



Risk Aware

Reporting Red Flag Behavior Identify and Manage Risk on College Campuses

by Heather M. Stern

His English professor, Lucinda Roy, describes his writings as disturbing and “dripping with anger”. She was so concerned in fact, that she decided to remove him from class and tutor him privately. His classmates described his work as very graphic and extremely disturbing. His roommate claimed that he was sullen and withdrawn, and often seemed to be out of touch with reality. Clearly Seung-Hui Cho exhibited troubling behavior, but it wasn’t brought to light until that tragic day in April of 2007, when he killed 32 people on the campus of Virginia Tech and then turned the gun on himself.

So how could someone like Cho, who had all the obvious signs of threatening behavior, fall through the cracks? The reality is that suspicious behavior and questionable activities occur daily on college campuses. But like at Virginia Tech, there is no way to “connect the dots” between these activities. In fact, one recommendation given by the Virginia Governor’s Panel, which investigated the Virginia Tech shootings, is that colleges and universities “should recognize their responsibility to a young, vulnerable population and promote the sharing of information internally, and with parents, when significant circumstances pertaining to health and safety arise.”

According to the non-profit organization, Security on Campus, 80% of crimes on campuses are committed by students against students. How do colleges and universities know the character of the students that they admit to their institutions? Some schools are asking applicants if they have ever been charged with a misdemeanor or felony, or if they have been previously dismissed from another institution.

Two of the dilemmas facing the academic institutions are that traditional students enroll in college at the age of eighteen, so any record would most likely be in a juvenile court and protected. In the case of international students, background checks are expensive and time consuming. There is the additional predicament that the information may get lost in translation from one country to another, generating inaccurate results.

Some academic institutions are doing background checks on student employees, faculty and staff, this although a start, it is not enough. Background checks may give a view of crimes committed in the past. A system is needed to monitor the day to day events on campus.

Currently most colleges and universities are using the same protection method that has been used in the past. They have a judicial system in place that tracks incidents once they occur. While there was a time this was sufficient, it no longer works as the deterrent as it once did. There is a need to be involved before an incident occurs. There needs to be a proactive system that identifies red flag behaviors and focuses on intervention and prevention.

Such a system could be compared to the “neighborhood watch” program used for decades to reduce crime in our communities. These programs are proven to lower crime rates by uniting and empowering the community. According to Abilene, Texas, Police Department, “national statistics

show that neighborhoods involved in active programs are between 17% and 51% less likely to be victims of crime." This 'neighborhood watch' on campuses should go beyond observation and include a method of collecting data in a centralized, consistent, systematic manner.

Dr. Stephanie Hughes and Dr. Rebecca White recently conducted a focus group for their risk management firm to discover how universities currently collect data and access threats on campus. Participants in this group, whose job titles ranged from Resident Assistant to Dean of Students, represented small, mid-size, and large institutions throughout the United States. One common theme was increased concern about safety on campus and the lack of measures to address potential threats.

One respondent in the focus group stated, "As a small residential college, there is a lingering perception that we will be able to simply catch people who are falling through the cracks and become aware of problematic behavior because of our size. I feel that is no longer true, as it may have once been. Especially since we have more issues of significant mental health incidents that we should for our size." When asked about the greatest challenges faced by their university as it seeks to ensure campus safety, one focus group participant noted, "...trying to be one step ahead of what 'could happen'."

This is further evidence that such a proactive system is needed in our colleges and universities. An ideal system would include a centralized process, analytical features, and an anonymous reporting option. Keeping information in a centralized manner is important when dealing with various incidents reported throughout a campus. For instance:

- A college freshman that is worried about her roommate who seems deeply depressed, and confides in her resident assistant.
- A suspicious van circling the parking lot near the dorms is reported to campus safety.
- An anonymous student leaves a note for the Dean of Students alleging his professor is being offensive in the classroom.

These are typical examples of information reported to different departments within our colleges and universities.

In a survey that complemented the focus group conducted by Dr. Hughes and Dr. White, university representatives were asked the question, "How many incidents are reported on an average month?" 5% of respondents answered "less than 5", 46.7% answered "6-14", 13.3% answered "15-29", 15% answered "30-49", and 20% answered "50 or more".

With so many incidents to sort through, how does a university staff analyze the information? There needs to be a way to track commonalities in reports: how many times a particular student or campus location appears in a report.

Administrators need a risk assessment solution that can take bits and pieces of reported information in order to predict trends, identify patterns, and most importantly, intervene to prevent a crisis or tragedy situation from occurring. An anonymous reporting function could allow students, faculty and staff to make a report while staying out of the line of fire. It might encourage reporting by those who may be hesitant to get involved, but are concerned about a certain activity or behavior.

While this may be a new concept in the higher education arena, it has been well documented in corporate environments. According to Jacob Blass, President of Ethical Advocate, "An external, confidential, anonymous reporting mechanism serves as an early warning system, enabling organizations to react quickly, to investigate issues, and often resolve problems prior to increased malfeasance, costly stealing, litigation, or negative publicity. It also creates a culture of ethical behavior that over time will diminish the prospects of these actions."

So, the question becomes: What does the university do with the information it receives?

Carolyn Wolf, Esq. and Brett Sokolow, J.D., attorneys specializing in mental health on campuses differentiate between distressed, disturbed and dysregulated students. Distressed students are emotionally troubled and could be experiencing situational stressors. These students should be met with and offered resources. Disturbed students, on the other hand, are behaviorally disruptive, possibly substance abusing, and/or destructive to others. These students should be met with, and referred to professional services. The most severe category, the dysregulated student, is suicidal, aggressive, hostile and/or self-injurious. These students require referral to counseling services or a more organized intervention. The goal is to intervene with students who may pose a threat and prevent disruptive behavior from escalating.

According to recommendations by the Virginia Governor's Panel, "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." Other recommendations by the panel require, "Incidents of aberrant, dangerous or threatening behavior" to be documented and reported immediately to the deal, the school's threat assessment group and the counseling center and parents.

College and university campuses are open environments, making them vulnerable to crime and other negative activity. According to the article, "Safe on Campus", published in 2008 in the Reader's Digest,, there are 40,000 burglaries, 3,700 forcible sex offenses, 7,000 aggravated assaults and 48 murders reported by the 6,000 higher education institutions in the United States annually. In addition, mental health issues, such as suicide and eating disorders are on the rise.

One important solution for college and universities in making a dent in these staggering statistics might be implementing a centralized system that provides a proactive analytical and anonymous reporting platform. Having this system may well increase the possible identification of threatening behavior so that appropriate action can be taken to prevent a crisis.