



Testimony

On

Best Practices for Making College Campuses Safe

Presented by:

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Good morning Chairman Miller, Ranking Member McKeon, and Members of the Committee on Education and Labor.

My name is Janet Walbert and I serve as Vice President for Student Affairs at Arcadia University, a coeducational private, comprehensive university located in Glenside, Pennsylvania, in the suburbs of Philadelphia. I also testify to you today in the capacity of President of the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA). NASPA is the largest professional association for student affairs administrators, faculty, and graduate students in the student affairs field, representing more than 1,400 campuses in 29 countries around the world.

Thank you for giving me this opportunity to testify today. I am here to speak not only from my own experiences as a senior student affairs officer, but I also speak on behalf of the more than 25,000 student affairs administrators employed at colleges and universities throughout the nation. We collaborate with many colleagues and other associations. Student affairs administrators on campuses across the country are working to address and enhance students' well-being and to ensure that our campus environments are conducive to student learning. In addition, national student affairs associations are working together to provide additional best practices and policy considerations. The Consortium on Government Relations for Student Affairs is composed of: American College Personnel Association (ACPA); Association of College Unions International (ACUI); Association of Student Judicial Affairs (ASJA); National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA); and Association of College and University Housing Officers International (ACUHO-I). These organizations collaborate on the development of strategies and public policy issues of concern to student affairs professionals. It is through the efforts of such collaboration that I testify today.

There are five primary points I hope to address through this testimony.

- Student Affairs professionals are meaningfully engaged in the lives and well-being of college and university students.
- Effective systems exist on most campuses and address a large majority of situations, with many situations never reaching a critical point because of effective prevention and early intervention, but there are no guarantees.
- We face increases in the mental health issues among students and these challenges are successfully addressed in most cases.
- Current laws exist to protect and support students' privacy as well as protect the community and allow for communication with appropriate family members when an individual's personal well-being is at risk.
- We can always learn more and we must continue to work on improving systems.

Student affairs administrators, like me, play key roles in educating our nation's students as we work directly with students and the varied support networks of family members and other university colleagues. In addition, our roles include planning for campus emergencies and managing campus crises, which occur at many levels and in a range of magnitudes of visibility and complexities. As professionals we dedicate our daily (and nightly) work with our students, and team with many others to enhance the quality of the learning environments

in our campus communities. While there are no guarantees, as we are sadly reminded at this time in our history, we work collaboratively to address prevention, intervention and response to critical situations involving our students.

Student affairs administrators are vice presidents of student affairs, deans of students, mental health professionals, housing officers, student activities administrators, fiscal officers, food service administrators, admissions officers, Greek life advisors, recreation managers, and so much more. It is the job of student affairs professionals to facilitate student learning through action, contemplation, reflection, and emotional engagement, as well as information acquisition. In the college and university environment student affairs departments often work collaboratively with colleagues in of academic affairs to promote the development of the *whole* student. In order to prepare for professional positions within the field of student affairs, administrators build upon personal experiences and often enroll in graduate school programs, grounded in student development theory as well as counseling and leadership components. Through ongoing professional development provided by postsecondary institutions, professional associations and collegial networks, student affairs administrators are able to ensure that current best practices are implemented on their respective campuses. As educators we are prepare students for effective and engaged citizenship.

Every day, and most nights and weekends, my colleagues across the nation focus their collective energies and attention on how our living and learning environments are meeting the needs of individual students and the expectations of parents. Contrary to the typical perspective that academic endeavors occur only in classrooms, we in student affairs educate at every level, around the clock.

The horrific events that occurred at Virginia Tech on April 16th could have happened anywhere across the nation. They could have happened on another campus despite the fact that higher education administrators generally, and student affairs administrators specifically, have established extensive systems to deal with individual student crises as well as larger catastrophes on campus—whether it is the death of a student by natural causes or suicide, natural disasters like Hurricane Katrina, or acts of terrorism that could potentially harm students, faculty, and staff. Our focus has been and will continue to be on diligence in both efforts of prevention as well as effective response.

The reality is that extremely good systems are fully operational on most of our campuses. Student affairs officers currently share best practices and strategies, meet with experts, and participate in electronic and in-person educational programs throughout the year. Participation in the National Incident Management System (NIMS) is an example of on-line training and efforts to integrate common knowledge and systems into campus-based protocols and policies.

