



Student Suicide: Policies, Procedures, and Prevention Strategies

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Purpose

The purpose of this poster is to bring awareness to issues related to student suicide on university and college campuses in the United States. A few of the key concepts include issues related to FERPA and a duty to warn, liability, no-duty-to-prevent suicide, "special relationships." In addition, this poster is to provide recommendations for policies, procedures, and prevention strategies.

Background

Suicide is the second leading cause of death among college students (American Foundation for Suicide Prevention [AFSP], 2011). Suicide is often the result of depression, substance abuse and conduct disorders (AFSP, 2011). Less than 20 percent of suicide victims ever seek help (Cohen, 2007). There is just no way to predict suicide (Cohen, 2007; Smith & Fleming, 2007) and no guarantee that institutions can stop it from happening. Hence, studying suicide as a point of law is important in higher education because institutions are left to deal with a multitude of issues when such incidents take place. In particular, the Office of the Dean of Students, Residence Life, and Counseling Centers take the hardest hits because the nature of their involvement with students tends to be a lot more personal when compared to other offices.

Policies, Procedures, and Prevention Strategies

Florida Gulf Coast University (FGCU). This institution established a system for After Hours Mental Health Emergencies through Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS). The system can be used by anyone that witnesses, or is having, a mental health emergency. Mental emergencies are instances involving sexual assault, rape, violence, suicide ideation, suicide attempts, and actual death (Florida State University, 2010).

The University of Idaho (UI). UI has a Suicide Behavior Response Plan that details protocol to be followed in the event that a student demonstrates any type of suicidal behavior. Levels of suicide are categorized by the Suicidal Behavior Assessment Team (SBAT) Guidelines that determine if a certain threshold for suicidal behavior has been crossed.

North Dakota State University (NDSU). In section 608 of their policy manual, procedures for dealing with any acts of suicide is outlined in nine parts. In addition, the university targets suicide prevention through educational programming. NDSU provides the university community with a flowchart to help identify the measures that should be taken in the event that a student, or staff member, is found dead at the university (North Dakota State University, 2009).

The Ohio State University (OSU). At OSU there is a Campus Suicide Prevention Program that encourages peer responsibility to reach out to those in need. It provides students information to recognize apparent signs of depression or suicide, ways to contact appropriate persons if they suspect suicidal behavior, and gives tips for self-care while dealing with these situations as they may become stressful. A highlight of the REACH Program is that it produces different brochures for specific populations such as: African-Americans, Asian Americans, GLBT, International Students, Latinos, Muslims, and students with disabilities (The Ohio State University, 2009).

The University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UNL). At this institution, the Public Policy Center has collaborated with the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services Division of Behavioral and Interchurch Ministries of Nebraska to fight against youth suicide. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) has provided a three year grant of \$500,000 per year to help raise awareness of suicide as a public issue and help to aid in lessening the number of youth suicides (University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 2011).

Western Michigan University (WMLU). Suicide prevention occur through workshops that can be in person or online. However, they do not offer any online counseling. Most of the online workshops are to increase suicide awareness and promote ways in which suicide can be prevented. The special thing to note is that there are specific suicide prevention workshops for veterans, people with substance abuse issues, and affords support to suicide loss survivors (including children) (Western Michigan University, 2011).

The University of Southern Mississippi (USM). There is a confidential student referral system with four-components called CARES (Campus Action Referral and Evaluation System). The four components of this system include: CARES Team, Critical Incident Response Team, CARES Advisory Team, and Campus Connections. The primary function of all components is to allow for members of the campus community to "submit information regarding student care needs or a concerning pattern or marked change of student behavior" (University of Southern Mississippi, 2006).

The University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC). Similar to the CARES system at USM, UIUC established an operation that has served as a joint effort between the Counseling Center and McKinley Health Center since 1984. The Suicide Prevention Program is open to report any individual with information on a student with regard to suicidal threats or gestures. If at any time there is awareness of these things, there is a mandated assessment which is then guided by a set of procedures to be followed (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2007).

Relevant Cases

Bogust v. Iverson (1960), *Jain v. Iowa State* (2000), *Klein v. Solomon* (1998), *Mahoney v. Allegheny College* (2005), *Schieszler v. Ferrum College* (2002), *Shin v. Massachusetts Institute of Technology* (2005), *Tarasoff v. Regents of University of California* (1976), *Wallace v. Broyles* (1998)

Key Concepts

FERPA and a Duty to Warn. As a Federal law the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974 (FERPA) protects the privacy of students education records. This law is applicable to all institutions that receive federal funding. FERPA does allow for schools to disclose students' records, without consent (unless to limited specified parties under specified conditions such as the government) (U.S. Department of Education [USDE], 2011). FERPA creates an obstacle for many institutions because non-medical records of students are confidential and cannot be disclosed. Hence, in the event of a suicide there is a gray area in how to proceed in dealing with the case without making any violations.

Liability. Each year increases in tort liability put a strain on institutions because litigation can become costly. There are four parts to tort liability that are familiar to institutions of higher education: A duty (or standard to care), a breach, proximate cause, and actual harm. Torts fall into three categories: intentional, unintentional, or strict liability. In suicide cases, it is common to see tort as it may have been unintentional as a result of a duty or because of strict liability (Dunkel & Coleman, 1997).

Special Relationships. An institution can be held liable if the courts believe that they have established a "special relationship" with the student because a duty is created with the institution to protect the student (Smith & Fleming, 2007). Special relationships are a way for courts to impose the law of affirmative duty. It is typical for an institution to be held responsible for custodial care because their responsibility to monitor the academic environment for incidents such as suicide (Lakes & Tribbensee, 2002). Gray (2007) stated that an institution's knowledge of a student's intent to commit suicides makes them accountable for the act that can be foreseen.

No-duty-to-prevent-suicide. The no-duty-to-prevent suicide rule has helped protect institutions in series of cases. Institutions have been able to escape liability cases where students have been lonely, outcast or participating in activities where alcohol consumption is high (Lake & Tribbensee, 2002). The no-duty-to-prevent-suicide ruling makes it exceptionally hard for plaintiffs to bring wrongful death suits against colleges and universities (Cohen, 2007).