

ACADEMIC AFFAIRS COUNCIL

AGENDA ITEM: 5.H

DATE: April 3, 2013

SUBJECT: Threat Assessment and Online Students

Earlier this spring, Russ Poulin posed a set of questions to the WCET membership about policies, guidelines, and practices campuses have in place to prepare faculty and staff to identify and deal with mental health issues in the distance and online environment. He prefaced this by stating that he and his colleagues did some preliminary searching on this topic and found very little information regarding policies or training on identifying students in distress in distance learning environments. Responses to his queries provided anecdotal information that faculty and staff have concerns but few institutions have established strategies to deal with this.

Dr. Shekleton also shared this question with his colleagues and, once again, responses showed that there were few if any formal programs in place. However, he did receive a response that provided a solid framework for campuses and, with his permission, this is copied below.

“We have not seen institutions carve out a specific protocol for threat assessment scenarios that involve online students. Instead, we have seen institutions (e.g., Virginia Tech, which has a very highly-developed threat assessment program) use the same procedures with online students as they use with on-campus students, to the extent possible. Many sources of information that would be tapped by a threat assessment team for an on-campus student will also be available for an online student (e.g., review of social media activity and other online activities, background checks where permitted, weapons check where possible, communications with faculty), and we don’t think it would be prudent for an institution to limit, through a policy statement, the sources of information that its teams would attempt to review just because the student is an online student. It has to be recognized of course that there will be limitations on an institution’s ability to do a full threat assessment inquiry regarding an online student, as some sources of potential information (e.g., dormitory roommates, RAs, coaches, academic advisors, professors who know the student personally) will, presumably, not be available. It should be recognized, however, that threat assessment teams may at least have a relatively better opportunity to assess the interactions between an online student and his or her professors and other students, because those interactions are likely to be documented through electronic communications. A threat assessment team that anticipates being called upon to do threat assessment of online students should be sure that the institution’s FERPA notice definition of school employee with a legitimate educational

(Continued)

RECOMMENDED ACTION

Discussion; Identify Action Steps, if any.

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interest, and any online education-specific confidentiality policies, are drafted so as not to limit the team's ability to access this potentially valuable source of information.”

This topic is also being referred to the Student Affairs Council.

Members of AAC should be prepared to discuss this, raise issues, and indicate support/action steps the system can promote to address this.