

Community Colleges and Behavioral Intervention Teams: A Study of North Carolina Community Colleges

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Abstract

The number of students presenting risk behaviors as defined by Sokolow, Lewis, Wolf, Brunt, Byrnes, (2009), is increasing, creating critical concerns for community colleges. This study examines North Carolina community college counselors and how they respond to students who present risk behaviors. Are there consequences if counselors are not trained to deal with students in crisis? How confident are community college counselors in North Carolina when assisting students who present risk behaviors? This study investigated these questions and determined the qualification levels of counselors who serve students on such campuses. Findings from this study indicate that North Carolina community college counselors desire training to support students who fall into the extreme/severe risk category as defined by Sokolow et al.'s Threat Assessment Tool available through NaBITA (2009).

Introduction

Violent crises on college campuses are increasingly being reported in the news. Campus shootings is one form of this violence rapidly increasing on college campuses (Eells & Rockland-Miller, 2011; Keller, Hughes, & Hertz, 2011; Davenport, 2009; The Associated Press, 2007). The Associated Press (2007) described eight campus shootings that occurred between August of 1966 and April of 2007 on four-year campuses. In this 41-year time period, there were eight campus shootings, with an average of two shootings per decade. It is currently not unusual to learn of a campus shooting when watching the evening news. Support for college campuses does exist, as they seek to reduce threats and strategically intervene to prevent violent attacks. In 2009, the National Behavioral Intervention Team Association (NaBITA), Sokolow et. al. (2009), introduced a free threat assessment tool for use by the higher education community. The tool's suggested use was to "measure to assess mental health related risk." The threat assessment tool categorizes the following five levels of generalized risk: extreme, severe, elevated, moderate, and mild (2009, p. 3). This threat assessment tool is intended to be utilized by college campuses to help Behavioral Intervention Teams adopt a systematic method for measuring threat.

College administrators lead the ethical, legal, and social charge to support and promote the security and safety of their respective college campus populations (Anderson & Davies, 2000). There are fundamental ethical and legal needs to address the issue of growing violence on campuses. Behavioral intervention and management research has been focused on universities, possibly due to four-year campuses being mostly residential (Keller, Hughes, & Hertz, 2011); however, ethical and legal issues exist not only on four-year campuses, but also at two-year community colleges, many of which have open-door admissions policies. Colleges are resolving to address the ethical and legal issues of threatening situations on their campuses with the assistance of NaBITA, which supports colleges by aiding with the implementation of tools and resources and the development of Behavioral Intervention Teams.

This study used the term "Behavioral Intervention team, as defined by NaBITA: "a multi-disciplinary group whose purpose is meeting regularly to support its target audience (students, employees, faculty, staff) via an established protocol. The team tracks 'red flags' over time, detecting patterns, trends, and disturbances in individual or group behavior. The team receives reports of disruptive, problematic, or concerning behavior or misconduct (from co-workers, community members, friends, colleagues, etc.), conducts an investigation, performs a threat assessment, and determines the best mechanisms for support, intervention, warning/notification and response. The team then deploys its resources and resources of the community and coordinates follow-up" (retrieved from: <http://nabita.org/behavioral-intervention-teams/>).

The term "crisis" can "apply to both individuals and systems;" a crisis "has the potential to cause severe affective, behavioral, and cognitive malfunctioning" (Myer, James, & Moulton, 2011, p. 15–16). Defined by Barton (1993), a crisis "is a major unpredicted event that impacts the organization across its employees, products, services, and reputation in unpredictable ways with the potential for negative results" (p. 2). Duncan and Miser (2000) explain the events in which a college can be in crisis: "a student death (whether it be from murder, suicide, or an accident), a student demonstration, violent act (rape or assault), or a natural disaster (hurricanes, tornadoes, or earthquakes)" (Duncan & Miser, 2000, p.453). For the purposes of this study a crisis will be defined as student violence towards themselves and others. This study also uses the reference of risk behaviors as defined in the research of Sokolow, Lewis, Wolf, Van Brunt, and Byrnes (2009) who identified five levels of risk: mild risk, moderate risk, elevated risk, severe risk, and extreme risk. According to the NaBITA rubric:

