

“Surviving the Storm: A Case Study of Suicides on a Small College Campus”

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ACPA

- I. Introduction:
 - a. Statistics on suicide in college population:
 1. 2nd leading cause of death for 18-24 year-olds in the U.S.
 2. 2008 NCHA data showed 10% of students had seriously considered suicide in the past year, 1.9% had attempted suicide
 3. JED foundation estimates that nearly 1,100 campus suicides occur each year
 - b. Review of the relevant literature suggests:
 1. Student death can profoundly impact campus community and student affairs professionals often play critical leadership role in responding (Zinner, 1985)
 2. Many campuses need to develop postvention response plans (Streufert, 2004, Wren, 1991)
- II. Description of crisis event on our campus
 - a. There were two suicides in the residence halls in a period of six weeks
- III. Our campus response
 - a. Immediate
 1. Key offices and individual responders: Campus Safety Service, Campus EMS, VP of Student Affairs, Dean of Students, Counseling Center, Campus Ministry, University President, AVP for Academic Affairs
 2. Support for those effected:
 - Family and friends were identified and contacted
 - “Drop-In” space established for friends & family to gather, wait for information, and receive support from counselors, campus ministers & student affairs staff
 - Personal attention given to those directly involved including EMS, roommate, RA etc.)
 - b. Short-term
 1. Communication: email to campus community from Dean of Students office, role of social media in dissemination of information among students, communication with faculty of deceased students, contact with deceased students’ current classmates in classrooms, VP of Student Affairs email to parents/guardians
 2. Support for broader campus community: brought in community resources (i.e. Hospice, therapy dogs), additional training with R.A. staff, residence hall floor meetings, resources posted in residence halls, student-led candlelight vigil, existing religious services addressed relevant themes

c. Long-term

1. Support for those directly involved and broader campus community: increased parent calls to several offices, increase in academic accommodation and financial aid concerns, increased use of counseling center through academic year, heightened sensitivity on campus to student distress led to increased use of support services in general
2. Anniversary of deaths: services in campus chapel on the anniversary of each death organized by Campus Ministry but not widely publicized, was attended by families

IV. Lessons learned

- a. What worked: communication with campus, support of parents, brought in suicide experts to provide education to relevant parties, provided training to local campuses on a suicide prevention program, collaboration with local colleges in the event of future tragedies, developed awareness of community vs. individual grieving process
- b. What would we do differently: extra counselors and campus minister time not utilized/"compassionate response" is the goal, complaints from students and colleagues about the way deaths were handled (withholding of information, lack of suicide prevention, lack of academic accommodations)

References

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