

14.2: Memorandum to the Faculty (2014 update)

by Gary Pavela

What follows is the latest update to our 2007 publication: “Memorandum to the faculty: Teaching Troubled Students after the Virginia Tech Shootings.” This edition includes commentary from the American Psychological Association Panel of Experts Report on gun violence (December 2013), reviewed in our last issue. We also highlight statistical information showing *declining* rates of violent crime at schools and colleges and the comparative safety of the college and university workplace. We waive copyright on this document and encourage you to share it freely.

1. How frequent are homicides on campus?

The magnitude of the Virginia Tech shootings (32 people killed) is highlighted by the fact that murders on American college campuses (approximately 4,200 institutions enrolling 19.7 million students) average about 20 a year (see “Toward a Safer Campus,” *U.S. News and World Report* April 30, 2007 p. 49, citing S. Daniel Carter, vice president of Security On Campus Inc.). Researchers at the University of Virginia Youth Violence Project report that “[m]urders on college campuses represent far less than one percent of the total homicides in the United States” and that “the average college can expect to experience a murder on campus about once every 265 years” (see related testimony by UVA professor Dewey G. Cornell before the U.S. House Committee on Education and Labor, given just after the Virginia Tech shootings).

Recent research continues to support the Youth Violence Project findings. See the 2011 study, “Leading Causes of Mortality Among American College Students at Four-Year Institutions,” summarized in the publication UVA today (November 4, 2011):

[F]indings also suggest that campuses provide much safer and more protective environments than previously recognized. When compared to the mortality of 18- to 24-year-olds in the general population, college student death rates are significantly lower for such causes as suicide, alcohol-related deaths and homicide.

2. Isn't violence becoming increasing common in schools?

No. A February 22, 2012 Bureau of Justice Statistics Report (Indicators of School Crime and Safety, 2011) states:

Between 1992 and 2010, the total victimization rates for students ages 12–18 generally *declined* both at and away from school. This pattern also held for thefts, violent victimizations, and serious violent victimizations.

In the most recent period between 2009 and 2010, the total victimization rate against students ages 12–18 at school *declined* from 43 victimizations per 1,000 students to 32 per 1,000, and the rate of violent victimization at school *declined* from 20 per 1,000 students to 14 per 1,000 [italics added].

3. How dangerous is college teaching?

A March 2011 federal report on crime in the workplace ranks college faculty members just behind *preschool* teachers as the safest occupations studied (for comparison, the rate of workplace violence for college teachers was 1.9 per 1,000 employed persons, while the rate for physicians was 10.1). See the Bureau of Justice Statistics Report “Workplace Violence, 1993-2009.” BJS reports that “of the occupational groups examined, law enforcement occupations had the highest average annual rate of workplace violence (48 violent crimes per 1,000 employed persons age 16 or older), followed by mental health occupations (21 per 1,000).”

Overall, the BJS documents a 51% drop in workplace homicides between 1993 and 2009; the rate of nonfatal workplace violence declined by 35% from 2002 to 2009, following a *62% decline* from 1993 to 2002 [*italics added*].

4. What should I do if I have concerns about a student?

You will find pertinent data and general advice in this memorandum. What's most important to remember is that trained colleagues are standing by to help. The campus police will respond to any act or threat of violence. Administrators responsible for student conduct are authorized to impose an immediate suspension (pending a hearing) if a student engages in threatening or disruptive behavior. And mental health professionals can initiate a mandatory evaluation process or even invoke procedures to dismiss students who pose a "direct threat" to self or others.

Students must be treated fairly and responsibly—just as administrators and faculty members would expect if they were the subject of comparable inquiry— but the campus is not powerless or reluctant to act decisively when threats arise. Our overall process in this regard is managed by the University Behavior Intervention Team. You may reach the team by contacting 316-978-UBIT (8248). In emergencies call the campus police first 316-978-3450.

5. School shootings are often suicides. How widespread is suicide among college students?

Multiple studies have found that college students commit suicide at rates “significantly lower” than 18- to 24-year-olds in the general population (see the 2011 study cited in answer number one, above). One of the most cited surveys found an “overall student suicide rate of 7.5 per 100,000, compared to the national average of 15 per 100,000 in a sample matched for age, race and gender” (Silverman, et al. , 1997, "The Big Ten Student Suicide Study: a 10-year study of suicides on Midwestern university campuses," *Suicide and Life Threatening Behavior* 27[3]:285-303). Additional support for the “Big Ten” study can be found in one of the most comprehensive studies of college student suicide now available—published in the journal *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice* (“New Data on the Nature of Suicidal Crises in College Students: Shifting the Paradigm,” David J. Drum, *et. al.*, 2009, Vol. 40, No. 3, 213–222) (based on "[d]ata . . . collected from over 26,000 undergraduate and graduate students at 70 colleges and universities").

