

**Statement on the Role of the Appalachian State University Counseling and Psychological Services
Center Managing Potentially Dangerous Students
Dan Jones, Ph.D., ABPP**

The purpose of this statement from the Counseling and Psychological Services Center Director is to provide information on what our counseling service is doing to manage potentially violent students and to educate media and the general public about what such services and universities cannot do. All concerned want to ensure the safety of their students, campuses, communities and the world at large. Therapy and counseling have always been a core method of helping distressed students. After the tragic and horrific events at Virginia Tech and Northern Illinois many campuses started initiatives to help minimize the possibility of more such events involving targeted violence. One such effort involved the creation of teams with different names such as the Threat Assessment Team, Risk Management Committee, and the Early Intervention Team. At Appalachian, these three teams are all a part of the Campus Safety Council. Counseling Center staff serve as consultants in weekly meetings with these groups, usually composed of the Dean of Students, Director of Student Conduct, Director of Disability Services, Police Chief, Director of University Housing, Health Center Director, and other relevant campus partners. The Early Intervention Team is composed of faculty and staff. Such committees help "connect the dots" (*i.e.*, gather more complete information about a student from multiple sources) and identify troubled students who may have the potential to go down a path toward violence directed at themselves or others. Plans are developed to help and support such students when possible, and these plans sometimes include mandated assessments, evaluations or treatment as preconditions to continuing in, or returning to school. Seldom can a clinician make a judgment about someone's stability, dangerousness or threat status in a one hour interview. Students often describe the events that led to their referral very differently than college officials do, so it is important that releases of information conform to applicable requirements and that proper documentation be required. If you are concerned about a student, please consult the Early Intervention Team, Counseling Center, Dean of Students, or University Police. The Police Department maintains an anonymous reporting site that allows individuals to share any concern related to the safety of the campus community. That site may be accessed at: <http://www.police.appstate.edu/crime-tip-submission-form>. In addition, the University maintains an emergency website which may be accessed at <http://epo.appstate.edu/>.

Our university has hired a case manager to help the safety committees and also help connect the dots. Our case manager serves as referral coordinator to insure that students follow up with referrals. She also helps troubled students find and negotiate for the services they need. Our university has increased psychiatric services for students. Medication is often needed for more severe mental health issues. Many surveys and research projects indicate that the severity of pathology and complexity of issues have greatly increased in college student clients in the past two decades. The demand for counseling services in general has increased as well. The Counseling Center does preventive psycho-education and outreach for the campus on such topics as suicide, eating disorders, or trauma, by going into classrooms, fraternities, sororities, residence halls, and club meetings to present. Counseling center staff often provides training to faculty, staff, and students on identifying troubled and troubling students and on how to refer such at-risk students for the help they need. One of the seemingly invisible services offered by college counselors has involved the increasing amount of time required for consulting with worried parents, faculty and staff regarding students of concern. The tragic shootings lead concerned professionals, friends and loved ones to seek more information and more assurance. College counselors attempt to reduce the stigma associated with psychiatric problems and to encourage the use of campus counseling services. It is also important to realize that the mentally ill are more likely to be on the receiving end of violence than the perpetrator of violence, and to understand that most of those with even serious mental illness are not violent.

Counseling and Psychological Services devotes much time and energy to contribute to safety through our programs and services, including facilitating campus environments free of hate where diversity is supported

and valued. The Counseling Center strives to work with students and the environments in which they live to facilitate health, well-being, and civil behavior.

Counseling service staff is sometimes dismayed when the media or the general public do not understand the limitations they are under. Universities cannot restrict or limit students because they are odd, strange, weird, unusual, or bizarre, nor should they. People have a right to be eccentric even if they make others feel uncomfortable. Universities cannot make someone get treatment. In North Carolina, only the courts have that power. Further, a psychiatric diagnosis is likely to protect a student under the Americans with Disabilities Act. Students cannot and should not be dismissed from school because they have a mental illness. If they are dismissed it must be for disruptive behavior such as aggressive or threatening behavior or disruption of the educational environment. Usually the Dean of Students office makes those decisions. It is important to hold students to behavioral standards and to take action when codes are violated. The International Association of Counseling Services (IACS), the accreditation agency for collegiate counseling services, discourages counseling services from being involved with discipline or enrollment decisions.

Most universities have limited resources. A college can't monitor thousands of students on and off campus. Concentrating counseling center resources on serving the few potentially dangerous students for their four years or more of college would result in curtailing or eliminating services for many other students who need counseling and support. Psychiatrists can help with the increasing pathology and severity that counseling services are encountering, but there is a national shortage of psychiatrists.

The community mental health systems in most states have been diminished or dismantled in the past decade, purportedly in the name of mental health reform but apparently more in the service of cutting budgets and saving money. This severely limits referral resources, especially for the uninsured or low income students, many of whom cannot afford deductibles or co-payments. Even when a referral can be made, the outcome is dependent on the client's desire to change.

The college students we work with are usually legally adults and are entitled to the same confidentiality that protects all adults who seek counseling from mental health professionals. Confidentiality protections are codified in state mental health law and in counseling, psychology and social work ethical standards and licensure laws. We can lose our license and be sued for breaking confidentiality outside of specified legal exceptions, most commonly when the patient presents an "imminent danger" to self or others. In some situations, breaking confidentiality is a criminal offense. If we determine that a student is an imminent danger to self or others, we do take appropriate steps, including making appropriate disclosures, to reduce that risk.

Incidents of targeted violence are too rare for reliable or valid profiles or protocols to be developed, and there are no useful instruments or methods for predicting such violence. The number of students who display the behaviors that have been observed in past school shooters is much higher than people outside of college counseling or campus police work would expect. If predictions were based on observation of such behaviors, there would be a great number of false positives. Even the best FBI or Secret Service forensic psychologists can't predict such targeted violence. Further, most college and university clinicians are trained primarily as helping professionals rather than as forensic psychologists, and they should not be asked or expected to practice outside of their competence.

Counseling and Psychological Services has a priority to contribute to campus safety. Counseling center staff have unique experiences, roles, and responsibilities related to campus safety. We have been leaders in the provision of counseling services for decades. We have: (a) pioneered outreach, (b) routinely considered that culture might play a role in effective service, (c) designed and implemented mental health triage systems, and (d) provided crisis intervention. Please feel free to consult with us regarding the matters discussed in this statement.