Mild and moderate risk-level behaviors include distress-level behaviors. This includes individuals who are emotionally troubled, those impacted by situational stressors and traumatic events, and individuals who may be psychiatrically symptomatic. Elevated risk behaviors include disturbance-level behaviors, such as individuals who are behaviorally disruptive, unusual and/or bizarre acting, engage in destructive behaviors, are apparently harmful to others, and are abusing substances. Severe and extreme risk behaviors are considered dysregulation/medically disabled, and include individuals who are suicidal, para-suicidal (e.g., extreme cutting or eating disorder), engaging in risk-taking behaviors (e.g., substance abusing), hostile, aggressive, relationally abusive, and deficient in skills that regulate emotion, cognition, self, behavior, and relationships (2009, p. 1).

Context of the Community Colleges

According to Cohen and Brawer (2003), "during most of its history, the community college has been unnoticed, ignored by writers about higher education" (p. 35). In 1988, Dallas Herring, later named Chairman Emeritus of the North Carolina State Board of Education, stated, "We face a new century a dozen years from now; not just a new century, but a new millennium. No one knows what it holds for civilization. One thing is certain: education of the masses of humanity, not only as economic beings, but especially as human beings, will be essential to the achievement of peace and prosperity" (p. 7).

Modern day community colleges are in flux, described by Levin, Kater, and Wagoner (2006) as undergoing "institutional shifts in strategic and operational planning that change from a focus on expanding educational and training opportunities for the local community to achieving economic goals motivated by values of efficiency and productivity [which] have affected the governance of community colleges" (Levin,

et al., 2006, p. 47). Demands have shifted, faculty perform multiple roles, and, because of the added duties, quality services are lacking (Levin, et al., 2006). According to Anderson and Davies (2000), community college leaders are responsible for the safety of their campuses as a whole. For the leaders to make sound decisions, it is important that they understand their campus counselors' perceptions and be able to create innovative approaches that will allow them to plan effectively for the safety of students, faculty, and staff.

Planning strategically as community college campuses serve a more diverse population is a necessity (Nevarez & Wood, 2010). Yet strategic planning is difficult for community colleges, which often face budget deficits. It's not surprising that the United States economy has presented community colleges with additional challenges; specifically, the need to serve more students with specialized services (2010). It is possible that community college counselors can adopt a vital role in the development of crisis intervention and management as related to campus violence prevention in addition to the role community college administrators assume in crisis intervention and management.

College counselors take part in identifying "at risk" students who could potentially threaten the campus at large. Research suggests that counselors are the ones who provide de-escalation for students in crisis (Davenport, 2009). The consequences if counselors are not trained to deal with students in crisis are severe. To make any plan, it is important to first understand how confident community college counselors are when assisting students who present risk behaviors. This study investigated questions for North Carolina community colleges that can be used in making changes to the colleges' culture in terms of working with at-risk students.

Method

Due to the access of participants and the large geographical area covered, a survey instrument was used to evaluate the current practices in place for counselors who provide services to community college students in North Carolina who are facing crisis situations.

Participants

The population for the study was North Carolina community college counselors. The sample of counselors for this study was accessible through an email listserv maintained by the North Carolina Community College System Office.

Instrumentation

Survey questions were designed around student behaviors as indicated by risk levels (Sokolow et al., 2009). There were six major areas covered by the survey: 1) community college policies and

practices; 2) behavioral assessment teams at community colleges in North Carolina; 3) counselor preparation; 4) levels of implementation of policies relating to behavioral assessment; 5) counselor demographics; and 6) a qualitative analysis of policies related to behavioral assessment at community colleges in the state. Socio-demographic information, including the education level, types of certification, years of experience, experience working with individuals who present mental health crises, and the length of time employed at a North Carolina community college(s), was also covered by the survey. The survey concluded with an unrestricted question regarding participating counselors' perception of their community college's preparedness to serve students in crisis.

Data Collection and Analysis

The survey instrument developed by the researcher was used to collect data and a pilot study was conducted. The pilot study assessed the instrument for validity. The link to the electronic survey was distributed on the email listserv maintained by the North Carolina Community College System Office. The data was analyzed using frequency, percent, mean, and standard deviation.