6. Are more students coming to college with mental disorders?

Probably yes. Caution is required because increases in counseling center visits and use of psychotropic medications may mean contemporary students are more willing to seek help for mental illness. In any event, trying to screen out such students (not a practical or legal alternative in any event), conflicts with our educational objectives. For example, psychiatry professor (and 2001 MacArthur Fellow) Kay Redfield Jamison at the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine has written that there is a “literary, biographical, and scientific argument for a compelling association, not to say actual overlap, between two temperaments—the artistic and the manic-depressive.” (*Touched by Fire: Manic Depressive Illness and Artistic Temperament*, p. 5). She and other observers caution that serious bouts of clinical depression aren’t likely to enhance creativity, but few disagree with the suggestion that students who struggle to overcome extraordinary challenges (like bipolar disorder) may acquire a deeper understanding of themselves and others. Those students should be part of the welcome diversity we seek in our classrooms.

7. Is there an association between mental illness and violence?

Research shows some association between severe mental illness and violence, especially when mental illness is accompanied by substance abuse. However, a 2006 Institute of Medicine report stated that “[a]lthough studies suggest a link between mental illnesses and violence, the contribution of people with mental illnesses to overall rates of violence is small, and further, the magnitude of the relationship is greatly exaggerated in the minds of the general population” (University of Washington, Coalition for Mental Health Reporting, Facts About Mental Health and Violence).

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services document “Violence and Mental Illness: The Facts” contains the observation that “[c]ompared with the risk associated with the combination of male gender, young age, and lower socioeconomic status, the risk of violence presented by mental disorder is modest.” Such a “modest” correlation won’t be sufficient to draw conclusions about the future behavior of any particular student. Again, individualized assessment will be imperative, focusing on a specific diagnosis, demonstrable behavior, compliance in taking prescribed medications, patterns of substance abuse, and any recent traumatic events or stresses, among other factors.

In 2013 an American Psychological Association Panel of Experts Report on gun violence stated:

Although many highly publicized shootings have involved persons with serious mental illness, it must be recognized that persons with serious mental illness commit only a small proportion of firearm-related homicides . . . *Furthermore, the overwhelming majority of people with serious mental illness do not engage in violence toward others and should not be stereotyped as dangerous . . .* [emphasis added].

8. Shouldn't we remove depressed students if they report suicidal ideation?

No. A 2006 article by Paul S. Appelbaum, Professor and Director of the Division of Psychiatry, Law, and Ethics at the Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons (and a past President of the American Psychiatric Association) highlights some the practical issues involved:

No matter how uncommon completed suicides are among college students, surveys suggest that suicidal ideation and attempts are remarkably prevalent. Two large scale studies generated nearly identical findings. Roughly 10 percent of college student respondents indicated that they had thought about suicide in the past year, and 1.5 percent admitted to having made a suicide attempt. Combining data from the available studies suggests that the odds that a student with suicidal ideation will actually commit suicide are 1,000 to 1. Thus policies that impose restrictions on students who manifest suicidal ideation *will sweep in 999 students who would not commit suicide for every student who will end his or her life*—with no guarantee that the intervention will actually reduce the risk of suicide in this vulnerable group. And even if such restrictions were limited to students who actually attempt suicide, the odds are around 200 to 1 against the school's having acted to prevent a suicidal outcome" (emphasis supplied).

("Depressed? Get Out!" *Psychiatric Services*, July 2006, Vol. 57, No. 7, 914-916).

Aside from unjustified removal of thousands of individuals, dismissals for reported depression or suicidal ideation would also discourage students from seeking professional help. Instead of finding creative ways to exclude or dismiss these students --who can be role models for their peers on learning how to adapt to adversity--we should be finding creative ways to keep them in school.

9. How can I identify potentially violent students?

This is not a task to be undertaken alone. Expertise is available on campus to help. See the contact information below and in our first answer.

