An Overview of Trends in Behavioral Intervention Teams at Community Colleges and Four-Year Institutions

by Laura Bennett

Upon accepting a position in Student Conduct at a community college, I left the world of student conduct administration at four-year institutions behind – the fraternities, division I athletics, and housing. I soon wondered if administration of a Behavioral Intervention Team (BIT) would also be different. As a result, I began doing research and making inquiries, resulting in a survey of 70 questions – covering everything from team composition and operations to threat assessment models to records policies. I conducted one-hour interviews with colleagues at 26 campuses (15 community colleges, 11 four-year public campuses) around the country, regarding the practices of the Behavioral Intervention Team (BIT)/Threat Assessment Team (TAT) on their campus. Here is an overview of the main findings:

Overview

Nearly all of the campuses have one team that serves as both a threat assessment and a behavioral intervention team. A few of the four-year public institutions have two teams (one for threat assessment and one for behavioral intervention). Ten of the campuses have BIT/TAT's that address employee behaviors, while six of the campuses have separate student and employee teams. A few teams were in existence prior to 2000, and formalized their procedures in recent years. Following the incident at Virginia Tech, several teams formed in 2007. However, the majority of teams formed in 2008 or 2009, following the incident at Northern Illinois University. The most common reasons cited for starting these teams include the state mandate in Illinois, in response to the incident at Virginia Tech, and because senior student affairs staff felt there was a campus need.

Risk Assessment Model

The most common risk assessment model in use is the National Association for Behavioral Intervention Teams (NaBITA) Threat Assessment Model This model is especially popular with community colleges – eleven of the fifteen community colleges interviewed reported using NaBITA's model or an adaptation of it. The second most commonly referenced model originated in the FBI/Secret Service and is described in *The Handbook for Campus Threat Assessment and Management Teams,* written by Deisinger, Randazzo, O'Neill, and Savage. Other sources for threat assessment models in use include: Gavin DeBecker's MOSAIC, Margolis & Healy, and the Center for Aggression Management. Five campuses indicated that they were not using a formal model of risk assessment.

Team Composition

Teams range in size from 4 to 12 members. Campus Police/Public Safety, Dean of Students/Student Conduct, and Counseling/Psychological Services are the most commonly represented offices on BIT's. Community colleges also tend to include Disability Services, Faculty, and Human Resources. Four-year institutions often include Housing, Academic Affairs, and Legal Counsel. Several teams mentioned the importance of all team members checking their egos at the door, and being willing to ask hard questions and engage in thoughtful dialogue. A few teams had designated back-ups who would also attend meetings and trainings. Most teams come together

regularly (weekly or bi-weekly) while a few meet only when a referral comes to the team. Most teams continue to operate in a consensus based model and have not faced the dilemma of who has the ultimate decision-making authority in a disagreement among members.

Referrals

The number of referrals varies, often depending on the level of campus outreach completed and the threshold for level of severity of the referral. The range of referrals reported spans 1 per year to 200 per year. Behaviors stemming from mental health conditions as well as those related to disrespect/uncivil actions (especially in the classroom) are the most common types of behaviors referred to teams. While the range of referrals is diverse, suicide ideation, bizarre actions, threats of violence (including references on social media), unmanaged medical/psychological conditions, and depression are also common referrals. Depending on the nature of the campus, referrals most often come from faculty, police, staff, and housing.

Interventions

The most common interventions mentioned included conversations with and offering resources to the referred individual, offering support/assistance to the referring party, behavioral agreements, and assessments. Every campus interviewed (other than those still determining their processes) has the authority to mandate assessments. This is sometimes done only in cases of involuntary withdrawal, other times only through a student conduct process. Four-year institutions were much more likely to have an involuntary withdrawal policy, although three of the campuses that have it in place rarely (if ever) use it. Most community colleges remove a student from campus only through suspension or interim suspension within a student conduct process; however, several indicated they are in the process of drafting an involuntary withdrawal process.

Current Trends

Many campuses indicated that adapting the team to include assessment of referrals about employee behaviors A few campuses mentioned hiring case managers to assist with the follow up of interventions. Teams are determining whether they want to be known on campus or fly under the radar. Many teams are assessing effectiveness, revising procedures, and expanding/contracting teams that have been in existence for a few years. Outside of Illinois and Virginia, many community colleges are in the early stages of team development. Reviewing current literature and updating training as staff turnover occurs is also a current challenge for many teams. While Illinois is the only state to require assessment of threatening behaviors by employees, many campus BITs are beginning to assess and address threatening behaviors exhibited by employees and non-campus community members.

Strengths

Nearly every team mentioned the quality of individuals on the team as well as the relationships among the team members as the top strengths. Having trust among a group of campus experts seems to be critical to the team functioning both in daily effectiveness as well as in a crisis. This seems congruent with the idea that many teams came into existence because a group of caring staff would discuss concerns about students even before there were formal procedures for BIT's.

Challenges/Needs

There are four areas that seem to be the most common challenges for BIT/TAT's:

Teams struggle to assess their effectiveness, including the use of their risk assessment model and the success in prevention/reduction of violence as well as the success of their interventions. Few teams have a clear sense of how aware the campus community is of the team as a resource, often drawing on the number of referrals as the sole measurement of this.

With BIT responsibilities falling mainly on employees who are already busy, and a caseload that will

only continue to increase as the team becomes more well-known on campus, teams are faced with the challenge of how to track and manage the cases before them. Ten of the teams already have or are moving towards using Maxient to track their referrals and responses. Simplicity Advocate and homegrown/Microsoft based systems were also mentioned multiple times.

The information that BIT/TAT's utilize crosses boundaries between FERPA, HIPAA, law enforcement records, counseling records, state FOIA, and personal observation – creating a unique conundrum for campuses which are often already challenged to understand these laws in isolation, much less when interwoven into one case file. When asked about recordkeeping practices, ten campuses indicated they were working on developing a policy and practice. Eight teams follow their campus records policy, and five campuses created policies specific to their BIT. Some teams shred all information except personal notes kept by a single team member, others retain documentation of everything indefinitely, and others refer to individuals by their initials only while documenting few details of a case. The Pima incident reminds all of us that our campuses are also part of the larger surrounding community, and campuses are also faced with formalizing the practice of what information is shared, when, and with whom.

- **Formalizing/Revising Procedures**

Only nine of the twenty-six campuses interviewed have written procedures. Many seem challenged to find a balance between having enough procedures that can guide decisions while not locking the team into an "if this, then this" chart. Campuses are navigating the relationship between student conduct and behavioral intervention, and when the team should take action or refer to a campus office for follow up. Most teams faced the reality of having to market themselves to the campus before they really had the chance to formalize things. As a result, marketing materials, websites, and brochures are also being developed alongside new procedures.

Conclusion

While there are some models that are emerging as best practices, campuses seem to feel more confident when they get the right people around the table to adapt processes to fit their unique campus communities. There are still many unanswered questions about the effectiveness of risk assessment models, recordkeeping procedures, and success rates of interventions. Amid the ambiguity, team members report that campus threat assessment and behavioral intervention are both a critical and rewarding part of college administration today. Research into current literature and best practices can be helpful to teams as they develop and revise their procedures to serve the needs of their campus and surrounding community.

Tagged as: at-risk student, BIT, campus threat, risk assessment, TAT, threat assessment