

ADMINISTRATION

Campus Fears Drive Boom in Threat-Assessment Teams

By Sam Hoisington | OCTOBER 18, 2017



Courtesy of Santa Monica College

Santa Monica College's threat-assessment team meets twice a month to discuss students who have been reported as possible threats to themselves or others. A tragedy there four years ago drives home the deadly seriousness of the team's work.

Working to prevent students harming themselves or others, the group's work is always serious and, as one team member said, sometimes heartbreaking.

At each meeting, a caseworker who manages the group's reports shares what is known about the students under consideration. Using a "threat assessment tool," students are classified by threat levels (1-9) corresponding to the perceived potential harm to self

Every other week, a group of administrators and staff members at Santa Monica College blocks off three hours to discuss students who have caused concern or raised suspicions on the community-college campus. Reports arrive from multiple avenues, but all end up here, in a library conference room where the college's crisis-prevention team meets.

The members of the Santa Monica team understand the very real potential for tragedy. Four years ago, one happened on

and others. The team members often disagree on how to proceed, but through discussion try to arrive at a consensus. After the group decides on next steps, the caseworker often takes the lead, meeting with students or referring them to appropriate services.

Notably absent from the meetings are the people at the center of the discussions — the students — most of whom are unaware that they're on the agenda.

The Virginia Tech shootings in 2007 pushed campus safety to the top of colleges' agendas, prompting administrators at Santa Monica and hundreds of other colleges to create these well-intentioned and somewhat secretive task forces. Among other factors in that tragedy, which claimed 33 lives, was a system that didn't share student information: Concerns about the shooter from counseling staff, faculty, and the police were kept in silos.

Santa Monica created its threat-assessment team that year, making it one of the first colleges to do so. The number of campus task forces across the country has grown since then.

900 Such Teams

Also known as behavioral-intervention teams and by at least 12 other names, the groups exist to compile concerns, identify early warning signs, and try to act before violence is committed.

The National Behavioral Intervention Team Association, which is known as Nabita, was formed in 2009 to foster the training and creation of threat-assessment teams. The organization has around 900 college and university members.

Such teams typically include representatives from campus counseling centers, police departments, and student-services divisions.

Proponents of the model cite research showing that most mass shootings culminate in suicide, demonstrating that solitary mental-health crises can sometimes spiral into acts of violence against others.

Anecdotally, examples that bolster the case for the teams include James E. Holmes, the former doctoral student who killed 12 and injured dozens of others in a movie theater in Aurora, Colo., in 2012. A psychiatrist at the University of Colorado's Anschutz Medical Campus had raised concerns about Mr. Holmes's mental health while he was still a Ph.D. student. Steven Kazmierczak, who killed five students at Northern Illinois University on Valentine's Day in 2008 before taking his own life, was a former student there. He was described as relatively normal and studious, but he had stopped taking a prescribed psychiatric medicine.

Nabita hosts trainings and conducts research on what can be learned from these examples.

"For each of these cases, the challenge is to not play Monday morning quarterback on the school, but continue to be sensitive about that in terms of not making the school feel responsible for these attacks," Brian Van Brunt, the group's executive director and president, said. "A lot of us doing this work better spend some time looking at these attacks to try and understand what is it that we can do differently at colleges and universities to get out in front of these problems."

A conference planned for November in San Antonio includes such sessions as "Suicidal Students on Campus: Legal Liability Management and BIT," "Developing a Death Protocol for Your Campus," and "Managing Parental Involvement: Maintaining Control of the Behavioral Intervention Process."

With hundreds of teams on the ground, campuses take different approaches to the work, but Nabita encourages a focus on prevention and preparation so students don't get to the point of issuing threats or engaging in disturbing behavior.

The organization's model focuses "identifying early the behaviors of concern and trying to connect up support," Mr. Van Brunt said.

A Busy Caseload

Santa Monica's team of 15 is considerably larger and busier than some of its peers. Its members include the college's Title IX coordinator, legal counsel, dean of international education, chair of the counseling department, and dean of human resources. A case manager was hired a year and a half ago to manage the team's day-to-day work, lightening the load for members who have other daily duties.

Each of the participants brings something of value to the table, Brenda Johnson Benson, senior administrative dean for counseling, retention and student wellness, said. "What I appreciate about having a large team is that when we come together, everybody sees the student's situation through a different lens or a different point of view," she said.

The college, with an enrollment of nearly 35,000, now gets two to five reports a day. On one particularly busy recent day, 10 came in. The volume has steadily increased over the years as faculty members have been trained to report anything inside or outside of the classroom that might be of concern.

"As soon as a faculty member witnesses some sort of concerning behavior, whether it's a concerning email or behavior that's demonstrated in the classroom, I think faculty are definitely more willing to now file reports," Ms. Benson said. "We've certainly seen an escalation in the number of reports."

But even one of the most robust and experienced crisis-intervention teams, which has referred countless students to appropriate mental-health and other services over its decadelong existence, can't guarantee that deadly violence won't visit the campus.

Four years ago, John Zawahri, a former student at Santa Monica College, killed his father and brother and set the family home on fire before going on a shooting rampage en route to the campus. There, he killed three other people, including a campus groundskeeper and the man's daughter, who was a student, before the police shot and killed Mr. Zawahri in the library. While he was enrolled at the college three years earlier, no red flags were raised, Ms. Benson said.

"He was a model student. He never came to the attention of the crisis team," she said. "This isn't anything that we could have prevented because no one saw it coming."

Because of the nature of the team's work, success can be hard to identify.

"Maybe we've prevented other shootings from happening on campus," Ms. Benson said. "We've certainly worked with a lot of students, gotten them mental-health services, gotten them housing services. So we're not even aware of maybe what situations we've prevented."

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