

Adams State University

Guidelines for Responding to Disturbing Writing and Behavior

Background & Purpose

Research on incidences of campus violence such as those that occurred in Columbine, CO or Virginia Tech University has suggested that acts of campus violence typically fall into one of two categories; affective violence, or targeted violence (Sokolow, Lewis, Schuster, Swinton & Van Brunt, 2014). Affective violence tends to be based on an emotional response or on adrenaline; it's reactive and impulsive. Targeted violence tends to be planned, strategic, and focused (2014). The vast majority of acts of campus violence (such as Virginia Tech in 2007, Northern Illinois in 2008, Alabama-Huntsville in 2010) and non-college/university shootings (such as the Sandy Hook Elementary School shootings in 2012 and the Aurora Movie Theater shootings in 2012) are characterized as acts of targeted violence. Perpetrators of targeted violence almost always give indications and clues as to the acts that they plan to commit (Sokolow, Lewis, Schuster, Lowery & Van Brunt, 2011).

Similarly, the vast majority of persons who attempt or commit suicide show signs that they are struggling with depression, or confide in a friend or trusted advisor that they are struggling (LivingWorks, 2013). When these indicators show up in conversations, online, or in writing assignments, the faculty member, staff member, or fellow student must make an initial intervention and work to get the individual engaged with a counselor or other helping professional.

The ASU Campus Health and Safety Committee has worked closely with the National Center for Higher Education Risk Management (NCHERM) and the National Behavioral Intervention Team Association (NaBITA) in implementing a system at Adams State University to proactively identify individuals who may be becoming a threat to themselves or others. This system includes a rubric for classifying the level of threat and a protocol for intervening with the person. The *2014 NaBITA Threat Assessment Tool*, which is utilized by Adams State, incorporates the most recent knowledge on targeted violence and provides a comprehensive tool for assessing mental and behavioral health indicators, risk level, and level of hostility and violence (NaBITA, 2014).

The Campus Health and Safety Committee works to gather data on individuals' behavior from as many sources across campus as possible. This provides a broader context for understanding the behaviors and a better chance for intervening with people before behavior becomes violent or suicidal. A coach dealing with an athlete's behaviors may feel the issue is isolated and has been dealt with. However, if that same student has been having issues in her residence hall, has had interactions with the ASU Police, and has turned in writing assignments filled with dark and disturbing imagery, the picture may be clearer that the issues are not resolved and an intervention can be commenced. The Campus Health and Safety Committee can only be successful to the extent that faculty members, staff members, and students report behavioral issues that they are seeing. A list of the standing members of the Campus Health and Safety Committee, as well as other resources, is included toward the end of this document.

The first step for any campus in being able to proactively identify and intervene with people before their behavior becomes violent or suicidal is for the people who spend the most time with them (i.e. faculty members, staff members, and students), to recognize when behaviors are becoming problematic, and to respond appropriately. The purpose of this document is to provide strategies and resources for intervening with in- and out-of-classroom behavior and to disturbing elements in student writing.

Identifying Disturbing Behavior

The *2014 NaBITA Threat Assessment Tool* (2014) classifies behaviors from a mental and behavioral health standpoint as either distressed, disturbed, dysregulated, or medically disabled. From a risk standpoint, dysregulated and medically disabled are at the same level of risk, so these concepts offer a three-tiered conceptualization of troubled behavior.

1. **Distressed Behavior:** The individual may be emotionally troubled. The individual may be impacted by situational stressors and/or traumatic events. Disruptive behavior may be present. The individual may have made a vague or indirect threat.
2. **Disturbed Behavior:** The individual's behavior is disruptive, erratic, unusual and/or bizarre. The individual may be destructive and there may be harm or threat of harm to others. The person has made a threat, and while the threat may still be vague or indirect, the threat may be repeated to multiple people. The person is exhibiting clear signs of distress and may be showing some indications of being out of touch with reality. The individual may be abusing substances.
3. **Dysregulated/Medically Disabled Behavior:** The individual is struggling with thoughts of suicide or is engaged in a continuum of suicide or self-harm behaviors (suicide attempts, self-injurious, eating disorders, etc.). The individual may be abusing substances. The individual may appear hostile, aggressive, and relationally abusive. A threat is made or present and the threat is concrete, likely to be repeated with multiple people, and specific. The individual may be deficient in skills that regulate emotion, cognition, self behavior, and relationships. The term 'medically disabled' refers to a clinical event such as a psychotic break.

