Getting Ahead of the Curve: Creating a Partnership between BITs/TATs/RATs and Admission Staff

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Abstract
Behavioral Intervention, Threat Assessment, and Risk Assessment Teams overwhelmingly spend their time reacting to referrals and reports of concerning actions or statements made by college/university constituents. The time devoted to proactively addressing issues may be minimal or nonexistent. North Central College’s BIT has considered the question, “What could we be doing to get ahead of the curve?” Our response was creating a robust and productive partnership with our institution’s Office of Admission.
This important point will be highlighted throughout this article. Students and working to prevent any future concerns from arising.

An admission staff member and the BIT is about resourcing incoming students because of a BIT review, and that would only ever result from prior criminal or disciplinary concerns involving a significant risk of harm to the campus community, as identified by the BIT. Again, the focus of the vast majority of collaborative work between admission teams, it is important first to highlight the role and scope of a BIT. When reviewing information shared through the admission process, a BIT’s primary focus must be prevention and proactive risk assessment.

When working to address referrals made by admission staff, the BIT should concentrate on offering, developing, and managing support for incoming students prior to their arrival to set the students up for success on campus. And while it may be appropriate for a BIT to recommend next steps when reviewing/reacting to criminal or conduct-related information shared by a prospective student, especially when the prior conduct could pose a risk of harm to the campus community, this should be relatively rare and the BIT should not make actual admission decisions for the college/university. As such, it would be uncommon for a prospective student not to be admitted because of a BIT review, and that would only ever result from prior criminal or disciplinary concerns involving a significant risk of harm to the campus community, as identified by the BIT. Again, the focus of the vast majority of collaborative work between an admission staff member and the BIT is about resourcing incoming students and working to prevent any future concerns from arising. This important point will be highlighted throughout this article.

**Important Note on Scope and Role of the BIT**

Before we dive deeper into the concept of BITs working closely with admission teams, it is important first to highlight the role and scope of a BIT. When reviewing information shared through the admission process, a BIT’s primary focus must be prevention and proactive resource referral.

**Institutional and Team Background**

North Central College is a small, private, comprehensive liberal arts and sciences college located roughly 30 miles west of Chicago in Naperville, Ill. We serve approximately 2,700 undergraduate students, about 1,400 of who live on-campus. The college also has a small population of graduate students, bringing our total student population to approximately 2,900.

Fortunately, the college has a very active and healthy Behavioral Intervention Team. The current BIT was formalized in 2013, and its membership includes representatives from the Office of the Dean of Students, Academic Affairs, Residence Life, Campus Safety, the Wellness Center (counseling and medical), Athletics, and Academic Support. Our team meets weekly for approximately two hours and reviews an average of 10–25 referrals, typically submitted through the college’s Early Alert Referral System. North Central’s Early Alert System allows anyone (i.e., faculty, staff, student, parent, guest, etc.) to submit referrals regarding anything that might hinder an individual’s success at North Central or cause alarm for the safety of an individual or the community.

In an average year, the college receives between 750 and 900 Early Alert referrals. These referrals are diverse in nature, covering anything from, “Suzy failed her weekly test and she doesn’t normally do that,” to “I think my roommate might have been raped,” to “A student in my ethics class told the professor to ‘f#&k off’ and then stormed out of the room.” The majority of referrals we receive are academic in nature. Nevertheless, the Early Alert Referral System is what feeds the cases being reviewed and acted upon by the college’s BIT. The team reviews the most serious referrals during weekly meetings. When a situation warrants, an emergency meeting may be convened. Currently, the team uses the National Behavioral Intervention Team Association’s Threat Assessment Tool to assess and classify risk.

The North Central College BIT focuses primarily on referrals that involve a faculty member, staff member, or student who may pose a risk of harm to themselves and/or others. However, our BIT also functions as a resource for students who are not necessarily a risk to themselves or others, but who may be experiencing significant personal difficulty. This could include, for example, a first-generation student who may be the primary caretaker for an ill parent and is struggling to balance that role with academic demands, or a student who suffers from a serious chronic medical condition and also recently got into a car accident. As a result of the college’s healthy referral culture, facilitated over many years of work both prior to and after the formalization of our BIT, and the institution’s relatively small size, the BIT is frequently alerted when
multiple concerns are affecting an individual’s life and/or academics. Often in these types of cases, our team takes less of a risk/threat assessment approach and focuses more on offering care, support, and resources.