Virtually every college and university campus today has a crisis management plan, clear protocols for managing emergencies, and strategies to communicate with the campus constituencies directly and indirectly affected. These plans were implemented six years ago when our campuses moved swiftly and expeditiously to respond to the events of September 11, 2001—to secure our campuses and to respond to the needs of our students. When Texas A&M University responded immediately to a campus bonfire accident that killed 12 students

and injured 27 others, the emergency protocols were successfully enacted. Similarly protocols were in place that helped restore order to the University of Florida following the killing of three college students by a serial murderer. They are implemented any time a student dies on our campuses. It may be considered unfortunate, but not unexpected, that so many campuses deal with crises of one nature or another frequently enough to be familiar with the various aspects of our communication chains, local law enforcement agencies, mental health resources, and community health organizations.

The challenge has always been and remains today that college and university campuses, by their very nature are open and accessible places. In testimony provided by Dr. Thomas Kepple, President of Juniata College, in the Pennsylvania Senate Education Committee Hearings on May 2, 2007, he stated: “The founders of America’s early colleges were often graduates of universities like Oxford and Cambridge. Unlike those exclusive universities, Americans wanted our colleges to be inclusive....Our colleges and universities are very much physical symbols of a new and very inclusive democracy.” Many of the nation’s 439 public four-year institutions cover acres of land and enroll in the tens of thousands of students. Some 17 million students attend this country’s more than 4,000 colleges and universities. Most campuses do not have single points of entry or any means for controlling access to every square inch of campus. We may wish we were sanctuaries—and the public may still consider us as such—but the concept of academe’s ivory tower is long gone.

Reports of disruptive behavior in classrooms, residence halls, and even in surrounding communities are commonly referred to student affairs administrators. To best address both isolated and repeated problems, a coordinated effort from administrators across campus is required. In attempts to identify students at risk, we must constantly work to improve our ability to share information and cover all bases. This includes information from peers, from mental health centers, from faculty, from other students in residence halls, from concerned parents, and from campus police. When a student appears on the radar screen at any corner of campus, we must and do exercise prudent judgment and share information with appropriate constituents on campus. Intervention must be rapid but correct, and points of intervention across campus must be clearly defined and communicated.

Situations where faculty raise questions, students report situations, and other staff members know of special circumstances, such as a death in the family, arise every day on our campuses. We deal with these situations formally, informally, and directly with students. Depending on the magnitude of the situation and the information available from the student, communication with parents or family members may occur. From the time students set foot on our campuses, we build partnerships with parents to enhance communications. Frequently, students engage their parents as a result of the direct involvement of student affairs. The existing laws allow for communication with appropriate family members when an individual’s personal well-being is at risk. Balancing the standard thresholds and expectations of when to communicate continues to be at the forefront of the thinking of student affairs administrators, as it has been historically for counselors in confidential relationships with clients.

As part of a college or university's executive leadership team, vice presidents for student affairs and deans of students work hand-in-hand with their senior administrative counterparts and other student affairs and academic affairs staff members to plan, execute, and evaluate campus prevention efforts, crisis protocols, and intervention strategies. Collaboration on campus is essential and common. None of us can do this alone. We also work in coordination with the campus safety departments and local, state, and federal law enforcement agencies to enhance safety inside and outside the campus.

At all institutions, students are repeatedly informed of safety protocols. Written and verbal communications ensure that students are informed of campus safety policies and procedures. Programs such as orientation sessions and residence hall meetings facilitate students' understanding of these policies in an effort to augment their own and their peers' safety on and off campus. Students must take some responsibility to understand the importance of this information. All of these mechanisms are also enhanced with the development of electronic communication allowing access to this information at the touch of a fingertip 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

Campus security is enhanced with the utilization of electronic surveillance and electronic access to residence halls. Student affairs professionals train resident assistants to identify potential threats to the safety and security of students living in residence halls. While resident assistants cannot take the place of campus safety and law enforcement officials or campus judicial officers, they are well trained and effective liaisons in recognizing and addressing interpersonal conflicts, code of student conduct violations, signs of mental health concerns, and other critical issues relating to the well-being of residents.

