, and students know that the school is open to reviewing potential risks in a calm,

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At Student Resource Services:

- 45% of student callers to SRS in 2012 reported one or more emotional issues, and 43% of these had serious emotional issues, including suicidal thoughts.
- SRS has provided on-campus crisis intervention over 25 times in the last five years.

planned way, there is a much higher likelihood of information being shared.

Managing Risk

In assessing your school's risk, there are legal issues with which you also need to be concerned, such as failing to provide adequate security, the negligent management of your school's student population, or the inappropriate

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response (at the individual or campus level) to a threat. Even in those cases where legal or financial risk is not imminent, the public

relations impact of such an event can be devastating.

Each school should educate its instructors and staff in order to effectively mitigate and manage risk. Each individual working on campus should understand their role in dealing with issues, be aware of the resources that they have available, and know with whom they should consult when they have a concern. Perhaps most importantly, it should be clear that staff and faculty members should not try to address potential risks on their own.

The school's policies should also allow for consistent monitoring and enforcing discipline. Doing so will allow the school to respond to issues in a more uniform manner. These proactive steps will help to ensure the safety of your students and educators and reduce the possibility of inconsistencies that could lead to legal or regulatory challenges.

Appropriate Response to Threats

After a potential threat has been identified, and you have gathered the investigative information mentioned earlier in this article, a clear plan of action needs to be developed and followed. As part of that plan, the team should consider the following questions:

- Do the police need to be notified about the situation?
- Is anyone else at potential risk, and do others need to be notified?
- Does the student need immediate mental health treatment, and/or a referral to a mental health professional?
- Is a mandatory psychological evaluation needed? If so, remember that clear next steps and a solid plan of treatment must also accompany the outcome of such an evaluation.
- Is dispute resolution or mediation necessary?
- Is disciplinary action or counseling regarding school policies needed?

These can be tough questions to answer, especially if you do not have the appropriate resources in place to provide assistance and consultation. However, having a plan in place, and identifying critical resources *before* you need them, can save valuable time—and, potentially, lives—should an incident occur at your school.