



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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It Could Never Happen Here

No campus is immune to the threat of violence, but the "it could never happen here" mentality is probably the major reason why little has been done to address a very serious problem. On March 14, 1996, OSHA issued anti-violence guidelines covering workers in health care and social services. Given the alarming surge in the national statistics regarding workplace violence, it is likely that there will be additional guidelines covering workers in many other categories. For example, the most recent NIOSH data (June 1996) indicate that homicide is now the leading cause of occupational death for working women and the second major cause for males.

Fortunately, most college campuses are still relatively safe places, at least according to the Justice Department's most recent analysis (December 1996) of campus crime statistics. The "safer" campuses, however, are those which employ security officers with full arrest powers and deploy their security personnel in adequate numbers—not the usual situation on many community college campuses.

In fact, individuals working or studying at community colleges may be at higher risk than their counterparts at other places. Among community college students are many older, displaced workers trying to retrain themselves or regain their self-esteem. Others are seeking education as a means of escaping dysfunctional family situations, and domestic abuse "spill over" is a well-documented cause of many violent workplace incidents. Many students find themselves mired in difficult school/work schedule trade-offs, sometimes on a daily basis. Faculty, administrators, and support personnel have been victims of downsizing or reorganization. Regrettably, if the stress load becomes unbearable, violence can be one result. Certain sensible precautions are in order.

Policy or preventive measures cannot guarantee that violent episodes will not occur, any more than a policy forbidding sexual harassment will bring such behavior to a complete halt. But a company or a college without an enforced anti-harassment policy is much more vulnerable when a complaint or legal action is initiated. In the aftermath of a violent episode, college officials who have made good faith efforts to acknowledge and

address student/employee concerns about campus violence may fare better than others who have ignored the problem, naively believing that "it could never happen here."

A simple questionnaire will provide a good start. Results can help college officials pinpoint concerns, ranging from complaints about inadequate lighting to outright fears expressed about individuals employed by or encountered on campus. (It should be noted that negligent hiring and negligent retention cases are becoming increasingly common in litigation.)

Once the questionnaire responses have been tabulated and communicated to a prevention/intervention team, policy and procedural responses can be developed to guide the college's reactions to perceived threats, including due process protections for those accused of posing a danger to themselves or others. Members of the prevention/intervention team could be identified to the campus community as the first step in a reporting procedure for students and staff. Too often, people who are concerned that a particular individual may resort to violence have nowhere to go or no one to whom they can report their concerns. As a result, critical intervention opportunities may be missed, with predictable and tragic results.

Qualified people who could serve on a prevention/intervention team may already be on campus—people who by nature of their backgrounds, training, or responsibilities may be very capable of investigating initial complaints and/or recommending appropriate action to administrators.

Questions to consider when assessing the state of readiness on your campus include:

- Would students and employees benefit from personal safety/workplace violence workshops?
- Are students and staff aware of the early signs that sometimes provide advanced warning that violence may be imminent (e.g., dramatic changes in dress, personal hygiene, or work habits; abusive domestic situations; depression, chemical dependence, fascination with weapons; etc.)?
- Are staff in "high stress" areas such as the business or financial aid office trained to defuse situations or ready with an emergency evacuation



plan? Have silent alarms ("panic buttons") been installed in these office areas?

- Are faculty and staff likely to be trapped by their own office landscaping in the event of a violent episode?
- Have campus security personnel collaborated with local police authorities to develop emergency response procedures in the event of a violent episode?
- Is there an Employee Assistance Program available, and are policies in place to provide leaves for employees needing counseling or crisis intervention services?
- Do students/employees know where to go if they have concerns about their physical safety, especially if they are being stalked or subjected to other types of threats?
- Given the irregular hours worked by many college faculty, is someone in an official capacity always aware of exactly who is in the building(s) and where they are?
- Have students and employees been taught to recognize that fire alarms may be used to signal other situations and that such alarms can be pulled to encourage others to evacuate the premises during a violent event?
- Are procedures in place for dealing with the aftermath of a violent episode? Have prevention/intervention team members been assigned to handle everything from de-briefings to public relations functions?

Obviously, the time to ask such questions is *before* a serious incident happens. A small amount of what some would regard as alarmism is obviously preferable to the hand-wringing, finger-pointing, and Monday-morning quarterbacking which will occur in the wake of a violent episode. If nothing else, precautions signal that the college is serious about trying to ensure the safety and well-being of everyone on campus.

We at Tompkins Cortland have taken the first steps towards confronting the violence threat—a personal safety/workplace violence workshop was conducted; student/employee questionnaire results are currently being reviewed by a prevention/intervention team that will be making recommendations regarding training needs and leave policies; and outside security consultants will be conducting a "campus walkaround" to help identify physical risks that can be reduced or eliminated. The college's attorneys will be reviewing an anti-violence "zero-toleration" policy that is now in the early stages of development.

None of these steps will guarantee a violence-free

campus, and we hope that none of these precautions will ever be put to the test. But at least we are no longer among those who still cling to the notion that "it could never happen here."

Joe Cambridge, *Professor, English*

For further information, contact the author at Tompkins Cortland Community College, P. O. Box 139, 170 North Street, Dryden, NY 13053.
e-mail: cambrij@sunytccc.edu