Analysis of a Behavior Assessment Team and the Typical Cases it Receives

By Kerry Greenstein

Abstract
Following the fatal shootings at Virginia Tech in 2007, institutions of higher education have implemented multidisciplinary threat assessment and behavioral intervention teams. Today, these teams provide proactive, preventative care for students who display a variety of warning signs that could potentially lead to violence, either to oneself or others. This article looks at one Behavior Assessment Team’s archival records and evaluates the work this team has done based on the number and types of cases they receive.

Introduction
Although college campuses have historically been thought of as safe havens for learning, campus violence has and does occur (Cornell, 2010). Beginning in the 1960’s with Charles Whitman’s attack at the University of Texas, there have been a number of mass shootings on college campuses (Geiger, 2010). Along with a rising number of mass shootings, there have been a variety of other violent acts on campuses, from homicides and physical assaults, to riots and property destruction (Geiger, 2010). While these violent acts continue to occur, mass shootings like Whitman’s attack at the University of Texas garner a great deal of media attention that adds to the fears of campus constituents (Addington, 2003).

After the 2007 mass shooting at Virginia Polytechnic Institution (Virginia Tech), many colleges and universities across the country began formally implementing the use of Behavior Assessment Teams (BATs) to monitor and evaluate threats of violence to the campus community (Graney, 2011). Six years later, there is now a growing body of research on how the teams develop, who serves on the teams, and the threat assessment protocols being utilized (Sokolow & Lewis, 2009). While that information is helpful to those on campus who are tasked with forming and running the teams, it does little to alleviate the fear of violence among higher
education’s many stakeholders. For faculty, staff, student, parents, and other community members to believe that college campuses are indeed safe places to learn, it is necessary to evaluate the effectiveness of these teams to determine what they are doing and how we can assess their effectiveness.

DeLaTorre (2011) and Graney (2011) evaluated how institutions implemented these teams on various campuses in Texas and New England, respectively. Sokolow, Lewis, Wolf, Van Brunt, and Byrnes (2009) looked at models of threat assessment and created a new model that was more appropriate for the higher education setting. The 2012 NaBITA survey assessed team leadership, the frequency of meetings, and training methods, among other items. These studies provide useful information to those responsible for creating and running teams, and those interested in how a behavior assessment team should function.

However, none of these studies focused specifically on the types of issues these teams are addressing on a regular basis. Through a better understanding of the cases they are seeing, a team can evaluate its responses along with the interventions it provides and be better prepared in the future to assist students with those, or similar, needs. This paper will, through an in-depth analysis of a BAT’s database and records, provide some answers to the following questions which guided this research:

- How does the BAT assess and report its efforts?
- What is the frequency of the specific issues being reported to the BAT?
- What trends are noticeable in the cases heard by the BAT?

**Literature Review: Threat Assessment on College Campuses**

Following the 1999 shooting at Columbine High School in Colorado, the United States Secret Service, along with the Department of Education, and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) initiated major studies on incidents of targeted school violence (O’Toole, 2000; Vossekuil, Fein, Reddy, Borum, & Modzeleski, 2002). Both studies came to the conclusion that schools should begin using a threat assessment approach to identify and manage potential threats of violence. These recommendations eventually led to the creation of multidisciplinary threat assessment teams in many schools.
The teams that developed at this time became much more formal compared with the teams that existed previously. What set the new teams apart from older models were formal protocols with specific techniques and strategies, which included utilizing a sophisticated threat assessment, facilitating a culture of reporting and integrating with existing campus and community resources (Sokolow & Hughes, 2007). The new, improved version of behavior assessment teams also included emphasis on training team members in intervention techniques, developing a rubric for classifying levels of risk that warrant varying levels of interventions, and establishing protocols and training faculty and staff on how to respond to students in distress (Sokolow & Hughes, 2007). Sokolow and Lewis (2009) described these practices as the key elements of second-generation behavioral intervention teams.

**Shift towards Case Management**

Following the attack on Virginia Tech, teams began to shift more towards proactive intervention such as case management. As teams began receiving more early information about students and concerning behaviors, they became more adept at implementing interventions designed to assist students in obtaining needed resources and support services. At the heart of this approach is the concept of flexible, need-based service delivery. This type of support for students has led the way toward a greater focus on case management. Van Brunt et al. (2012) defines case management this way:

Case management is a solution-focused approach to assist students with a wide variety of needs. As such, case managers are concerned about what is and what can be done, rather than a focus on what was and what has held back the student in the past. Helping students engage in effective problem solving and identifying solutions are the backbone of case management services (p. 5).

