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Overcoming the Obstacles to Campus Safety:

Developing a Comprehensive
Approach to Prevention

Alan D. Berkowitz, Ph.D.
Independent Consultant, Trumansburg, NY

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Overcoming the Obstacles to Campus Safety: Developing a Comprehensive Approach to Prevention

Safety and violence prevention remain at the forefront of concern on college and university campuses. Despite the amount of attention given to this issue, safety efforts often are fragmented, isolated from other prevention activities, and conducted without awareness of best practices in prevention programming. Campus safety and crime prevention will benefit from a comprehensive, coordinated, and collaborative approach with student affairs professionals – and with students themselves. In addition, program activities will be more effective when they are intentionally designed to be compatible and mutually reinforcing.

A comprehensive approach to campus safety promotion includes:

- Adopting an “environmental management” approach that considers the whole environment and includes assessment of risks and community assets that foster safety
- Viewing prevention as a process that identifies short-term goals and intermediate outcomes in the context of a broader, long-term vision
- Fostering ongoing, collaborative relationships with other campus offices and stakeholders
- Using a task force composed of relevant campus and community actors to oversee and plan long and short-term goals
- Engaging students as active partners in the process of safety promotion and violence prevention
- Developing proactive media relations strategies that promote awareness of campus safety while honestly discussing risks inherent in any campus environment
- Actively surveying students to assess their needs and concerns, including perceptions and misperceptions of campus policies and safety issues

2

Campus safety and crime prevention will benefit from a comprehensive, coordinated, and collaborative approach with student affairs professionals – and with students themselves.

These program elements are grouped and briefly described below in the context of:

- Developing a vision of the big picture (comprehensiveness)
- Creating synergy (intensiveness)
- Tailoring prevention to the campus and its constituencies (relevance)
- Being informed by accurate knowledge (data-driven)
- Growing health (emphasizing the positive)

Developing a vision of the big picture (comprehensiveness)

Comprehensiveness addresses the question of who is part of the intervention. In a comprehensive program, all relevant community members or systems are involved and have clearly defined roles and responsibilities. This must occur at all levels of prevention and within all levels of the administrative hierarchy.

A task force for coordinating prevention activities is critical for providing the infrastructure for comprehensive prevention, yet most schools do not have one. Thus, a 2002 study found that only 40% of schools have a campus wide task-force for alcohol and other drug prevention, and only 29% of institutions said that they were part of a community coalition, leading the study's authors to conclude that "the vast majority of colleges and universities have not yet put into place the basic infrastructure they need to develop, implement or evaluate [a] comprehensive approach" (DeJong & Langford, 2002, p. 146).

3

Prevention efforts will benefit from an effective task force that is composed of all key players and empowered to formulate strategy, assess campus risks and assets, and facilitate collaboration. The task force should include community members, administrative staff, and students. Task force members must meet as a group and in sub-committees on a regular basis.

One goal of a task force is to ensure that campus efforts to promote safety and prevent crime are intensive, relevant, positive, and data-driven, as described below.

The task-force serves as an advocate for safety issues on campus, collaborates with other task forces focusing on related issues, and identifies program gaps and needs.

Short term goals for the campus can be set and modified as progress is made. For example, on a campus where surveys suggest that the incidence of sexual assault is dramatically underestimated, a task force may decide to focus initial prevention efforts on educating members about the problem. On another campus where victims of crime feel unsafe coming forward, initial efforts might focus on creating a team of advocates and first-responders while working to develop a proactive media relations strategy.

The task-force serves as an advocate for safety issues on campus, collaborates with other task forces focusing on related issues, and identifies program gaps and needs. Achieving comprehensiveness requires viewing the whole campus community as the target population and devoting time to creating meaningful connections with colleagues. A coordinated, comprehensive effort will create awareness of what others are doing, articulate a common prevention framework, and provide students with information and messages that are intensive, relevant, positive, and data-driven.

Creating Synergy (intensiveness)

Intensiveness is a function of what happens between and within program activities. It is the job of the task force to ensure that programs and activities offer compatible messages that are synergistic, mutually reinforcing and that address short and long-term goals in a cohesive, coherent manner.

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Linking workshops and lectures provided at different times of the year can strengthen the effect of a program. College campuses feature a variety of activities and venues that can be used to deliver mutually reinforcing prevention messages. Thus, a scenario on sexual assault presented during a peer theater presentation during orientation can be discussed and compared to a similar situation in a novel read in a literature class. In general, finding ways to link activities that are normally separate and disconnected can create positive synergy and result in programs that are more effective in combination than alone.

