The Importance of Creating a Behavioral Assessment Team at Your Community College

Author
Karen B. Phinazee

Abstract
Given their often-transitory and diverse student populations, increasing enrollments, and the open nature of their campuses, community colleges need to have a Behavioral Intervention Team in place as much as any traditional college or university. This article explains the process of creating such a team on a community college campus.
Introduction

“Never in my life would I have expected community colleges to be called potential saviors of the economy,” says George Boggs, president of the American Association of Community Colleges. “When the downturn started and people were being laid off, community colleges sent teams into companies to talk to workers about their options,” he explains. The importance of community colleges progressed from there.”

— Ann McClure, “Community Colleges as Economic Saviors.”

Community colleges today play an increasing role in educating a growing and diverse student population. With that come the unique challenges associated with an often-transitory, diverse student population with real-world problems that are not usually settled before class or after hours. With increased numbers, the safety of the students and faculty at community colleges then becomes a risk factor. Along with counselors and security staff members, one of the most important decisions that your college will make is regarding the creation of a Behavioral Intervention Team.

Creating a BIT on your community college campus can serve as a critical conduit as you work toward a safer campus environment. Networking with other community college BITs will provide you with helpful information for completing the team’s structure. Securing buy-in from the upper-level administration and gaining campuswide support are key to the success of a BIT launch. Incorporating members who are committed to student success and to the core values of your institution are ideal. Additionally, joining an organization like the National Behavioral Intervention Team Association can provide you with a plethora of resources and support.

Campus safety is important, and creating a BIT is a major step in working with campus police to maintain a safe environment.

Understanding the BIT’s Role

Within student services, you may find counselors, advisors, and various areas of support for students. In addition to those services, you should consider incorporating a Behavioral Intervention Team. What is a BIT? The NaBITA website states that:

The team receives reports of disruptive, problematic, or concerning behavior or misconduct (from co-workers, community members, friends, colleagues, etc.), conducts an investigation, performs a threat assessment, and determines the best mechanisms for support, intervention, warning/notification, and response. The team then deploys its resources, the resources of the community, and coordinates any necessary follow-up.

The aforementioned is a general definition of what a BIT does. The following community colleges have created mission statements describing the purpose of their BITs:

- The Westchester Community College Behavioral Intervention Team mission is to provide a safe environment for the college community through coordinated analysis and risk assessment of student cases, collaboration across the campus, information collection, and intervention.
- Wake Tech has established a Behavioral Assessment Team (BAT) for the purpose of keeping the campus community safe. This cross-functional team helps to identify, assess, and manage disruptive and threatening (or potentially threatening) behaviors and situations. The BAT includes representatives from a cross-section of areas.

Both mission statements provide general descriptions of a BIT. Keep in mind that your team’s mission statement should aim to be personal and should resonate with your constituency based on its needs.

Laying the Groundwork

Do your research. Contact other colleges, especially those similar in size, demographics, and location to your community college. Find out how they started their BITs; there is no need to recreate the wheel. If something is working for others, it will probably work for your school. Northern Virginia Community College (NOVA) is similar in size to Wake Technical Community College. Both colleges have a Behavioral Intervention Team.

When gathering information from other institutions that may be helpful to form or consider forming a BIT, here are some questions you may want to ask:

- How many members do you have on your team?
- How often do you meet?
- What type of training were you provided?
- What were your marketing strategies?

According to the NaBITA 2016 survey, published by Brian Van Brunt Ed.D., the average BIT size is 9.6 persons. NOVA has seven members on its Threat Assessment Team. There are nine members on the Wake Technical Community College Behavior and Assessment Team. Both community colleges’ teams meet monthly to discuss cases and engage in continued training of their members.

You may also want to include the following questions:

- Do you have a centralized recordkeeping system?
- And if so, what system do you use?

According to the NaBITA 2016 survey, 91 percent of the colleges surveyed used a centralized recordkeeping system. Thirty-nine percent of those used Maxient. Both NOVA and Wake Technical Community College use
Maxient for recordkeeping. While it is important to research colleges that are similar to your institution, it is equally important to connect with BITs at colleges that are dissimilar to your own because there is a wealth of information that can be attained from them. While collecting data on BITs, consider creating a working document detailing the information you gather. Statistics are needed to present to stakeholders.

Gaining the buy-in of the senior-level administrators at your college is essential. Your research will exemplify the importance of a BIT for ensuring the safety of your constituency. A presentation that includes examples of BIT cases and findings will be necessary for convincing them that having a BIT is in the college’s best interest.

**Determining Team Composition**

Now that your presentation is over, and senior administrators have assigned you the task of creating a BIT, what comes next? “Who should be included?” and “How many should be included?” are questions you need to consider. The cohesiveness of the group is as important a consideration as the number of individuals on the team. Are the members committed to the mission of the BIT? Wake Technical Community College’s BAT includes representation from faculty, campus police, counseling, disability support services, and student conduct officers.

Once you have decided who will be on the team, plan a brainstorming session to determine how you want to market your BIT on your website and around campus. Refer to your research for reporting guidelines and to determine what information should be included on the initial launch of the team’s Web page. It will not be perfect when it goes live, but you can go back and add to it, including any information that you believe will provide customers with the necessary tools for reporting and obtaining information. You can always refer back to your initial research, but continue to look at other colleges as well. It is always a good idea to look for ways to improve on or include information that you had not previously considered.

**Getting Your Team Operational**

Now that you have your team in place, it’s time to become a member of NaBITA. It offers multiple resources for members. In addition, NaBITA offers you access to BIT practitioners with similar experiences, who are truly committed to helping their peers and the students they serve. Through the NaBITA Resources page, you can access whitepapers such as, *Preventing the Preventable, Case Management in Higher Education, Second-Generation Behavioral Intervention Best Practices*; and more. Membership has its privileges.

**Conclusion**

The creation of BITs on community college campuses is vital for ensuring safety from a proactive, rather than reactive, standpoint. You wouldn’t necessarily wait to see flames before contacting the fire department, especially if you have been smelling smoke for a while. The firefighters are trained to detect the source of the smoke. Likewise, having a BIT in place will ensure that members of the campus community know what to do if they notice a student’s concerning behavior. A BIT that has been trained can be ready to serve, and hopefully avert a crisis situation.

**References**