The beginning of this trend was evident in Sokolow and Lewis’ (2009) discussion about second-generation teams. One of the key elements for these teams was that team should “see their role as nominally to address threat, and primarily to support and provide resources to students” (Sokolow & Lewis, 2009, p 5). Flannery and Quinn-Leering (2000) stress the importance of identifying the warning signs of potential violence, as it is often the result of individuals struggling with personal problems such as a job loss or the break-up of a
relationship. Other warning signs they identify include interpersonal disputes, alcohol and drug use, and impulsive behavior. Students with any of these issues could be considered non-threatening, and would therefore score low on risk rubrics, but a BAT focused on case management and a more holistic approach would still be able to offer them much needed resources.

This has created the opportunity for case management to become an effective strategy at many institutions. Since most students do not pose a serious threat to themselves or the campus community, BATs are spending a majority of their time on low-level issues like the ones above. For example, a student who acts out in class and is disrespectful towards his/her professor is unlikely to cause anyone harm, but through conversations and case management the institution may learn that the student could use some counseling, has a disability that can be better managed through the Disability Services Office, or was maybe just having a bad day due to a roommate conflict. Whatever the case may be, case management is a better solution than viewing this student as a threat and doing a threat assessment.

In the 2011 Book on BIT, there is even more evidence that the focus of these teams has shifted away from threat assessment. One of the basic principles listed in the book states that threat assessment should be done within the framework of the Behavior Intervention Team (Sokolow, Lewis, Manzo, Schuster, Byrnes & Van Brunt, 2011). Randazzo and Plummer (2009) also recognized the importance of case management services. In discussing the implementation process at Virginia Tech, they mention, “case management services are at the heart of effective threat assessment and violence prevention efforts” (2009, p. 64). As one of the guiding documents for the creation of teams on college campuses, Randazzo and Plummer (2009) suggest that “institutions of higher education give serious consideration to adding case management positions to their university rosters” (p. 64).

Encouraging Reporting and Record Keeping

Another topic that comes up in the literature on BATs is the importance of reporting and record keeping. The guidebooks for creating BATs all make reference to the need for campus community members to report concerns to the team (Sokolow & Hughes, 2007; Deisinger,
Randazzo, O’Neill, & Savage, 2008; Randazzo & Plummer, 2009; Sokolow & Lewis, 2009; and Sokolow et al., 2012). DeLaTorre (2011) also identified a “mechanism to report threats of violence” (p. 58) as one of the five critical recommendations from the Virginia Tech review panels that directly related to higher education. Sokolow and Lewis (2009) stated that “modern behavioral intervention teams foster a comprehensive reporting culture within the institution” (p. 8). DeLaTorre (2011) found that this was one of two criteria in which every institution studied had followed the recommendations. Every one of the 31 institutions reviewed had at least one link on their website to report threats of violence, many having more than one. Sokolow and Lewis (2009) further discussed the need for faculty and staff to report concerning behaviors to the team. They stress the need to market teams to the campus and make sure that campus community members know where to report concerning behavior.

Once the concerns are reported, it is even more important for the team’s success to properly maintain records. Sokolow and Lewis (2009) stated that second generation teams are supported by databases that can longitudinally track trends in student behavior. Hughes, White, and Hertz (2008) discussed web-based reporting platforms as one of the security efforts campus administrators began to use following Virginia Tech. This was explained further by Sokolow and Hughes (2007) in their discussion of campus-wide databases that would allow faculty and staff to submit information to the team in real time for continual tracking of incidents. Although in their initial stages of development Virginia Tech was not using a web-based platform, Randazzo and Plummer (2009) also advocated for teams to keep track of their records in a searchable database. Deisinger et al. (2008) stressed the importance of being able to access the information easily and quickly. They suggested using a database that could “store, search, and retrieve information so that that team can quickly know if a certain individual has come across the radar screen previously” (p. 93). This would give the team more information about an individual’s patterns of behavior, which could be extremely helpful in providing the needed resources.

Therefore, second-generation behavioral intervention teams that work to improve their culture of reporting and maintain their records in a sophisticated database should have access to searchable data that might allow them to see patterns and trends in the larger student
population and better provide the services and resources the students need. With the trend towards case management as discussed above, rather than continuing to report data regarding team members and frequency of meetings, BATs may begin to gather data regarding risk or threat levels, types of cases heard, and grade point averages, among others. It is this data that will be most helpful to already established teams looking for quantitative ways to assess and measure the prevention work that they are undertaking on their campuses.

