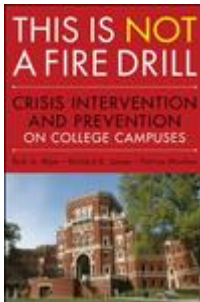


Empowerment for Crisis Prevention and Recovery: What Does It Take?

A review of



This Is Not a Fire Drill: Crisis Intervention and Prevention on College Campuses

by Rick A. Myer, Richard K. James, and Patrice Moulton

Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2011. 368 pp. ISBN 978-0-470-45804-4. \$60.00, paperback



Reviewed by

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As a faculty member for 42 years at Virginia Tech (VT), the site of the most horrendous school shooting in U.S. history (cf. Lazenby, 2008), I read *This Is Not a Fire Drill: Crisis Intervention and Prevention on College Campuses* with empathic interest and authentic concern. Indeed, the authors dedicate an entire chapter to an analysis of the VT tragedy of April 16, 2007, including a discussion of the rather complex systems currently in place at VT and other universities to identify, assess, and treat students who demonstrate “a substantial likelihood of danger to self and/or others or significant decomposition into disorganized, irrational, and unpredictable behavior” (p. 121). This 368-page book educated me substantially about the complexity of issues surrounding the seemingly straightforward task of identifying severely disturbed students and removing them from the university community if they impose a possible danger to themselves or others.

Since that horrific event on our campus, I've been involved in numerous discussions with students and faculty about how a senior as obviously emotionally disturbed as Seung-Hui Cho could have avoided detection and effective therapy for four years. The passionate and comprehensive account of an English professor's attempts to warn appropriate authorities about Cho's emotional instability (Roy, 2009) only fueled post-hoc indictments of university administrators for not doing more to prevent the tragedy. Inevitably these "what-if" conversations progress to finding fault with local police for not locking down the campus sooner (i.e., after the double homicide in a VT residence hall occurred across our large campus from the site of the gunman's subsequent rampage that killed 30 more students and faculty and injured at least 26 others; Roy, 2009).

No Quick Fix

From the start of this fault-finding dialogue, my stance has been that Cho's parents should have been notified as soon as he showed signs of severe emotional distress or offered "ominous writing and verbal threats" (p. 107). Couldn't (or shouldn't) Professor Roy have contacted Cho's mother or father about the unstable and troubling behavior he manifested long before his shooting spree? And shouldn't other university officials, especially counselors who evaluated him, have done the same?

Of course, I proposed these questions after learning the respectable social status of Cho's parents and the fact his older sister graduated from Princeton University. Plus, I professed these questions before reading *This Is Not a Fire Drill*. Readers of this well-written and comprehensive analysis of the variety of tactics needed to keep a university campus safe will learn a multiplicity of complex but critical challenges, from developing a multifaced crisis management program (CMP) to implementing policies to guide decisions for both preventing a campus crisis and reacting effectively after a crisis.

Consider, for example, the seemingly simple and straightforward strategy of informing proper authorities about threatening and/or uncomfortable comments made by a student to a counselor, as was the case with Cho. As the authors point out with profound detail, a "legal shield of *privileged communication*" (p. 105) disallows disclosure of the threat to a third party, except under certain circumstances.

What are these circumstances? When does the disclosure of an individual's disconcerting verbal behavior outweigh the benefits of preserving confidentiality? This book entertains the ethical and legal issues related to deriving answers to these crucial crisis-prevention questions, including the dynamics of deriving a practical answer for a particular situation.

After the VT disaster, for example, laws were passed by the Virginia legislature that "have wide-ranging implications for clients, counseling centers, and universities themselves"

(p. 108) and “will result in a significant alteration of business as usual, potentially for university counseling centers across the country” (p. 122). Will these changes be beneficial to the prospect of preventing disasters caused by university students? A lawyer and current president of the National Behavior Intervention Team Association says “no,” claiming such policy change “is ill-considered,” mainly because it “potentially undermines the clinical relationship, creates incentive for the subject to lie” (p. 122), and decreases the probability of a long-term student–counselor relationship.

This single aspect of one case study, dear to my heart, merely scratches the surface of addressing the overwhelming responsibility of keeping colleges and universities safe. No one can deny the need for a comprehensive CMP for colleges and universities.