Some examples of these types of behaviors:

- Individual is disruptive/disrespectful/verbally aggressive or assaultive in class
- Individual is regularly sleeping in class
- Individual is abusing substances to the point that they are endangering themselves or others
- Individual is physically assaultive, aggressive, or threatening
- Individual has personal hygiene problems
- Individual has expressed that he or she is thinking about suicide, or has a plan to commit suicide
- Individual's behavior is so unusual or bizarre that it may suggest that the individual is dysregulated (or way off their normal baseline)
- Individual routinely dominates classroom discussion
- Individual's behavior suggests that they are crying out for help
- Individual is exhibiting signs of depression or other mental illness
- Individual is committing acts of dishonesty, including cheating, plagiarism, furnishing false information to any University official, or any other form of academic dishonesty.

The above is obviously not an all-inclusive list. Sokolow & Lewis (2007) define "disruptive" as anything that causes you concern or prevents you from being able to effectively perform your duties. If you're not sure the behavior you're seeing qualifies, err on the side of caution and respond appropriately.

Responding to Disturbing Behavior

Faculty, staff, and students are the people on campus most likely to observe or hear about these types of behaviors. In some circumstances it may be appropriate for you to confront the behavior yourself.

However, as someone's behavior starts progressing into the definitions of distressed, disturbed or dysregulated above, your best response will be to a) immediately call the police, and/or b) report the behavior as quickly as possible. See the list of additional resources at the end of this document. Determining if you will respond to a person yourself requires discretion on your part. You should never put yourself at risk. If a situation is threatening, contact the police immediately. Sokolow & Lewis (2007) provide the following lists of confrontation strategies should you choose to confront disruptive behavior:

- Do remain calm and in control
 - Do listen to what is being said
 - Do acknowledge the person's feelings (but do NOT justify the behavior)
 - Do allow appropriate emotional expression
 - Do identify and acknowledge the concern/issue. Offer a solution or offer to continue the discussion later (after class, during office hours, etc.)
 - If someone is exhibiting signs of distress, ensure you have sufficient time to speak with them before engaging them in a conversation
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- Do not raise your voice
 - Do not argue with the person
 - Do not challenge or threaten the person
 - Do not get too close to the person (manage personal space)
 - Do not allow the person to get too close to you
 - Do not ever touch the person
 - Do not point or use gestures that are challenging or threatening
 - Do not use any abusive or derisive language
 - Do not humiliate the person

If you encounter any behavior that could fall into the definitions of distressed, disturbed, or dysregulated in the previous section, those behaviors should be reported to the Campus Health and Safety Committee (and potentially to the police, depending on the behavior). As discussed previously, the Campus Health and Safety Committee can only be effective to the extent that as much information as possible is known to the committee. If you're not sure, err on the side of reporting.

Often, disruptive people or people exhibiting distress can benefit from speaking with a counselor. If the situation warrants it, consider offering to walk the person over to the Counseling Center in Richardson Hall, where they can speak to a counselor.

Identifying Disturbing Writing

Some of the greatest writing in history is very disturbing in nature. Having violent or disturbing themes or images in a writing assignment should not automatically result in a professor intervening with the writer. The Virginia Tech Department of English (2007) has developed written guidelines for identifying and responding to disturbing writing. Other schools' written guidelines can be found by searching the topic on the internet. This section references the Virginia Tech guidelines in a much abbreviated fashion, with adaptations for the Adams State University campus environment.

Everyone has a unique perspective on what is "disturbing" when it comes to writing assignments – particularly if your course engages students in creative writing. You need to use your discretion and the

guidance of your department in gauging if writing truly represents a warning of potential harm to self or others, or if writing reflects either a deep desperation or a separation from reality that needs to be followed up upon.

One major consideration in identifying disturbing writing is how the writing aligns with the assignment you gave. If you find a student writing about deeply personal issues and their resulting anguish when you assigned the student to write about what they did last weekend, it may represent a more explicit cry for help. On the ASU campus, the most frequent writing samples referred to the Campus Health and Safety Committee have been this type – expressions of despair or anger toward people or situations when the writing assignment itself did not direct the student to write about that topic.

The Virginia Tech Department of English (2007) offers a number of questions for you to consider when weighing if a student's creative writing reflects creative exploration, or something requiring a different response. A sample of these questions is included below. The full guidelines by the Virginia Tech are available online for faculty to examine further (see the references section for the URL).

