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Students' rights weighed as colleges try to assess threats

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By **Mary Beth Marklein, USA TODAY**

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A growing majority of colleges nationwide are keeping tabs on students through "threat assessment teams" charged with identifying dangerous students, causing debate to erupt over how much power the schools should have as they try to flag disturbing behavior.

Two states — Virginia and Illinois — now legally require such teams and 80% of colleges nationwide have started them since the 2007 massacre at Virginia Tech that left 32 people dead. At [Pima Community College](#) in Arizona, a Behavior Assessment Committee identified alleged gunman Jared Loughner as a person of concern months before a weekend massacre that killed six and injured 13 others, and the school suspended him.

Questions are now being raised about the appropriateness and effectiveness of the teams. In the wake of the Arizona shooting, some experts are questioning whether the school could have done more to help Loughner, or to alert authorities beyond campus borders. "There's a dangerous person put out in the community," says Stetson University College of Law professor Peter Lake.

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Other critics say administrators may try to use threat assessment teams for their own purposes. In a case involving a student dismissed from Valdosta State University, a federal judge ruled that the former president improperly called for an investigation into the student's mental health, employment and grades mostly because the student opposed plans to build a campus parking garage.

Since April 2007, news reports show that at least 67 people have been killed and 69 others injured in attacks by U.S.



[Enlarge](#) By Shaun Tandon, AFP/Getty Images

A sign welcomes visitors to Pima Community College, where Jared Loughner, the alleged Tucson gunman, attended.

RED FLAGS

Examples of behaviors and risk levels that could lead to a campus intervention:

Mild

"Distancing in the classroom through averted eye contact or wearing concealing clothing, such as hoodies or long coats."

Moderate

"Flouting a resident advisor's authority."

Elevated

"A student aggrieved at the loss of an SGA election who lashes out at the winner as having stolen the election."

Severe

Aggressor "may be prepared to give up his/her life for this cause but intends to survive."

Extreme

"The so-called 'Thousand-Yard Stare' is one indication."

Source: National Behavioral Intervention Team Association

college students.

Threat assessment teams, also given softer names such as "behavioral intervention" or "student of concern" committees, spread quickly after the [Virginia Tech tragedy](#), where various officials each noticed red flags but didn't connect the dots in time to stop [Seung Hui Cho](#) from going on a rampage.

Nobody tracked threat assessment teams before 2007, but experts such as Brett Sokolow, past president of the National Behavior Intervention Team Association, say about 20 colleges had them before Virginia Tech. The association estimates about 1,600 campuses have them today.

United Educators, which insures 1,160 schools and colleges, recommends such teams as a way to identify [usatoday.com/.../2011-01-13-colleges-...](#)

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students who may pose a risk on campus, gather information to assess the situation, and determine whether there is need for an intervention. That could involve, for example, an evaluation for disability services, a referral for medical treatment, a call to parents or suspension.

Students, faculty and staff are encouraged to submit confidential reports detailing concerns about behaviors they've seen. The reports go to a committee, which meets regularly to discuss cases and intervene when necessary.

"We try to look at each case objectively, to see whether we're dealing with a goofy, immature kid, or someone who's truly a danger," says Patricia Lunt, head of Campus Assessment, Response and Evaluation (CARE) Teams at Northern Virginia Community College, which enrolls 78,000 students.

Last year, the first year the school began tracking students, 130 reports were submitted, about half involving "concerning" behaviors such as verbal threats, erratic or disrespectful behavior or talk of suicide. Fewer than five students were dismissed, Lunt said.

Pima Community College, which suspended Loughner and steered him toward mental health treatment, has been praised for following standard policies. "The school did what they were supposed to do, which is protect their school, require an evaluation," says Brian Van Brunt, president of the American College Counseling Association and director of counseling at Western Kentucky University.

Some mental health officials argue that suspension is inappropriate. "The fear is that rather than using (teams) as a vehicle to support students, they're using them as a vehicle to get rid of them," says Karen Bower, senior staff attorney at Bazelon Center for Mental Health Law, an advocate for mentally ill people.

"Colleges are in a unique position to engage students and work with them, support them to get them the help they need ... They are in an environment where people can reach out and make a difference." She says the existence of threat assessment teams might discourage students from getting the help they need.

Students' rights groups say administrators are infringing on students' free-speech rights. "Putting innocent outbursts into a campus database is a chilling way to police discourse on campus," says Adam Kissel, vice president of the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education. "In the name of security, behavioral intervention teams are encouraged to go far beyond what they need to do."

Advocates acknowledge colleges face complicated decisions.

"No one wants to be the college who fails to react. But no one wants to be the college that overreacts," Sokolow says. "The key is do due diligence."

Contributing: Brad Heath

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The cause of the attacks are the use of psych drugs, so the reduction of the use of these drugs (like anti-depressants) is the best way to reduce these situations. These poisons create suicide and homicide thoughts and obsessions.

There are many other ways to help people with problems that make them drug addicts. And, remember that Al-qaeda uses drugs to create the suicide bombers

It's b/c students like the Tech shooter and lately the AZ shooter were NOT under care and properly medicated not to mention their parents either in denial or clueless WHY "big brother" needs to step in.

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.....

Typical right-winger thinking only the left wing wants more government control.

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Got to indoctrinate those students into the police state.

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minstrelmike (20 friends, [send message](#)) wrote: 9m ago

When some wack job kills and reporters go talk to the neighbors and friends and ask what he was like, THERE ARE ONLY TWO possible ANSWERS!!!

Either he was a little weird or he seemed perfectly normal.

Those are the only two choices.

It's very hard to determine if the little-bit-odd person is dangerous and it is impossible if the person doesn't even seem a little odd.

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Without a doubt, the greatest tool for helping out the mentally ill is the "3 day involuntary commitment".

The "3 day involuntary commitment" is a 3 day lock down in a psych ward against the person's will.

They work wonders by getting a psychotic person the meds they need to stop the psychosis.

Anti-psychotic meds (like Zyprexa) take 3 hours to work, so it does not take long for the person to see that they are better and that they don't have voices in their head and intense delusions anymore.

A "3 day involuntary commitment" requires the person "be an imminent threat to themselves or others".

By all reports, Loughner met this criterion and should have gotten the "3 day involuntary commitment".

Maybe the college "threat assessment teams" should understand when and how to use the "3 day involuntary commitment" so that they can actually help the kids out.

Instead they just kick him out of school and make him more upset and determined to exact out his revenge.

Nice work fellows. Don't actually help solve the problem, just kick it over to someone else. Nice.

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Do you want non-medically trained professionals trying to determine if someone needs a 3-day involuntary lock-up?

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The students are paying customers and deserve to be treated with respect and dignity.

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More gov't intrusion into our lives. Bye-bye freedoms.

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