Results

Demographic, employment, and educational levels of the counselors employed at community colleges in North Carolina provide a description of the counselors. Participants provided the number of years they have worked for the North Carolina Community College System, their gender, age, ethnicity, level of education, and credentials. Table 1 provides an overview of the gender, ethnicity, educational level, and credentials. The mean age of participants was 45 (SD=9.51). Of the participants, 72 percent (n=56) were female, and 28 percent (n=16) were male. A majority of the participants, 75 percent (n=57) identified as Caucasian, 21 percent (n=16) identified as African American or Black, 2.6 percent (n=2) identified as American Indian, and 1.3 percent (n=1) identified as multi-racial.

Educational levels within the group varied 84.2 percent (n=64) had a master's degrees, 8 percent (n=6) indicated that they had either a Ph.D. or Ed.D. (n=6), while 1.3 percent (n=1) reported having a Psy.D. Those participants with a bachelor's degree totaled 3.9 percent (n=3), and those who held other degrees totaled 2.6 percent (n=2). When reporting licensures, 36 percent (n=27) of participants were licensed professional counselors, 3 percent (n=2) were licensed clinical social workers, and 15 percent (n=11) reported that they held other related licenses. Of the participants, 51 percent (n=38) reported that they had no specific counseling related credentials. It is vital to note that North Carolina community college counselors work in varying circumstances and it is not unusual for the counselors' educational levels to be different. Some perform

work in conditions that do not require licensure and others work under someone else's license.

Table 1

Frequencies and Percentages of Gender, Ethnicity, Educational Level, and Credentials of North Carolina Community College Counselors:

Variable	Respondents		
	n	%	
Gender			
	Male	56	72.0
	Female	22	28.0
Ethnicity			
	Caucasian	57	75.0
	African American or Black	16	21.0
	American Indian	2	2.6
	Multi-racial	1	1.3
	Hispanic/Latino	0	0
	Asian	0	0
	Other	0	0
Educational Level			
	Master's degree	64	84.2
	Ph.D. Ed.D.	6	8.0
	Psy.D.	1	1.3
	Bachelor's degree	3	3.9
	Associate's degree	0	0
	Other	2	2.6
Credentials			
	Licensed Professional Counselor	27	46.2
	Licensed Clinical Social Worker	2	3.0
	Certified Rehabilitation Counselor	0	0
	Licensed Psychological Associate	0	0
	Other related license	11	15.0
	None	38	51.0

The five levels of risk identified by Sokolow et al., (2009) were divided into three categories (mild/moderate risk, elevated risk, and extreme/severe risk) for this study. Table 2 describes the definition of each level (Sokolow et al., 2009).

Table 2

Levels of Risk Defined by Sokolow (2009)

Level	Definition
Mild/Moderate Risk	Emotionally troubled individuals impacted by situational stressors and traumatic events; psychiatrically symptomatic.
Elevated Risk	Behaviorally disruptive, unusual and/or bizarre acting, destructive, and apparently harmful to others; substance abusing.
Extreme/Severe Risk	Suicidal, para-suicidal (extreme cutting, eating disordered), individuals engaging in risk-taking behaviors (e.g., substance abusing), and hostile, aggressive, and relationally abusive individuals deficient in skills that regulate emotion, cognition, self, behavior, and relationships.

In the survey, participants were asked to rate, using a five-point Likert scale, how often they assisted students who brought forward the behaviors. Data reported by 70 counselors who responded to the survey indicates:

Students presenting mild/moderate risk behaviors:

- Three percent (n=2) "never" provided services to students who presented mild/moderate risk behaviors;
- Seven percent (n=5) "rarely" provided services to students who presented mild/moderate risk behaviors;
- Thirty-eight percent (n=27) "sometimes" provided services to students who presented mild/moderate risk behaviors;
- Forty percent (n=28) "often" provided services to students who presented mild/moderate risk behaviors; and
- Eleven percent (n=8) "always provided services to students who presented mild/moderate risk behaviors.

For the behaviors associated with the elevated risk category:

- Six percent (n=4) "never" provided services to students who presented these behaviors;
- Forty percent (n=28) "rarely" provided services to students who presented these behaviors;
- Forty percent (n=28) "sometimes" provided services to students who presented these behaviors;
- Thirteen percent (n=9) "often" provided services to students who presented these behaviors in this category; and
- One percent (n=1) "always" provide services to students who presented these behaviors in this category.