Intensive programs that create synergy offer learning opportunities that are interactive and sustained over time, with active rather than passive participation. Interactive interventions are more effective than those requiring passive participation. For example, an interactive theater presentation with audience discussion followed by discussion in small groups is a more powerful intervention than a presentation without discussion or audience participation. In order to create intensive programs that foster interaction, discussion and reflection, it is necessary to focus on process as well as content, and replace rigid structure with flexibility.

Similarly, interactive programs which are sustained over time and which have multiple points of contact with reinforcing messages are stronger than programs that occur at one point in time only. Thus, an interactive workshop followed by in-class discussion is more intensive than a stand-alone program. The benefits of an ongoing focus on prevention suggest that it is not productive to limit attention on a specific issue to a particular “awareness week.” Rather, an awareness week can serve to bring attention to activities that are offered throughout the year.

Many prevention specialists have found that offering individual workshops in conjunction with campus media campaigns is an excellent way to provide mutually reinforcing messages. Messages should be carefully developed based on program goals and survey data, and tested with students. Social norms media campaigns could incorporate messages about campus safety issues and relevant protective factors. Statistics and positive messages reviewed in a workshop can be incorporated into posters and other media placed around campus to provide a booster that strengthens and reinforces the original message.

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Programs that are relevant are tailored to the characteristics and needs of the campus and to the demographics of the recipients. This requires understanding the developmental needs of the campus and considering the special needs and concerns of different communities and affinity groups.

Creating synergy requires that we also pay attention to the possibility of conflicting messages and programs that may undermine each other. For instance, Rape Awareness Defense (RAD) workshops may be advertised in a way that causes students to over-estimate the incidence of sexual assault and create fears about safety, undermining efforts to accurately define the scope of the problem. Or, a social norms campaign addressing student over-estimations of dangerous drinking may be undermined by a program using a crashed car to call attention to the dangers of driving while intoxicated, unintentionally reinforcing the misperception that most students drink dangerously. Discrepancies of this nature can be resolved by the task force so that programs are coordinated and reinforce each other's messages. For example, the crashed car can be replaced by a new car along with posters stating the percentage of students who drive safely, while students viewing the car can be solicited to sign a pledge not to combine alcohol and driving.

Tailoring prevention to the campus and its constituencies (relevance)

6

Programs that are relevant are tailored to the characteristics and needs of the campus and to the demographics of the recipients. This requires understanding the developmental needs of the campus and considering the special needs and concerns of different communities and affinity groups.

Programs that are tailored to the needs of an individual campus will adopt a long-term approach that concentrates on “achieving intermediate objectives that will contribute to behavior change in the long-term using a staged approach” (DeJong, 2002, p. 186). Each campus faces different challenges and possesses varying degrees of the infrastructure necessary for effectiveness; there is no “one-size-fits-all” or “magic bullet” for campus safety.

Programs can achieve relevance by acknowledging participant differences within a generic program or by developing a specialized program focusing on the particular needs of a specific audience. Heppner, et. al. (1999), for example, found that a sexual assault program that was effective for white men did not have a similar benefit for men of color. However, when the program was adapted to include material relevant to men of color and was presented by a mixed-race pair, it was

effective for all participants in a mixed-race audience. Another component of relevance is the inclusion of students. Peers can present information and share personal material in a way that is relevant and appropriate to students in particular campus environments.

Relevant programs pay attention to three “cultures of prevention” outlined by Berkowitz (2003): the culture of the problem, which takes into account the fact that different problems have distinct features and challenges; the culture of the service or message delivery system, which takes into account that there are different methods of delivering information; and the culture of the target population, which requires considering the culture and characteristics of the audience. Certain cultural groups will differ, for example, in the way they communicate and digest information. Differences in these three cultures must be addressed in the design of programs. Issues such as these should be acknowledged and addressed whenever possible to ensure program inclusiveness and relevance to all participants.

Having accurate data is critical for effective task-force planning and can lead to the development of programs that are relevant to student needs.

