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Emergency Management in Community Colleges: Why Colleges Need to be Prepared

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This practice brief provides community college leaders with recommendations for preparing for emergencies that could occur on their campuses. When issues occur on college campuses that have an impact on day-to-day operations, administrators need to be prepared to ensure that their students, faculty, and staff have the knowledge of what to do before and after these situations occur. Also, these issues can bring increased media attention and, if the incident is not handled properly, it can cause serious harm to the institution's reputation. Having plans and teams in place prior to an incident will benefit not only the institution but those that are directly affected by the emergency as well.

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Emergency Management in Community Colleges

On July 7, 2016, five police officers were killed in Dallas, Texas, by a gunman who wanted to inflict as much damage as possible. During the rampage this person also wounded two El Centro College police officers. El Centro College is a community college located in the downtown Dallas area. While the college was not specifically targeted in this situation, this incident brought damage, both physically and psychologically, to the institution as well as the community

(Winn, 2017). Even though this incident is an extreme example of a tragedy, it is a real situation that community colleges need to be prepared to handle. There is a wide range of emergencies that can occur at any given time on college campuses.

There are two types of emergency events that can affect community colleges: acts of violence and threats of disruption. Acts of violence can refer to intentional acts committed by an individual or a group of people. These include, but are not limited to, a bomb threat, an active shooter, a domestic violence situation, or some other act that

involves physical, or attempted physical, violence. Threats of disruption are those events that could cause long-term issues for institutions. Examples of threats of disruption include, but are not limited to, building collapses, fires, tornadoes, floods, hurricanes, earthquakes, and disease outbreaks.

It is almost impossible to have an exact plan in place for every conceivable type of emergency that could occur on or near a community college campus. But just because there cannot be an exact plan for every type of scenario in place, it does not mean that community colleges shouldn't be prepared. The implications for not being prepared for these crises are immense and failure to plan and prepare for them can damage the reputation of the institution for a very long time, especially if there is a loss of life or significant damage to infrastructure.

Emergency plans are related to external and internal threats to campus as well as natural disasters which can cause disruption to normal operations. After reviewing available literature on this topic, this practice brief provides recommendations for community colleges to ensure they are utilizing effective emergency management practices.

Current Research

A majority of the current research relating to emergency management issues on college campuses relates to four-year universities. While these do not specifically relate to community colleges, the information gathered could still be used by community college leaders to ensure that they are using the best practices as well. There is strong evidence describing the importance of utilizing best practice emergency management procedures.

In one study relating to community colleges, Connolly (2012b) noted that just because a college has a plan in place to deal with crises or emergencies, it does not mean it will necessarily be prepared when an issue occurs on the campus. Multiple methods need to be used to ensure campuses are safe during an emergency situation. According to Connolly (2012b), the results of a study conducted at one college showed that a majority of faculty and staff members were not sure what was expected of them in an emergency. This is important because even if a plan is in place, it does not mean anything if faculty and staff don't know what they are supposed to do when a real incident occurs. In regards to possible crises on our campuses, Connolly (2012b) stated that:

> school officials have no idea what crisis or disaster will strike next or where...because your school has a plan on the books and crisis team in place does not mean that when an occurrence happens in a classroom your school will be prepared. (p.377)

If an emergency occurs on the campus of a community college there must be some type of notification process in place. Sheldon (2018) tested the impact of emergency alert communications on campuses and the quantitative study investigated how alert messages sent through text message and via social media influence the perceptions of the seriousness of a crisis. An online survey

of 172 students was implemented utilizing four different scenarios (a social media shooting alert, a text message shooting alert, a social media tornado alert, and a text message tornado alert) to gauge how they would share this information. The results of the study revealed that warning messages sent through text messages are perceived to be more serious than those sent through social media. Text messages may be perceived to be more personal so they are taken seriously. Universities commonly use social media as an advertising platform with multiple posts per day, so it is not perceived as serious as text messages would be because universities rarely send them, and when they do, it is only for emergency notifications. This study is important as it shows colleges should be using some type of text message notification to alert students, faculty, and staff during an emergency.

One way to take an active role in the safety of everyone on college campuses is by starting campus-based Community Emergency Response Teams (CERTs) that include students, faculty, and staff (Connolly, 2012a). These members typically have training that will assist them in dealing with emergencies that occur on their campuses. According to Connolly (2012a), for a college-based CERT to be successful, there needs to be support from college administration, students, and the CERT trainers as well. Support from students is important and by participating they are able to "learn a skill set that enables them to participate in activities that will prove beneficial if the campus community should find itself in a state of emergency" (Connolly, 2012a,

p. 449). This practice allows for students to develop a strong sense of community by giving them a role in ensuring the safety of their fellow students.

Having a CERT team in place is one way to ensure community colleges are preparing for emergencies. Another type of team suggested to be put in place is a threat assessment team. The difference between a CERT team and a threat assessment team is that a threat assessment team attempts to identify and manage threats before they occur while a CERT team responds to incidents that have already occurred. Pollard, Nolan, and Deisinger (2012) provided an overview of threat assessment management on college campuses. Their review of research literature revealed that identifying and managing threats to campuses are important and threat assessment teams should be developed on college campuses as these teams help keep campuses safe. Best practices include support and backing from the institution's administration, access to mental health services, involvement of law enforcement/campus security, and active outreach to the community. These teams must follow best practices and even if they are in place there may be legal scrutiny after an event occurs if the person or issue was not monitored properly by the team.