- Is the writing excessively violent? Do characters respond to everyday events with unexpected violence? Does the violence seem to express rage and anger from the author as opposed to serving a thematic purpose?
- Are the characters' thoughts as well as actions violent or threatening? Does the text mediate the characters' thoughts and actions? Or does the text represent an unmediated venting of rage and anger?
- Does the current work continue a theme of violent writing or is this the first piece with that theme? Is there a possibility the student is exploring violence for literary effect?
- Are the violent actions in the work so disturbing or so extreme as to suggest they go beyond any possible sense of purpose in relation to the larger narrative? Are they a component of the piece, or the whole point of the piece? Does the work suggest extreme depression or suicidal inclinations in the author?
- Are the expressions of hostility directed toward other racial or ethnic groups? Is the writing threatening to any other specific group of students?

Responding to Disturbing Writing

Factored into your decision to respond personally to a student's disturbing writing should be your relationship with the student, whether or not you're seeing any concerning behaviors to go along with the disturbing writing, and if you feel even a hint of a threat to yourself. The Virginia Tech Department of English (2007) recommends the following steps in responding to disturbing writing:

1. Instructor speaks informally with the student: Explore with the student if the writing was literary in nature. Make sure you have sufficient time to have this informal discussion with the student. If the student seems threatening in any way, do not meet alone and consider referring the student immediately to the Campus Health and Safety Committee.
2. Consult with your department chair: If your conversation with the student doesn't convince you that the disturbing features of the writing are literary in nature, consult with your department chair. Share the writing in question as well as the situation and your notes from your meeting with the student.
3. Involve the Campus Health and Safety Committee: In situations where a mental health diagnosis and treatment are indicated, or where a police response is most appropriate, engage

the resources available to you on campus. See the resources section of this document for further direction.

Resources

If you are dealing with a person who is disturbed or dysregulated, or who is so distressed or disruptive that you do not feel safe intervening in the situation, call the police. 911 will always get the quickest response. The State Patrol Dispatch is 589-5807. If you are in need of non-emergency consultation, the ASU Police Department can be reached at ext. 7901.

The San Luis Valley Community Mental Health Center has a 24/7 on-call crisis response team. During regular business hours, you can reach the Mental Health Center at 589-3671. After hours and on the weekends you call the same number but it will be answered by a State Patrol Dispatcher. Tell the Dispatcher that you need to speak to the on-call emergency services worker. The Dispatcher will take your number and have the on-call counselor call you.

The Adams State University Counseling Center offers confidential counseling services free-of-charge to ASU students and their immediate families. The Counseling Center is located in Richardson Hall and the phone number is ext. 7746. After hours in an emergency situation, contact the Mental Health Center's emergency services worker by calling 589-3671.

The State of Colorado's Employee Assistance Program offers confidential counseling services for ASU employees. The C-SEAP program is housed under Human Resources as one of ASU's employee benefits. To schedule an appointment with a C-SEAP counselor, call 1-800-821-8154.

Tu Casa is the San Luis Valley's provider of services to victims of sexual assault and domestic violence, including counseling and emergency shelter. Tu Casa has a 24/7 hotline and can be reached at 589-2465.

Two more great resources for students struggling with depression and thoughts of suicide are the National Suicide Prevention Hotline, and Metro Crisis Services which serves as the State-wide hotline for Colorado. The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline is staffed 24/7 and can be reached at 1-800-273-TALK (8255). Resources are also available online at www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org. Metro Crisis Services is also available 24/7 and can be reached at 888-885-1222 and it offers both a hotline staffed by trained clinicians, and a "warm line" staffed by peer counselors. Resources are also available online at www.metrocrisiservices.org.

The following list is the standing members of the Campus Health and Safety Committee at Adams State University, by title, with current phone numbers:

- Vice President of Student Affairs (ext. 7221)
- Director of Counseling & Career Services (ext. 7746)
- Chief of Police (ext. 7901)
- Director of Auxiliary Services & Residence Life (ext. 7227)
- Director of Human Resources (ext. 7990)

Most of the Campus Health and Safety Committee members are available to consult with you if you're not sure what response is indicated. If you're not sure, it's better to go ahead and report the behavior

you're seeing. The Campus Health and Safety Committee works best when the committee has as much of the pertinent information about a person and the person's behavior as possible.

Concerns can be reported by calling a Campus Health and Safety Committee member directly or through the online reporting form on the ASU website. The Concern Form is linked to the webpages of the Counseling Center (counseling.adams.edu), Human Resources (www.adams.edu/administration/hr), the ASU Police Department (www.adams.edu/ps), and Student Affairs (www.adams.edu/sa). The Concern Form is also linked to the Faculty/Staff Resources page under Campus Services.

Additional resources can be located on Adams State's Campus Safety and Emergency Management webpage at www.adams.edu/about/safety/index.php.

References

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