Being informed by accurate knowledge (data-driven)

7

It is essential that all of our efforts are based on scientific knowledge and incorporate accurate data about problems and student perceptions of them. Having accurate data is critical for effective task-force planning and can lead to the development of programs that are relevant to student needs. In light of this, there is a critical need for ongoing and accurate student survey data about the incidence of various crimes on campus, perceptions of safety, protective behaviors, victim safety issues, students’ willingness to engage in safety awareness and their perception of peer willingness to do the same, and student support of our policies and procedures. Data of this nature can be used to set priorities, guide the development of programs, infuse relevant data into workshop and media programs, and measure progress towards goals. This should be combined with a proactive media relations strategy in which the institution frames the issue positively and educates its public, including parents, staff, students, and community members.

Young adults are more receptive to positive messages outlining what can be done than to negative messages that promote fear or blame. Programs that are blaming or induce fear have repeatedly been found to be ineffective and should only be used in limited circumstances.

For example, recent social norms research (DeJong, 2003) indicates that students support most campus policies but incorrectly perceive other students as in disagreement with these policies. Information about misperceptions of this nature can be used to guide policy development and inform media campaigns that educate students about accurate norms pertaining to student support for policies. Publicizing accurate survey data is especially important to the extent that student and parent assessments of safety on campus are based on misperceptions and inaccurate information

Growing health (emphasizing the positive)

Positive messages should build on the audiences' values and predisposition to act in a positive manner. Young adults are more receptive to positive messages outlining what can be done than to negative messages that promote fear or blame. Programs that are blaming or induce fear have repeatedly been found to be ineffective and should only be used in limited circumstances (DeJong, 2002; Job, 1988). Instead, "the task force should define the problem in a way that motivates behavior change.... and publicize[s] positive trends to help reinforce further changes in behavioral norms" (DeJong, 2002). The social norms approach provides an excellent example of how positive messages can be used to increase positive health behaviors and reduce risky behaviors.

Focusing on the positive requires a careful balancing act between identifying the strengths and safety of a community and educating about risks. Many campuses are reticent to acknowledge that they are less than completely safe, yet campuses by definition are communities that have crime and harbor criminals. Communication strategies thus need to be developed that inform parents, students, and staff of the realistic risks that accompany everyday life and the behaviors that can reduce them. Hiding these problems will undermine efforts when an incident occurs. Focusing on the positive thus requires both that we identify and promote healthy aspects of our communities while at the same time talking positively and constructively about problems. For example, media notice of a registered sex offender living near campus could generate concern and attention that shifts the focus away from understanding that most sexual assaults are perpetrated by students who live on campus. In cases like this it is important to address the problem identified by the public and/or media, while educating others about its true scope.

Summary and Conclusion

Preventing crime and promoting safety on campus is a difficult task. However, success is more likely when there is a thoughtful and consistent planning process that results in integrated programming and a common vision of what is desired and how to get there.

Designing a program that incorporates the many elements discussed here may seem daunting. Still, a few interventions that are carefully linked, sequenced, and integrated with other activities in and out of the classroom will be more powerful than multiple program efforts that are discrete, isolated, and unrelated. It is important, therefore, to focus on quality and process rather than quantity. It is the author's sincere hope that this discussion will advance the "state of the art" in promoting safety and preventing crime on college and university campuses and promote dialogue in the service of more effective programs.

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Note: This white paper contains elements of earlier articles written on this subject by the author. See Berkowitz, 1997 and 2005 for examples.

Alan Berkowitz is an independent consultant who works with colleges, universities, public health agencies, and communities to create programs that improve health and promote social justice. He is highly regarded for his research, innovative programming, and public speaking in the areas of violence prevention, drug prevention, the social norms approach, and diversity/prejudice reduction training, and has received five national awards for his work in these areas. Alan can be reached at alan@fltg.net and copies of his articles can be downloaded from www.alanberkowitz.com.

To learn more about developing a comprehensive approach to campus safety and crime prevention, attend the "Developing Comprehensive Safety Education and Awareness at Your Campus" conference from June 19-21, 2007 in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The conference is built on a safety education structure that emphasizes the involvement of student affairs. Participants will lay the groundwork for taking existing safety education programs to the next level and developing more innovative techniques that integrate safety education throughout the student life experience. For more information, visit:

<https://www.academicimpressions.com/conferences/0607-safety-education.php>

References and Resources

An excellent resource for comprehensive prevention is U.S. Department of Education's Higher Education Center for Alcohol and Other Drug Abuse and Violence Prevention (www.HigherEdCenter.org).

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10

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