**Getting Ahead of the Curve: Building Partners in Admission**

The most robust partnership between the BIT and the admission staff began through the use of the college’s Early Alert System. This system allowed admission staff to submit information/referrals after an admission decision had been made and typically after a student accepted the offer of admission and submitted a deposit, but before the student started classes. Having worked closely with our admission staff over the years, the student affairs leadership was aware that students and their families often disclose personal issues, medical concerns, and mental health needs to those staff members during the admission process. Conscientious admission counselors would often refer both a student and family to the appropriate on-campus resources (e.g., medical staff, counseling, dean of students, disability services, etc.) and also track this information/disclosure in their own admission database.

During the spring of 2014, our Dean of Students, who serves as the Chair of our BIT, trained the admission staff in Early Alert reporting. This assisted admission in its already strong practice of sharing information so the BIT and other campus partners could be of assistance to incoming students. The training included examples of the types of concerns that admission counselors could submit to the Early Alert System to ensure that students who may need support are being offered resources early on and/or that they are on the radar of those whose job it is to provide ongoing support. This training, and subsequent refresher workshops held over the years, have resulted in a marked increase in the number of referrals coming from admission.

For referrals that do not require in-person follow up, the college has developed a form letter that can be adapted and sent to incoming students offering services tailored to their particular needs. For other matters, the team may dispatch a student affairs staff member to connect with and refer students to appropriate resources or perhaps even offer a more formal support meeting to discuss all campus and local resources available to them.

This process has significantly improved the communication and outreach to students who disclose their needs on entry. Additionally, this partnership has allowed the college to better respond to compliance-related concerns around the disclosure of a disability and/or past experience of sexual misconduct. We now have a more formalized mechanism to ensure appropriate support and/or accommodations are in place when a student managing a disability or past sexual misconduct experience arrives to campus.

**Getting Ahead of The Curve: Admission Review Cases**

It is not uncommon on college and university campuses for admission personnel to employ a process for seeking input from a Dean of Student’s Office, or in some organizations from a conduct office, when an applicant discloses a prior disciplinary or criminal history on an admission application. Sometimes, that disclosure comes in response to a particular question on an application. Other times, especially in the case of transfer students, the disclosure may also be part of a dean’s release form completed by an administrator at the applicant’s prior institution. Personal statements and essays, typically requested after a student makes an initial disclosure on an application, provide another avenue for an applicant to share information about previous disciplinary, criminal, or conduct issues.

Prior to 2015, when an applicant disclosed any concerning information — particularly a criminal or disciplinary history — the North Central admission staff would reach out to the Dean of Students or conduct officer to request a review of the information. This “case” would then be reviewed by the first available dean at the college, typically an assistant or associate dean, or the Dean of Students herself, at times in consultation with other appropriate parties. After review and consultation, an opinion or recommendation back to admission on the candidacy of the applicant, with regard to the criminal or disciplinary background, would then be provided. As the BIT formalized and gained experience reviewing behaviors of current students, a natural opportunity arose to use the team’s expertise to examine disclosed disciplinary or criminal behavior of prospective students to assess whether a risk of community harm may exist.

In April of 2015, North Central decided to pilot a process by which the BIT would be responsible for review of any relevant admission concerns or questions about prospective students involving a potential of risk of harm to the campus community. These became known as “Admission Review” cases. The Dean of Students Office knew the BIT was well-equipped and established in assessing risk, reviewing complex cases, and following up on concerning information. In addition to the benefits gained by using the BIT’s expertise, having these cases reviewed by the BIT also made the team aware of incoming students who may be in need of immediate support and resources.
Operationalizing A Partnership with Admission

Of the 10–25 cases the North Central College BIT team reviews weekly, there are normally one or two cases that come from an admission staff member. These are typically only the most significant cases referred by admission, and involve a prior criminal or disciplinary history and concerns over a risk of harm to the campus community. The level of discussion, action, and research conducted by the BIT on cases submitted by admission staff is determined by the nature of the matter or question that was referred to the BIT. Often, the team simply processes the information shared and may choose to only monitor a situation and/or store the information in the event that it could be helpful in serving a student in the future. The team may dispatch a member to reach out to the student to voluntarily set-up a time to discuss available resources. This follow-up is typical for post-admission decision referrals. Depending on the nature of a case, there are times when the BIT may require a prospective student to meet with someone on the team or in the Dean of Students Office.