Methodology: Research Design

The purpose of this research is to evaluate a Behavior Assessment Team and the types of cases it receives. More specifically, this research is seeking to identify the trends and patterns evident in the cases discussed by the team. Patton (2002) recommended that “in new fields of study where little work has been done, few definitive hypotheses exist and little is known about the nature of the phenomenon, qualitative inquiry is a reasonable beginning point of research” (p. 193). Behavior Assessment Teams are still relatively new, and little empirical research exists regarding these teams. Since the higher education community works toward better understanding these teams and the work they do, qualitative research remains a strong starting point. Within qualitative research there are many methods one can choose such as ethnography, phenomenology, and case study (Saldana, 2011). However, this research will focus solely on document analysis using the team’s database and records. An in-depth evaluation of their database and other written documents will help provide a better understanding of the cases this team discusses on a regular basis.

Context

For this research, the BAT at a large, approximately 20,000 student, public institution in a rural area of the southeastern United States was examined. The BAT was formally established in 2008, with the Dean of Students serving as chairperson. Other members of the team included representatives from Counseling, University Police, Academic Affairs, the First-Year Experience Office, the Student Disability Resource Center, Housing, Student Conduct, and the university attorney. Initially, the team used a homemade database for maintaining records. This database
included student names, information about the case, who brought the student to the team’s attention, follow up plans, and risk levels. In the fall of 2011, the team acquired Maxient software (http://www.maxient.com) to better store their records for both Student Conduct and the BAT.

**Role of the Researcher**

The researcher served as a key member of the BAT being studied. As Associate Dean of Students, the researcher was responsible for the operations of the team. He served as a case manager for many of the cases brought to the team, and is responsible for the maintaining of all team records. He was also involved in the BAT training for both the team, and the rest of the campus community. However, risk level classifications in the initial database were decided upon by the team as a whole. In Maxient, where the team uses “charges” to classify and categorize cases, the initial coding is submitted by the reporter, and adjusted accordingly by the team. Since the team has input into these case types, it seemed appropriate to use the historical records in the database for analysis so that any bias on behalf of the researcher would be limited.

**Data Collection**

The researcher compiled and reviewed all of the documents available on the BAT, including both databases, old agendas (agendas were used at meetings until Spring 2012), reports, and the researcher’s case notes.

During the summer of 2011, after the team stopped using the old database, the researcher compiled a one-page document summarizing the number of students reported by semester, the total number of students discussed, and risk level classifications. Although the records kept prior to the implementation of Maxient have been added to the database, that information cannot be sorted along the same criteria as the newer information thus, making it difficult to review. Therefore, the researcher has chosen to use the summary document to account for the first three years of the team’s efforts.

As the person responsible for maintaining the records of all BAT cases, any case brought to the BAT is assigned to the researcher within Maxient. Using the Maxient analytics tool, it
becomes easier to obtain a report from the system of all cases assigned to, or heard by the researcher. After extracting other case types heard by the researcher, a complete listing of all BAT cases can be created for a specific time period. This report was run three times, collecting the data for each academic year (2010-2011, 2011-2012, 2012-2013) in which the team had records in Maxient.

**Data Analysis**

Using basic filtering techniques and sorting the data, the researcher was able to identify the various case types being reported to the team, within each separate report. The case types include basic observations community members may report such as emotional distress, changes in appearance, and changes in behavior. Other case types include missing students (either those reported as not attending a class for an extended period of time, or those not seen or heard from for 24 hours), students displaying social challenges either in class or in their residence halls, and incivility. There are also some more serious concerns that include aggressive behavior (bullying, fighting, classroom disruptions, etc.), suicidal thoughts or actions, and threats (both written and oral). The final category is a more general concern for a student’s health and well-being, which could include anything from multiple alcohol incidents to the loss of a family member to poor grades and the possibility of facing academic exclusion. The General Concern for Health and Well-Being was also used as a default category for any case that did not fit neatly into any of the other predefined categories. Concerns about this being used as a default category are discussed in more detail in the Discussion section. All of the data was then analyzed for frequencies of each “charge” type within each academic year. To determine overall numbers of cases reported to the team, the 2011 summary document and the three separate reports from Maxient were analyzed. This data was then reviewed for patterns and trends seen over the five years of the team’s existence.

**Findings**

The findings from this research will be discussed considering the records kept prior to Maxient, as well as once the software had been implemented. Upon switching to the new
database, the institution made a strategic decision to begin classifying their cases differently, meaning the information will not be consistent across all five years. Where possible, the research will be reported considering all five years, but in some cases the information is only available in one set.

