

September 3, 2009

TO: All Faculty and Staff  
FROM: Thomas Pedersen  
Assistant Director for Student Rights and Responsibilities  
RE: When Student Behavior Concerns You

## **Memorandum to UW-River Falls Faculty and Staff**

The UW River Falls **Behavior Intervention Team (BIT)** thought it appropriate to provide members of the River Falls community with information and advice regarding how to handle students whose behaviors create concern for the health or safety of individuals and/or the campus community.

This team created in the fall of 2007 serves to identify, assist, and direct those students whose behavior has become a significant concern to others. These campus professionals meet on a weekly basis, but also convene at limited notice when appropriate. Members of the UWRF BIT have participated on the Governor's Task Force on Campus Safety, and reviewed and responded to UW System President Kevin Reilly's Commission on Campus Security as well as attended training provided by UW System on Campus Violence, Interruption, and Responding. The UWRF BIT team has also recently received Advanced Threat Assessment Training taught by a former member of the U.S. Secret Service. Further information regarding the make-up of the team and contact information is contained at the end of this memo and in the enclosed brochure.

### **1. How frequent is violent behavior toward others or oneself exhibited on campus?**

In the wake of the shooting incident at Virginia Tech University, it is reasonable to wonder about the threat of violence on campus. Thankfully, the overall rate of murder and violent crimes among college students is very low – even lower than for their non-student counterparts. Similarly the rate of suicide among college students, while somewhat higher than violent crimes, is also quite low and less than non-students in the same age cohort. Because media reports tend to link mental illness to violence, it is important to highlight that research has shown that the vast majority of people who are violent do not suffer from a mental disorder, and that the vast majority of people diagnosed with a mental disorder are not violent.

### **2. How can I identify behavior that poses a health or safety risk to the student or the campus?**

Because of the above facts, it is important to resist the temptation to try to “profile” potentially violent students based on media reports of school shootings or student suicides. The most promising approach currently available to minimize the risk of violence is a “threat assessment,” based on analysis of **observable behavior** compiled from multiple sources.

Some examples of behaviors that might signify risk are included in the reference list at the end of this document. If you are unsure as to whether the students' behavior could potentially pose a threat, please contact the Behavior Intervention Team.

### **3. Should I talk with a student about my concerns?**

As a faculty or staff member with regular student interaction, an effort at conversation is generally advisable. In the aftermath of events like the Virginia Tech shootings, it is important not to perpetuate a climate of fear and distance between professors and students, especially students who may seem odd, eccentric, or detached. Research on violence prevention suggests schools and colleges need *more* cross generational contact, not less. This entails fostering a *community of engagement*, defined by an active sense of mutual responsibility. Now more than ever we must demonstrate skills in reaching outward, not retreating inward.

When you talk with students you are concerned about, please do not give assurances of confidentiality. A student who appears to pose a threat to self or others, needs to be referred for assessment and assistance. College professors and university staff should not abrogate their traditional role as guides and mentors, but they also must not assume the responsibilities of therapists or police officers.

**4. What else should I do when I have serious concerns about a students' behavior?**

What is most important to remember is that trained colleagues stand by to help. Administrators responsible for student conduct are authorized to take immediate action if a student engages in threatening or disruptive behavior. At the same time, it is also important to remember that students must be treated fairly and responsibly – just as administrators and faculty members would expect if they were the subject of comparable inquiry.

Our overall process in responding to serious health and safety risks is managed by the **Behavior Intervention Team**, chaired by the Assistant Director for Student Rights and Responsibilities and including representatives from Student Affairs, University Police, Student Health and Counseling Services, Residence Life, Chancellor's Office, and the City of River Falls Police Department.

When a concern is expressed, the professionals in this group will work collaboratively to evaluate the overall risk and develop a coordinated response that balances individual rights and needs with those of the campus community as a whole.

You may reach the **BIT** team by contacting Student Affairs at 425-4444 Ext. 114. When concerned about immediate threats to safety of individuals or groups or people, call University Police first by dialing 425-3133 or 9-911.

To download "Assisting Students During Emotional Distress: Guide for Faculty and Staff" please go to [www.uwrf.edu/counseling](http://www.uwrf.edu/counseling) and click on the Faculty and Staff area.

*\*the above material has been adapted from a document prepared by Gary Pavela, recognized expert on law and policy in higher education – used with permission of the author.*

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<b>UWRF Reference Clip Sheet</b>		
<b>Immediate Threat to Health/Safety</b>	Call River Falls Police UWRF Police	9-911 Emergency 425-3133 UWRF Office
<b>Behavior Intervention Team</b>	<b>Office of Student Rights and Responsibilities</b> (715) 425-4444 ext. 127 Thomas Pedersen, Assistant Director	
	<b>Student Affairs</b> Gregg Heinselmann, Associate Vice Chancellor	(715) 425-4444 Ext. 114
	<b>University Police</b> Richard Trende, Director	(715) 425-3133
	<b>Student Health &amp; Counseling Services</b> Alice Reilly-Myklebust, Director	(715) 425-3293/3884
	<b>Residence Life</b> Sandi Scott-Duex, Director	(715) 425-4444 Ext.118
<b>Behaviors suggesting a health/safety risk:</b> <i>hostile, aggressive, or otherwise disruptive behavior; overt references to suicide; evidence of self-harming behavior; threats or references to harming others; inability to communicate clearly; disjointed thoughts, garbled or slurred speech, loss of contact with reality; beliefs or actions at odds with reality; seeing or hearing things that are not there; comments idolizing school shooters, etc.</i>		