In Admission Review cases, or those involving criminal or disciplinary matters, and/or where a significant risk to the campus community may be present, the BIT may recommend to admission staff that a student not be admitted. More typically, the BIT gathers information relating to the criminal or disciplinary matter and communicates “no concern” back to admission staff. Sometimes with Admission Review cases, in particular when an applicant may have been suspended from a prior institution as the result of past conduct, the team may recommend that the student in question not be eligible to attend North Central until any required sanctions have been completed, making the student eligible to attend the former institution.

In many instances, Admission Review cases do not necessitate a risk assessment score/ranking. For example, the team does not always assign risk in cases where the criminal or disciplinary history is very old and no recent incidents have occurred. In these cases, the information would simply be documented. Being aware of past disciplinary or criminal information serve the BIT and the college well if another referral is made or an incident arises. Conversely, there have been times when establishing a risk level has made sense for a case. Frequently, information gathering is done through the case manager, or during BIT meetings, when the applicant’s name is searched online to confirm the information that was presented on the application or in the referral, especially with regard to criminal concerns.

For instance, if you have a name and the nature of a reported arrest, it is relatively easy to verify that information through publicly available online records. In the event that it is needed, the BIT might also submit a Freedom of Information request to the appropriate authority to obtain additional detail and/or confirm facts in a case. For example, if a prospective student discloses an arrest for driving under the influence, the team can quickly search to confirm this information. If in doing so, additional information is revealed that was not reported on the application, the BIT can share the new information with admission. Our admission staff would then be able to follow up with the prospective student. In our experience, if a prospective student is found to have been intentionally dishonest on an application, the admission staff may elect not to offer admission to the applicant. By using the BIT to review and verify reported information on certain admission applicants, our admission team is able to make the most informed decisions possible.

The example described earlier illustrates one of the ways in which Admission Review cases can be useful to an institution. But in our experience, it is much more likely that the quick research conducted by the BIT will reveal the information reported by the prospective student to match what is easily discoverable online or with a little follow-up. When the reported information matches the found information — especially if no ongoing risk to the campus community appears to be present — the BIT will often communicate back to admission, verifying that the information shared by the prospective student appears to be accurate. This is frequently coupled with a request from the BIT to have the applicant meet with a member of the student affairs team or Dean of Students Office either prior to admission or before classes begin. This step allows a member of the administration to discuss the information disclosed by the student, establish an initial relationship with the student, offer resources as appropriate, and ensure that the student is aware of the college’s expectations.

Most cases that would be referred by admission staff would not be classified as Admission Review cases. A good example that illustrates this is a recent case referred through the Early Alert System involving an already re-admitted student with a known and significant mental health history. When previously enrolled, the student had worked with members of the BIT regarding her health and her academic success. Given the nature of the past case, and the lack of up-to-date information regarding the student’s current care, the team elected to assign a risk level. Our partnership with admission allowed the team to become aware that the student would be returning to the college and gave the BIT case manager a chance to reach out to the student upon her arrival to campus to seek an update on any recent care and to discuss ways in which the college might be able to assist with her transition back to campus.
If your BIT is interested in building/strengthening your partnership involving prospective, incoming, and re-admitted students.

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Tips to Develop a Partnership with Admissions

If your BIT is interested in building/strengthening your partnership with admission, following are some tips/suggestions for your team to consider:

1. Nurture the Relationship with your Admission Team

For this partnership to be successful, your BIT will need to have a solid working relationship with your admission staff and unit leadership. Often, the chair or case manager of the BIT has the responsibility of working to ensure that your admission team has a healthy understanding of the BIT and trusts the work being performed by the team. Additionally, for schools that don’t use a standardized application, having admission staff work with the BIT to develop a set of screening questions for the institution’s admission application might help to empower and strengthen the partnership between the BIT and admission staff.

