Preventing a crisis on campus is just a phone call away

After a troubled student killed 32 people on the Virginia Tech campus eight years ago, the federal government recommended that each college and university in the country establish a behavioral threat-assessment unit.

Sacramento State, which has had an active Crisis Intervention Team since 1996 – long before the Virginia Tech shootings – recently elevated its efforts to prevent campus violence by hiring its first case manager/coordinator.

Katelyn Sandoval, who earned her bachelor’s degree in psychology and master’s degree in counseling at Sacramento State, stepped into her new job in November.

“The team’s ultimate goal is to assess any threat to our campus, as well as to assist students before a situation moves to a crisis, perhaps by connecting them to counseling services and other resources for help,” she says.

“I am the central point of intake for students, faculty and staff to call if someone on campus makes them feel uncomfortable. We’re working to create a culture of sharing. Perhaps after four or five conversations about someone, we will think, ‘Ah, maybe there is a risk there.’ We want people to call so we have a comprehensive view of a situation.”

Reports can be made by calling Sandoval in the Division of Student Affairs at (916) 278-6060 during regular business hours Monday through Friday. Messages left after hours will be returned the following business day. Immediate threats or concerns should be directed to the Sacramento State Police Department: (916) 278-6900 or 911.

In addition to Sandoval, the members of the multidisciplinary Crisis Intervention Team are:

- Chief Mark Iwasa, Sacramento State Police Department
- Beth Lesen, associate vice president for Student Engagement and Support
- Ron Lutz, clinical director of Student Health and Counseling Services
- Scott Oleinik, Human Resources benefits manager
- Jill Peterson, University Counsel
- Ardith Tregenza, director of Student Conduct

The team meets biweekly to discuss current referrals. “The point is for the collective wisdom of the team to look at the situations and make the best possible decisions for our campus,” says Sandoval, who has handled 17 cases since November.

Having a case manager on the team is vital to campus safety, Lesen says. “She ensures that disparate efforts are coordinated, that everyone has timely information about important developments while maintaining the privacy of all involved, and that the many aspects of follow-up required actually happen. There’s an opportunity for something to fall through the cracks, but with the case manager involved, someone monitors the moving parts and ensures that nothing is overlooked.”
The question then becomes: What warrants a report to the Crisis Intervention Team?

“We would like for people to err on the side of making a call about anything that causes concern,” Lesen says. “For example, if someone seems overly fascinated with pain and suffering. If they are unusually aggressive or detached. If their behavior or appearance has changed suddenly or dramatically. If a person makes a threat suggesting potential harm to themselves or to others, even if it’s a veiled or vague threat.

“People should report any behavior that makes them worry, either for that person or for others. It’s always better to bring our attention to something that turns out to be minor than to refrain from saying something and wish later that you’d come forward. The team is here to help.” – Dixie Reid