An integral component of threat assessment is the reporting of potential threats. Hollister and Scalora (2015) discussed the importance of having an effective reporting system in place to prevent violence on campuses. Their review of research literature revealed that if there is trust in campus authorities to

investigate concerns that are brought up then there will be more pre-incident reporting. Once incidents are reported, if there is an effective intervention system in place this will assist in continued reporting of possible threatening behaviors.

How do we limit violence? Sulkowski and Lazarus (2011) reviewed literature on how colleges attempted to accomplish this on campuses. Their findings were that college campuses are subject to violence because of their perceived openness and vulnerability (multiple buildings, open campuses, large numbers of people traveling through during the day). Contemporary responses to limit violent attacks include legislation; especially relating to mandatory crime reporting data, technology; cameras, automatic locks, concealed weapons, criminal profiling, and threat assessment. Sulkowski and Lazarus also stressed the importance of encouraging the reporting of suspicious behavior and the use of threat assessment to assist campuses with preventing violence before it occurs.

Looking at the research available, Fox and Savage (2009) studied twenty reports from various task forces and study groups relating to active shooter incidents on campuses. They highlighted seven top recommendations colleges and universities need to develop to prevent an active shooter event from occurring and how to respond if an incident does occur. These recommendations were to create an all-hazards emergency response plan, adopt an emergency mass notification and communication system, establish a multidisciplinary team to respond to threats and other dangerous behaviors, train personnel regarding privacy matters associated with regulations (FERPA and HIPPA), have memorandums of understanding with health agencies and other key partners in the community, practice emergency plans, conduct training, and educate and train students, faculty, and staff about notification systems and their roles during an emergency.

Recommendations for Practice

A recommendation for all community colleges is to establish a CERT team. Using recommendations from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA, 2013), this group should include individuals and organizations that serve and represent students, faculty, and staff. The CERT team should be able to respond effectively and safely to manmade or natural disasters that happen on its campus. This group should also regularly train together utilizing table-top exercises along with hands-on, real-life scenarios practiced in a controlled setting.

Another recommendation is that all community colleges should establish a threat assessment team. While this team should be tailored to fit the needs of individual community colleges, the members of the group should remain consistent. If possible, a threat assessment team should also consist of experts in the field of mental health and law enforcement. This team needs to be responsible for identifying, responding to, and managing threats to the campus and campus community.

After the CERT and threat assessment teams are formed, they need to meet and train on a consistent basis. Weekly meetings of the threat assessment team are recommended to go over previous and new cases brought to the group's attention. In addition to meetings where emergency plans and contingencies are developed and maintained, the CERT team needs to participate in table-top exercises that present different scenarios the institution could face. By going through these scenarios they can adjust their plans and responses accordingly.

A final recommendation is that all community colleges have some type of text messaging system in place to be able to get emergency notifications out when an incident occurs. While text message notification is not required by the Clery Act, the law requires transparency relating to campus crime statistics and notification of serious threats to campuses, and emergency notifications sent via text message are taken more seriously. Also, text message alert systems are able to immediately reach more students, faculty, and staff when compared to other platforms such as social media, email, phone calls, etc. However, it is beneficial to use text messaging along with other forms of communication to ensure that students, faculty, and staff have the information they need during emergencies.

Challenges

While the above recommendations are the best practices to put forward, the reality is that not all institutions may be able to effectively accomplish them. One issue relates to securing funding for the notification systems. Another issue is being able to dedicate trained personnel to the two types of teams, CERT and threat assessment. While it would be highly recommended to have some type of emergency management coordinator/director for each community college, in times of limited funding this may be a position not all colleges can afford to have. Also, the sometimes large geographical footprints of community colleges may make the formation of teams and their training hard to accomplish. If a community college covers a multi-county area with facilities in multiple jurisdictions, each location could pose its own unique challenge. One possible challenge would be to determine if each location needs its own CERT and threat assessment teams. This is a question that would have to be left up to each individual institution to decide the best course of action. A one-size fits all approach is not recommended.

Another challenge that may occur, especially in community colleges covering a large geographical area, is the different public safety representatives who would need to be involved. Some community colleges are able to have their own police or security force, but for those that don't (or are extremely small) local law enforcement would have to be represented on these teams as well. If a community college has locations in five different counties, at least five local law enforcement representatives would need to be involved, not to mention the possible inclusion of local emergency

management agencies along with various (and sometimes competing) mental health providers.

Conclusion

No community college is immune from threats to its campus. No matter how many precautions are taken, it is not a matter of if but when an incident will occur. Not having plans in place will cause many problematic issues for community colleges. Even with internal and external forces that demand attention, colleges still have to be prepared to deal with disruptions to campuses.

While each community college will be different, the evidence seems to point to the necessity of having, at a minimum, trained CERT and threat assessment teams, emergency notification systems that utilize text messaging, and emergency management plans/processes in place. While a one-size- fits-all approach is not advisable, each community college needs to have some type of emergency management plan in place in the event there is an incident that could have a short- or long-term impact on the daily operations of these institutions. Proactive approaches are needed as not being prepared for possible threats or disruptions on college campuses is no longer acceptable.

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