If your institution is fortunate enough to already have a strong and effective BIT with a positive working relationship with your admission team, including Admission Review type cases could be a fairly simple and easily understood next step. If not, initial work will need to be done to strengthen relationships and trust between the BIT and admission. In North Central’s case, it took time, training, and regular communication to first develop trust and rapport with admission staff regarding the benefits of the Early Alert Referral System. This step was essential in paving the way for the team to evaluate Admission Review cases in later years.

2. Develop Expertise in Reviewing Typical BIT Cases

It is essential that your team establish expertise in reviewing, managing, and following through on your more typical BIT/Early Alert type cases, especially prior to launching Admission Review cases. A BIT is only effective if it has the continued trust of the campus community and therefore, continues to receive referrals. Once your team is well seasoned and the team’s work is valued and established in the campus culture, considering Admission Review cases can make logical sense. Of course, trust for the work and expertise of the BIT will need to be earned over time. Additionally, by taking on Admission Review cases, you are better allowing admission teams to focus on their own expertise of determining which students will be the most successful at your institution. This collaboration allows for energy to be spent more efficiently and therefore, increases productivity for both BIts and admissions personnel.

3. Understand and Establish Scope

As previously mentioned, scope is likely the most important component of a partnership with admission. Specifically, it can be a major pitfall for BITs managing Admission Review cases. It is not the BIT’s responsibility to ultimately determine whether
an individual is admissible. This is especially the case with regard to academic standards. That must be left to the experts in admission. Of course, when a BIT is engaged in information gathering, it may come across or review things like grade point averages, academic standing, or SAT/ACT scores.

However, a team should never be using academic-related information to guide their recommendation to admission. Instead, a team should assume that all prospective students who have been referred by admission are already academically admissible. Therefore, academic standards and markers should not be the focus of the review by the BIT.

The BIT should only ever be “reviewing” a case and never “clearing” a student for admission. “Clearing” a student gets into dangerous territory, because a BIT might feel empowered to “deny” a student admission. BITs must proceed with caution and focus here. Additionally, colleges and universities must be sure not to engage in any form of discrimination during the admission process. It is important that your BIT is never recommending against admitting someone with a disability to your institution on the basis of the disability, if the individual is otherwise qualified for admission. Therefore, it is paramount that a BIT only ever go so far as to make a recommendation on admission in cases where there is criminal or disciplinary information that demonstrates a risk to the campus community.

Even then, the BIT should never be the final judge of a student’s admission status. Ultimately, the scope of the team should revolve around the nature of the referral or whatever specific issue brought the case to the team. The primary role of the BIT should be to connect students to campus resources that might aid in their success at the institution. To reiterate, a Behavioral Intervention Team should rarely make a recommendation that a prospective student be denied admission, and should only ever do so if/when criminal or disciplinary information mandates such action or if information uncovered presents a significant risk to the campus community.

4. Consult, Consult, Consult
As your BIT begins to build a partnership with admission and possibly manage Admission Review cases, it is possible you may quickly find your team in potentially uncharted territory. For those BITs that do not have general counsel as a regular member of the team, we highly encourage consulting with experts in the field (e.g., NaBITA, the Association of Threat Assessment Professionals (ATAP), and The NCHERM Group), and/or your own legal counsel on any case in which the BIT is unsure about next steps and/or follow-up measures. In our experience, specifically with Admission Review cases, there is significant benefit in discussing complex or novel cases with experts in the legal field, early and often, to determine the best course of action for an institution and an applicant.

Conclusion
In the time that North Central College’s BIT has been cultivating a positive working relationship with the admission team and managing Admission Review cases, we truly have seen the benefit of “getting ahead of the curve.” The work that has been done to establish positive and fruitful working relationships with the admission staff has paid instant dividends. Not only do we see more referrals coming through, but we also see the admission team more frequently using and trusting the college’s Early Alert System to share any concerns they may have — and not just for prospective or incoming students, but for our current students as well. This, of course, translates into the college and the BIT resourcing and responding to our students in a more timely and robust manner.

In the climate in which most BITs function today, the never-ending deluge of crisis after crisis can feel overwhelming. But, when the team focuses on collaborating and forging partnerships with admission personnel, the narrative can shift slightly, from being always reactive to being more proactive. As BITs across the country continue to diligently work to create safer and more caring educational environments for all students, faculty, and staff, we hope your team will consider cultivating and strengthening a relationship with your admission staff as a step toward getting ahead of the curve.