But what are the necessary components of such a program? What personnel and resources are needed, and how does one activate and sustain the commitment needed to make this happen? What assessment tools and systematic methods are available to determine the effectiveness of the variety of prevention interventions and emergency response tactics? And how can one get the right people on board to conduct the assessments needed to continuously improve each component of a campus CMP?

Rick Myer, Richard James, and Patrice Moulton help readers deal with each of these questions in meaningful and convincing ways. They clearly define the multiple components of an effective CMP for college and university campuses, and they explain the skills needed to implement each component. Then, with provocative case examples and illustrative dialogues, they persuade readers that the intervention tool or procedure will work if it is implemented properly.

The Empowerment Imperative

As a safety trainer, consultant, and researcher for more than 35 years, I am all too familiar with the difficulties in motivating injury-preventive action, in contrast to the reactive responding after an injury. I’ve learned that the best way to enable people to feel empowered and self-motivated with regard to prevention intervention is to help them answer “yes” to three questions: (a) Can I do it? (b) Will it work? and (c) Is it worth it? (cf. Geller, 2005, Part 7).

Is It Worth It?

In the domain of industrial safety, I’ve found it most difficult to obtain an honest “yes” answer to this critical empowerment question. Why? Because people are motivated by the soon and certain consequences of their behavior (Skinner, 1953), and the need for extra

safety-related behavior is usually not apparent throughout a person's daily routine. People take risks every day, from talking on a cell phone or texting while driving to mindlessly rushing an activity at work, and such risk taking is usually not punished by an aversive consequence (e.g., an injury). In fact, these risky behaviors are typically reinforced by both performance efficiency and the avoidance of anticipated inconvenience and/or discomfort.

Common sense informs us that group statistics do not work to obtain a genuine "yes" to this empowerment question. Rather, the circumstances must become personal to the individual. Thus, it's most effective to show real-world examples of negative consequences experienced by people in situations similar to the target individuals—those who need to believe that avoiding the improbable negative consequences is worth the continuous and inconvenient prevention efforts.

Myer et al. use realistic case studies not only to activate personal interest in the variety of issues, policies, and procedures relevant to keeping a campus safe but also to teach readers step-by-step methods for preventing a crisis and for recovering after a crisis. In particular, the authors use realistic dialogue among members of the crisis management team at Central University (an imaginary institution) to detail the numerous challenges that a campus must face when attempting to bounce back after a crisis.

Having experienced firsthand the life-changing aftermath of the VT tragedy, I am quick to answer "yes" to the empowerment question "Is it worth it?" And the authors' realistic portrayal of this and other campus crises incites interest to learn more about crisis management for colleges and universities.

Can I Do It?

After poring over the seemingly infinite particulars of preventing and reacting to a campus crisis, I'm persuaded that the authors' CMP proposals will work (i.e., Empowerment Question 2), but I'm concerned that a "yes" answer to Empowerment Question 1, "Can I do it?," will be difficult to obtain from individual readers. In fact, many readers will likely find the descriptions of policies, procedures, and interventions to be mind-boggling from a personal action perspective. For example, readers untrained or uninterested in psychological assessment will be overwhelmed by the detail about the Triage Assessment Scale for Students in Learning Environments (TASSLE), but clinical psychologists will want more specifics about this assessment tool (e.g., the TASSLE is not provided, though it is actually purported to be included "in Appendix B," p. 240).

Correspondingly, the target audience of this book is not obvious. In other words, the number and diversity of possible users and applications of the authors' enlightened and provocative advice are considerable. Therefore, I'm afraid that a reader with certain expertise and job functions related to crisis management will lose personal interest or focus

while wading through the mounds of material irrelevant to his or her potential role in a CMP. This difficulty can be readily resolved if the book is read and discussed by a diverse team of individuals, each with a designated skill-relevant assignment for developing, implementing, and sustaining a campus CMP.

If this book is used in a series of workshops for those willing to serve on a CMP team, a talented instructor could enable “yes” answers to the three questions that reflect the level of empowerment needed to prevent a crisis on the campuses of colleges and universities. I hope that comprehensive CMP instruction will soon be commonplace at educational institutions nationwide. *This Is Not a Fire Drill* should be required reading for such a course.

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