**Students Reported by Semester/Year**

The number of students reported to the BAT since 2008 has been somewhat consistent. Three of the five academic years had just over 100 students reported to the BAT. In each of the remaining two years, the team heard between 60 and 80 cases. Overall the team received more reports during the fall semester, with the exception of the 2010-2011 academic year, where there were more students reported during the spring semester. Table 1 shows that the number of reports has increased each Fall for the past five years except for Fall 2011, which had a significant drop in overall reports, down to 37. It is believed that this drop in reports is due to this being the first semester with Maxient, when the team had not yet figured out a consistent process for the recordkeeping. Some records were entered into Maxient, while others continued to be kept manually. Reports received during the Spring semesters have been much less consistent, as seen in Table 2. The reports increased from 24 in Spring 2010 to 58 in Spring 2011, but then dropped again to 28 in Spring 2012.

Table 1

**Cases Reported in Fall Semester**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Cases</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>38</td>
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<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>44</td>
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<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>48</td>
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<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>63</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Cases</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Risk Levels**

When the summary report was written in summer 2011, 89 of the students who had been discussed by the team had been enrolled during the previous spring semester. The remaining students had either successfully graduated, voluntarily withdrawn from the institution (for personal reasons, transfer, etc.), or were involuntarily withdrawn (involuntary medical withdrawals were still a common practice for BATs until a 2012 ruling from the Office of Civil Rights questioned the legality of the practice). As of 2011, institutions were still using involuntary medical withdrawal procedures, and eight students had been involuntarily withdrawn from the institution. The students who were no longer enrolled, regardless of the reason, were not considered when the team reviewed current students and updated risk level classifications. As a result, only the 89 students enrolled during spring semester 2011 were classified. Table 3 shows that of those 89 students, five remained at an Elevated risk level, and eight were classified as moderate due to repeated behavioral concerns. The remaining 76 students who had been discussed were all classified as low, or mild, risk. Based on this data, it can be assumed that the team used the involuntary withdrawal procedures on any student who reached the higher levels of risk. Those students were then removed from the institution and no longer considered when recording data on current students.
Table 3.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Students’ Risk Levels</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Risk Level</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extreme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Severe</td>
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<tr>
<td>Elevated</td>
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<tr>
<td>Moderate</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mild</td>
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</table>

Grade Point Average

During the fall of 2011, the Associate Provost, who is a member of the BAT, was compiling retention data for the institution and asked about grade point averages (GPA) for the students discussed by the BAT. All students (n= 207) who had been discussed by the team from fall 2008 through fall 2010 and were on the old database were considered when compiling this data. The report sent to the Associate Provost showed that the GPAs for students discussed by the team ranged from 0.13 to 3.93, with an average GPA of 2.46. In total, there were 17 students discussed by the team who had GPAs of less than 2.0 and 22 students with GPAs above 3.0.

Concern/Charge Type

Over the past two academic years, for which it has been recording case types, the BAT has heard at least one case in nine of the ten categories listed in the database. The data show that the majority of reports received by the BAT are general in nature—“General Concern for Health/Wellness.” These reports come from community members who are concerned for the general welfare of a student and include situations where students have experienced traumatic events such as a sexual assault or the death of a close friend or family member, had repeated incidents with the Office of Student Conduct for alcohol violations, or were struggling due to issues surrounding disability accommodations. Other case types regularly discussed by the team included students who had expressed suicidal thoughts, were considered to be
emotionally distressed, or had displayed some form of hostile or aggressive behavior towards a faculty or staff member. Less frequent were cases regarding potentially missing students, extreme changes in behavior, and students struggling to communicate and interact with their peers. The only type not discussed was “Extreme Changes in Appearance.” Figures 1 and 2 below show the frequency of each of the case types during the Fall and Spring semesters since Maxient was introduced to the campus in Fall 2011.

Figure 1. Concern Types Reported in Fall Semesters

![Figure 1](image1.png)

Figure 2. Concern Types Reported in Spring Semesters

![Figure 2](image2.png)
Discussion

Due to the fluctuations in the numbers of reports received and lack of consistency in the methods used for analyzing the records over the years, the data gained from this BAT do not allow for many useful generalizations. However, they do provide a baseline for the institution moving forward. The data from the early years of the team have been collected, and in future years will provide a benchmark as the team continues to track data, no matter which data it chooses to review.