Our campuses are inseparable from the very communities and diverse cultures that form this great country. Like thousands of communities across the nation, we have our share of residents who abuse drugs or alcohol, who have been involved in confrontations with faculty members or fellow students, or who have traded threatening e-mails. These situations are not unusual, nor are they taken lightly.

Just like the general population, our student populations include increasing numbers of individuals dealing with mental health issues. In recent years, students increasingly report stress, depression, thoughts of suicide, relationship problems, and substance abuse problems. In the 2006 National Survey of Counseling Center Directors that includes data provided by directors from 367 counseling centers at institutions across the United States 92 percent of the respondents believed that the number of students with severe psychological problems has increased in recent years. According to the survey, directors reported that 40 percent of their clients have severe psychological problems.. In a survey conducted by the American College Health Association-National College Health Assessment (2006) of more than 94,000 students and 123 postsecondary institutions, more than half of the students reported feeling hopeless in the past year, more than 35 percent reported feeling so depressed that they could not function three or more times a year, and nearly 10 percent reported seriously considering suicide in the previous year. Additional research reported in 2006 conducted by Allan Schwartz, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Psychiatry at the University of Rochester, indicates when the data related to suicide is analyzed comparing college students and the general population,

controlled for age and gender, it appears that counseling centers are effective in treating suicidal students. The bottom line: healthcare professionals have become so good at treating young people with psychological issues that growing numbers are able to attend college and obtain degrees. Thanks to greater student access to psychotherapy, advances in medications to treat psychological problems, and growing public acceptance of antidepressant therapies, we have more students on our campuses that face these mental health problems. In addition, we have many students who, with support and responsiveness of strong campus professionals, manage or overcome their personal hurdles and successfully complete their educational pursuits.

Student affairs administrators are among those who are lowering thresholds of tolerance for aberrant behavior, whether it is the possession of weapons, verbal threats, or stalking. We are swiftly taking action before student behavior becomes harmful to others, and we are making it easier and more comfortable for students to raise concerns to campus staff members in a confidential manner. Hotlines, web access to file reports of concern, information about referral mechanisms, and communication about how to assist others are common on many campuses. The ability to document how many incidents are averted or limited in scope because of expedient responses by student and professional staff is limited. It is extremely difficult if not impossible to document concrete results of prevention efforts. Yet, we know that we are educating about civility, communication, conflict resolution, and understanding diversity across the nation's campuses.

Higher education is not above the law. We must protect individual rights and follow the law in dealing with an individual's right to participate fully in campus life. If a student misses a series of classes because they are depressed or they openly discuss suicide or other unacceptable behaviors, we cannot simply banish them from our campuses. It is these very types of situations that, when addressed, are typically resolved before a tragedy occurs.

Our campuses must abide by federal and state confidentiality laws regarding key records and communications and the release of confidential information. Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 protects qualified disabled individuals from being excluded from participation in, being denied the benefits of, or being subjected to discrimination under any program or activity receiving federal financial assistance. While administrators cannot make the decision if a student's mental health condition qualifies him or her as disabled, mental health professionals on and off campus can provide that assessment. If a student discusses disturbing thoughts during a campus counseling session, the counselor must take precautions to avoid violating the recognized psychotherapist-patient privilege.

To be aligned with our common mission, higher education administrators, including senior student affairs officers, must have the latitude to determine policies from the best educational approach. While we certainly understand the importance of safe environments as a key element for learning, our primary roles focus on the education of all of our students. Engaging the community, opening our doors for participation in campus events such as theater productions, concerts, or use of our libraries, certainly allows a level of exposure, but one most of us maintain is important. When focusing on our students, if students are disruptive—defined as behavior that is typically well-addressed in each institution's student code of

conduct—we must hold them accountable through progressive discipline. Dangerous or disruptive behavior (including acts and threats of self-harm) can be, and are frequently, addressed immediately by interim suspension policies, followed by appropriate process for any administrative or disciplinary proceedings. Common practices and administrative processes give students opportunities to tell their stories. Colleges and universities often include or require consultation with qualified mental health professionals to establish that such students do not pose a potential or immediate threat to oneself or the community.