In 2013 an American Psychological Association Panel of Experts Report on gun violence stated:

Acts of targeted or predatory violence directed at multiple victims, including crimes sometimes referred to as rampage shootings and mass shootings, occur far less often in the United States than do acts of impulsive violence (although targeted violence garners far more media attention) . . . Although it seems appealing to develop checklists of warning signs to construct a profile of individuals who commit these kinds of crimes, this effort, sometimes described as psychological profiling, has not been successful. Research has not identified an effective or useful psychological profile of those who would engage in multiple casualty gun violence. Moreover, efforts to use a checklist profile to identify these individuals fail in part because the characteristics used in these profiles are too general to be of practical value; such characteristics are also shared by many nonviolent individuals.

The 2003 National Research Council [NRC] report *Deadly Lessons: Understanding Lethal School Violence* (a project undertaken by the councils of the National Academy of Sciences, the National Academy of Engineering, and the Institute of Medicine) contains the following guidance (p. 332):

One widely discussed preventive idea is to develop methods to identify likely offenders in instances of lethal school violence or school rampages . . . The difficulty is that . . . [t]he offenders are not that unusual; they look like their classmates at school. This has been an important finding of all those who have sought to investigate these shootings. Most important are the findings of the United States Secret Service, which concluded:

There is no accurate or useful profile of "the school shooter" emphasis supplied) . . .

- * Attacker ages ranged from 11–21.
- * They came from a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds . . .
- * They came from a range of family situations, from intact families with numerous ties to the community to foster homes with histories of neglect.
- * The academic performance ranged from excellent to failing.
- * They had a range of friendship patterns from socially isolated to popular.
- * Their behavioral histories varied, from having no observed behavioral problems to multiple behaviors warranting reprimand and/or discipline.
- * Few attackers showed any marked change in academic performance, friendship status, interest in school, or disciplinary problems prior to their attack . . .

A more promising approach is "threat assessment," based on analysis of observable behavior compiled from multiple sources and reviewed by a trained threat assessment team. The report "Threat Assessment in Schools: A Guide to Managing Threatening Situations and to Creating Safe School Climates" (developed by the U.S. Secret Service and Department of Education in 2002) contains the following overview) (p. 52):

Students and adults who know the student who is the subject of the threat assessment inquiry should be asked about communications or other behaviors that may indicate the student of concern's ideas or intent. The focus of these interviews should be factual:

- What was said? To whom?
- What was written? To whom?
- What was done?
- When and where did this occur?
- Who else observed this behavior?
- Did the student say why he or she acted as they did?

Proper threat assessment is a team effort requiring expertise from experienced professionals, including law enforcement officers. Threat assessment on our campus is done by [name of the team or committee on your campus], headed by [identify name and telephone number]. Faculty members should contact the threat assessment team whenever believe a student may pose a risk of violence to self or others. If in doubt seek a threat assessment. In an emergency contact the campus police immediately [your campus emergency telephone number].

10. Should I talk with a student about my concerns?

Exercise judgment on a case by case basis, preferably after consultation with colleagues, perhaps including the threat assessment team.

An effort at conversation is generally advisable. Students are often oblivious to the impressions they make. Careful listening and courteous dialogue —perhaps with participation by a department chair or student conduct administrator— will often resolve the problem. At a minimum, the discussion may prove valuable in any subsequent threat assessment process.

Please do not give assurances of confidentiality. A student who appears to pose a threat to self or others needs to be referred for help and supervision. College teachers should not abrogate their traditional role as guides and mentors, but they must not assume the responsibilities of therapists or police officers.

One danger in the aftermath of the Virginia Tech shootings would be a climate of fear and distance between teachers and students, especially students who seem odd, eccentric, or detached. Research on violence prevention suggests schools and colleges need *more* cross-generational contact, not less. The NRC report (p. 160) stated that:

In the course of our interviews with adolescents, we are reminded once again of how "adolescent society," as James S. Coleman famously dubbed it 40 years ago, continues to be insulated from the adults who surround it . . . The insularity of adolescent society serves to magnify slights and reinforce social hierarchies; correspondingly, it is only through exchange with trusted adults that teens can reach the longer-term view that can come with maturity. . . [W]e could not put it better than the words of a beloved long-time teacher [at one of the schools studied]: "The only real way of preventing [school violence] is to get into their heads and their hearts . . ."

Getting into the "heads and hearts" of students goes beyond individual conversations. It entails fostering a *community of engagement*, defined not by codes of silence or barriers of indifference, but by an active sense of mutual responsibility. This critical endeavor depends upon the faculty. Now more than ever they must demonstrate skills in reaching outward, not retreating inward.

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