

## Student Suicide: An Inquiry into Protocol

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### Introduction

One of the most difficult situations a student affairs professional may encounter is a student suicide. The sense of urgency, the sensitive nature of the issue, and the vulnerability of the surrounding students make the campus environment a puzzling place. As the number of suicides at the national level remains high, student affairs professionals must anticipate and be prepared to handle this difficult situation. The purpose of this article is to examine the campus environment after a student suicide and provide suggestions for student suicide protocol for university staff and administrators.

In 2004, suicide was the eleventh leading cause of death in the United States accounting for 32,439 deaths (National Institute of Mental Health, 2007). Even though research on preventative measures continues, the number of suicides remains consistent every year. It is estimated that more than 1,000 suicides occur on college campuses each year and one in 12 college students have made a suicide plan (ULifeline, 2007). In anticipation of the worst, and inevitable, student affairs professionals must take the initiative and research the most effective methods of addressing student suicide on their campuses.

### Student Suicide

A young man of 18 years, entering his second semester of college, ended his life abruptly at approximately 11 o'clock on a January evening. "Cory," a well liked and 4.0 student, waited as a train approached, directly behind his residence hall. When the train was within a few feet, he jumped. Due to the close proximity of the incident to campus and residence halls, the emergency response team was easily noticed. Although many students were aware of an incident on the railroad tracks, none were knowledgeable as to the specifics.

### Student Reaction

Prior to his death, Cory lived in a coeducational residence hall, housing approximately 531 freshmen. He met his roommate on move-in day and they quickly became friends. Cory was one of 18 male students on his hall.

Grieving the loss of an individual that committed suicide is particularly difficult. Many individuals find frustration in their attempt to internally answer questions that seem to have no answer, such as: Why did she/he do it? Why didn't they tell me something was wrong? Was it really a suicide?

The students in Cory's building took his death particularly hard, especially his hallmates. During support meetings for the hall, students displayed an inability to move

through the grieving process. Students felt a necessity to have their pondering questions answered before moving forward. This inability to allow the body to grieve makes the handling of a suicide complicated and prolonged. Dealing with such a sensitive area takes thoughtful decision making to ensure intentional actions.

### Inquiry into Protocol

In dealing with any student death, staff and administrators must remember to anticipate the unexpected. Due to the unique nature of suicides, not one specific protocol will work for all cases. It is important that all staff approach this topic in an open minded, resourceful and well educated manner.

Every institution should have standard procedures to follow during a crisis situation, as part of an overall crisis management plan. When reviewing an institution's plan, staff and administrators need not only pay ample attention to administrative logistics, but also to the emotional support needs of the entire campus community. While examining the plan, staff and administrators should notice three areas of consideration:

1. Who is the lead and point of contact for all information? It is important to establish a leader for all crisis situations prior to their occurrence. Once a student suicide has been discovered, your point of contact should immediately be notified so his/her strategic plan may be implemented. The lead should also have a pre-assigned core leadership group comprised of all vested or essential parties based on the specific situation.
2. Collect and confirm all details. It is imperative that all details concerning the death of a student be confirmed by an expert. Make sure to await the confirmation of the student death from the coroner or a physician. No dissemination of information, outside of your core leadership team, should take place until that confirmation has been received. Establish a list of those most affected by this death. Consider family, friends (on and off campus), roommates and hallmates, academic contacts, staff advisors, and student organizations.
3. Effective communication is essential in handling a student suicide.
  - a. How will information be disseminated? Consider who will notify the family, friends (on and off campus), hallmates, roommate, building, student body, media, and community? Confirm what role(s) the following offices desire, or need, to play in this event: the president of the university, media relations office, department of student life, counseling center and possibly university housing.
  - b. Written communication should be carefully crafted with a thoughtful message.
  - c. Contact necessary campus agencies to mobilize and brief staff for anticipated student support (counseling center, religious workers, housing staff).

Though many institutional emergency management plans will address these three areas of consideration most needed, they may not address the emotional distress of the student body and affected staff, and the support that is necessary. Steps to consider while critiquing your institutional plan or handling the aftermath of student suicide are listed below:

1. Assess your student population. During the assessment of the students, staff and administrators should consider the actual act of the suicide, the location the suicide took place and the students affected. In addition, staff and administrators should consider how the demographics of the institution may affect the situation. Is your campus small, medium or large in size? Is it located in a rural or urban area? Multiple input of information will assist with your critical thinking and analysis of the crisis.
2. What level of support is perceived to be needed? If the incident occurred within a residence hall, you will definitely pay particular attention to the residents of that hall. However, how much attention will be provided to students familiar with the deceased through class, campus organizations or work?
3. What is the best way(s) to provide support? What may initially come to mind is group or individual counseling. You may also want to consider inviting religious workers to campus, arranging an on-site counselor, and establishing an on-call counselor for the evening hours. As the technology of the world continues to change, so will the way students communicate, even in the expression of anger, confusion and grief. Depending on the comfort level or stance your institution has with on-line networks, the following may be extremely useful for the reclusive student: establishing a temporary instant messaging account with a counselor, utilizing a current Facebook.com or MySpace.com account for communication, or referring online journal sites or a memorial page established by the family.

When Cory passed away approximately 25 students utilized the on-site counselors; however several hundred posts were made to his Facebook.com account immediately following the announcement of his death. Staff must be prepared to reach the student in the most beneficial way possible.

4. Have an outreach plan. Lasting effects of a student suicide are not easily, if ever, overcome. Continued outreach and communication should be a part of any plan.

## Conclusion

Individuals coping with the death of a friend or family member will display a variety of characteristics. According Dr. Michael Conner (2006), a licensed psychologist, you may notice symptoms of denial, yearning, disbelief, anger, confusion and guilt. He also recommends five steps in helping individuals during the grieving process: 1) share the sorrow, 2) doesn't offer false comfort, 3) offer practical help, 4) be patient, and 5) encourage professional help when necessary.

Handling a student death is difficult for all involved. It is imperative that all individuals affected by and engaged in the situation, remember to care for themselves. Students and staff should feel comfortable utilizing the resources offered to the entire campus community. One's level of knowledge, ability to communicate, genuine care and critical thinking skills will assist above all else.

## References

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