Across the nation, many varied institutions are engaged in common best practices that complement current efforts to minimize crises, address situations that do arise and support the students, faculty, and staff who may be affected. Examples of such best practices include the following:

- Creating expanded counseling services or a counselor-in-residence position. On some campuses with expanded resources counselors may be on call around the clock, have offices in the residence halls, conduct programs, consult with staff, and intervene in crises.
- Coordinating the delivery of resources to students with behavioral or mental health problems via a student assistance coordination committee. Committees exist that develop and implement communication networks and protocols among relevant units to deliver seamless services. Through consultations and referrals, members of the campus community are encouraged to identify and address potential behavioral or mental health problems and to review, update and distribute critical incident response guidelines.
- Holding monthly meetings of a crisis intervention committee to review new and pending disciplinary cases that go beyond ordinary or routine behaviors. Committee membership vary depending on the campus but typically include the chief of police or campus safety, housing representatives, university attorneys, human resources representatives, on-call staff, dean or coordinator, judicial affairs representatives, academic affairs representatives, counseling center staff, and other administrators such as women's center directors or student health services staff.
- Assembling a case management group that meets biweekly to share reports, even anonymous reports, about students of concern and discuss possible interventions.
- Charging the campus police chief or another appropriate campus administrator to assemble, train and exercise an emergency response team. Campuses simulate disaster days annually to fine-tune the team's emergency response plan. In addition, weekly meetings, including key student affairs officers and campus police, are held to review police reports and flag unusual student activities from the previous week.
- Creating a permanent incident command centers with full back-up generators and computers. This includes implementing an emergency communications system for activating the command center and a crisis action team.

The list goes on and on. The above identified activities summarize just a few of the ongoing efforts at a wide range of institution types and sizes, including: large and small; public and private, four-year and two-year; community colleges and research institutions.

It is clear that we must continue to work on improving these systems. While the senior student affairs officer often leads crisis planning and response on campus, other student affairs administrators participate daily in various aspects of response and communication utilizing institutional protocols. Situations are documented and occur with great frequency. These situations occur on campuses across the country without fanfare and with no media exposure, and result safe outcomes for the students, friends, and family. Actions include interventions that maintain reasonable privacy and allow for students to successfully resume typical college activities once the presenting issues are addressed, often without the stigma that more public responses may cause.

As student affairs officers look at old technologies such as bullhorns and public address systems as well as the latest technologies of e-mails and text messages, we must devise systems of swift and clear communication to give students the information they need to make informed decisions. Still, the decision **to** communicate and **what** to communicate must be made by well-informed, well-prepared authorities on each campus or in each community. We must be sure behaviors outside the norm are duly noted and responded to in a timely manner. We must work diligently to address communication issues and elicit critical feedback across campus, including information from colleagues on the faculty, in other administrative departments, in residence halls, and other areas in each of our institutions.

Even the best-managed institutions cannot completely eliminate the risk of a catastrophe. But by addressing such risks thoughtfully, institutions can increase their preparedness. When a concerned parent called me on the morning of September 11th, he asked, “How are YOU going to protect my daughter?” My reaction was genuine. “Sir, we have not been able to protect the Pentagon today.” You can see how it would be irresponsible of higher education to make any promises in terms of our ability to absolutely protect the safety of each and every student.

As Student Affairs professionals play a significant role in establishing and implementing effective systems which successfully address a large majority of situations, we still face significant challenges regarding the mental health of our students. While we work with the boundaries and expectations of current laws the focus must be on education and understanding the varied individual student priorities as well as the different communities and campus cultures which exist. As educators, we, too, are always learning and are committed to improving our institutional systems.

Our college campuses are places that encourage free and open discussions and intellectual debate. We have come to treasure their open borders and the freedoms they give our young people as they develop into productive young adults. We cannot begin to close down that access. We cannot change the very nature of these institutions in our attempts to protect our children. According to a recent issue of *U.S. News and World Report* (April 30, 2007) despite

the massive numbers of students enrolled and the growing diversity of our campus environments, college and university campuses remain among the safest places in America. Student affairs professionals in many roles and responsibilities work tirelessly and partner assertively across many institutional lines to contribute to a very positive and productive learning environment for all students.

Thank you for this opportunity to represent the very important roles embraced by my colleagues on campuses across the country and around the world.