For the behaviors associated with the extreme/severe risk category:

- Thirteen percent (n=9) “never” provided services to students presenting extreme/severe risk behaviors;
- Fifty-eight percent (n=41) “rarely” provided services to students who presented these behaviors;
- Twenty-three percent (n=16) “sometimes” provided services to students who presented these behaviors;
- Three percent (n=2) “often” provided services to students who presented these behaviors;
- Three percent (n=2) “always” provided services to students who presented these behaviors.

The data is further summarized in the table that follows.

Table 3

Means and Standard Deviation for Students’ Risk Behaviors as Reported by Counselors and Standard Deviations of Each Occurrence

Risk Behaviors	M	SD
Mild/Moderate Risk	3.5	.897
Elevated Risk	2.64	.835
Extreme/Severe Risk	2.24	.824

On the survey, counselors were able to assess their confidence levels when serving students who fell into the risk behavior categories. Counselors reported feeling most confident when working with students who present with mild/moderate risk behaviors. The majority of counselors reported that they “agree” they are confident when working with students in the mild/moderate risk category (M=4.01, SD=.819).

When assisting students who fell into the elevated risk behavior category, they responded half-way between the “neither disagree or agree” and “agree” responses (M=3.5, SD=.922). The counselors reported assisting students who fell into the extreme/severe risk categories mostly in the “agree” response (M=3.28, SD=1.104). Table 4 provides detailed descriptive data for confidence levels.

Table 4

Summary of Counselor Confidence Levels Reported When Providing Services to Students Presenting Risk Behaviors

	Strongly Disagree		Disagree		Neither Agree nor Disagree		Agree		Strongly Agree	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Mild/Moderate Risk	1	1	4	6	4	6	43	63	16	24
Elevated Risk	1	1	10	15	18	27	32	47	7	10
Extreme Risk	5	7	14	21	11	16	33	49	5	7

Summary and Recommendations

How confident are community college counselors in North Carolina when assisting students who present risk behaviors?

This study found that 93.5 percent (n=71) of counselors who work at North Carolina community colleges have earned a master’s degree or higher. This educational training qualifies them for the profession. Sixty-four percent of counselors “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that additional training is needed to better assist students who present mild/moderate risk behaviors; 73 percent of counselors reported that training is needed to better assist students who present elevated risk behaviors; 84 percent of counselors reported that training is needed to better assist students who present extreme/severe risk behaviors.

The counselors who participated in this study reported that they most often work with students who present mild/moderate risk behaviors, and rarely encounter extreme/severe risk behaviors when assisting students. Twenty-eight percent of counselors either “disagreed” or “strongly disagreed” that they were confident when assisting students who present extreme/severe risk behaviors. This research supports the conclusion that additional training is needed for community college counselors to be confident when dealing with students who demonstrate elevated and extreme/severe risk behaviors.

What are the consequences if counselors are not trained to deal with students in crisis?

A decreased level of confidence when dealing with students who present extreme/severe risk behaviors was reported by counselors who took part in this study, and 84 percent of counselors reported that training is needed for dealing with this risk level. The combination of decreased confidence and a desire for training makes it evident that counselors at North Carolina community colleges would benefit from support when working with students who present extreme/severe risk behaviors. A failure to respond to this level of need could result in ethical and legal implications. College leaders hold an

ethical responsibility to provide safe campuses, but also hold a social responsibility as well.

Anderson and Davies (2000) support the view that “community colleges play an integral role in the social, political, and economic lives of their respective communities” (p. 711). Counseling services are key during threatening situations and aid in managing risks (Davenport, 2009). Suicidal and homicidal incidents on college campuses have increased in recent years; threat assessment teams, which include counseling staff, are being developed to deal effectively with student concerns as a result (Davenport, 2009). A code of ethics is provided by the American Association of Community Colleges as well (AACC, 2005). The core values developed by the association allows ethical standards to be followed by community college leaders.

Research supports “disability law, laws that govern student privacy and confidentiality, and concerns about liability for student suicide and violence” as three key areas with which an institution’s legal counsel should be familiar (Eels and Rockland-Miller 2011, p. 10). Communication among team members is imperative in the process of mitigating threats at an institution of higher education with the legal representation of the college for legal guidance (Eels & Rockland-Miller, 2011).

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