Now that Maxient has been used regularly for nearly two years, there should begin to be some consistency in the record-keeping. As they complete future academic years using the current systems and processes, the data will become even more telling about the work this BAT is doing. While the record-keeping over the five years this team has been in existence has not necessarily been consistent, there are still some important lessons that can be learned from their data that can ultimately help them improve their efforts.

The BAT at this institution didn’t begin advertising and promoting the team, or training faculty and staff until the fall of 2009. The increase in reports since then is most likely a result of those efforts. While the numbers show a decrease in 2011-2012, it is believed that the mid-semester transition to Maxient caused some cases to be left out of the tally. Therefore, the number of reports received annually, has consistently been around 100 students. As the team continues to increase their efforts to encourage a culture of reporting, they can continue to track the total number of reports to determine the impact of those efforts. The team is now part of the training schedule for all new faculty, has trained all academic advisors, regularly offers training to Student Affairs departments, actively encourages students to report, and is even reaching out to individual academic departments. All of these efforts should lead to an increase in reporting that will likely be seen in the coming years.

The information regarding GPA may be very telling about the students discussed by the team. When it was first calculated in spring 2011, it was obvious to the team that there were a number of students being discussed that were in trouble academically. Although only 17 students were below a 2.0 GPA, many of the remaining 168 students were in danger of dropping below the 2.0 requirement, or not meeting academic requirements of their degree.
program. Recognizing this led the team to add a representative from advising to the BAT, and, more specifically, one of the institution’s academic intervention specialists who worked closely with students with academic standing concerns. This addition was the team’s intentional effort to provide better support for the students based upon what they were hearing. A continued review of the issues faced by the team may lead to other changes, as well. If the trends suggest a specific problem has become common and that someone else on campus is better equipped to provide assistance to those students, that person may also be asked to join the BAT. By continually reviewing grades and GPA, the BAT may also be able to recognize which students are struggling and need more intervention and which have turned things around. Perhaps, the team will find a high number of Business students where the GPA requirement is 2.5, or Nursing students, where it is extremely competitive to reach the upper division program, causing the BAT to adjust the services for these students.

When the team looked at the risk levels of the students they were discussing, they discovered that the vast majority of their cases were little to no risk, especially after one or two short-term interventions. Since the team spent very little time doing threat assessments, and most risk levels were mild, the team decided to try classifying their cases differently. They wanted to know specifically what issues the students were struggling with, and created the ten categories used in Maxient. Now, the team can monitor the situations they handle frequently and ensure that the interventions used for those cases are both consistent and effective. However, the high number of the General Concern for Health and Wellness cases leads the researcher to believe that this is too vague of a category, and is in need of further clarification by the team. As the team further reviews the cases it receives, a more precise coding may become necessary. It is the author’s opinion that if reporters are given a “general” or “other” option, that will always be the most popular selection. The BAT should take a closer look at what the current General Concerns are and try to create more specific categories such as Repeated Conduct Violations or Traumatic Life Event, that better capture the concerns raised in those reports.
Conclusion

Members of Behavior Assessment Teams are beginning to recognize the importance of assessing the work that these teams are doing. Currently, much of the research has focused on how to create a team with information such as who should be on it, how often they meet, the protocols and rubrics to use, and more. While that information is helpful, teams now exist on most campuses. Therefore, it is my belief that the focus should shift towards assessing the teams and making sure that they are effective at both helping students (case management) and preventing violence (threat assessment). The BAT community now needs to determine the factors that lead to an effective team. Although the reporting and record-keeping from the team reviewed in this paper has been inconsistent, there are many good ideas that come from the data they have collected over the years. All of this information, if kept consistently over a period of time, could produce valuable data for the team and institution, whether it is risk levels, GPAs, or the case categories. Any of these criteria could be part of the information gathering process of an effective team. As this team moves forward, they have many opportunities for collecting this information and identifying patterns and trends that can better help them serve their students and their institution.

Even more important to note is that any team, with even the most basic databases and record-keeping practices should have access to much of this same information. Not only would this allow any institution to track what they are seeing and doing, but also opens doors for researchers to make comparisons along all of these criteria. If these methods of data collection were adopted by other institutions, BATs may begin to not only assess their own teams, but also be able to compare their results to other institutions similar in size, location, or any other criteria they wished. The information from each institution could even be compiled into a national report allowing campuses to compare their data against national averages. When considering all of these options, the possibilities for future research on BATs, their effectiveness, and even their contributions to student success and campus safety are numerous. Further research, as well, is needed on the variables that define effectiveness for teams and the methods used to measure those variables.


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