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# The Evolving Nature of Threat and Violence Risk Assessment in College Counseling Centers

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper examines the historical and current contexts of threat assessment and violence risk in higher education, highlighting the evolving roles of college counseling centers in the threat assessment process for students displaying signs of concerning behaviors. Given research showing many college mental health professionals feel under-prepared for this work, we build foundational knowledge about the differing purposes of psychological evaluations and threat assessments, and provide recommendations for ways to continue to build and demonstrate understanding, competency and proficiency with threat assessments... Our review shares recent updates in the field regarding high-risk groups and the use of AI in assessment, and highlights the need for more attention to be given to training community members as well as counseling center staff and other members of campus teams involved in decision-making about students who threaten violence. We recommend the deliberate practice model of skill building to better prepare college mental health professionals when needing to respond under stress and pressure.

The last two decades have been a time of considerable change for Institutions of higher education (IHEs) and increased demands on and expectations for their counseling centers, including involvement in threat assessment, "the best practice for preventing incidents of targeted violence" (National Threat Assessment Center National Threat Assessment Center [NTAC], 2019, p. 1; Pollard et al., 2015). This article is designed to better equip college counseling center staff when navigating the complexities of threat assessment and management, whether on their own or when working with a campus team. We begin by providing an overview of the evolving field of threat assessment in IHEs and related changes in college counseling centers. This article then reviews key assessment terminology and current recommendations for knowledge and practices in threat and violence risk assessment. We end by providing a look ahead to recent advances and the future landscape of the field

(Association of Threat Assessment Professionals [ATAP], 2006; R. Meloy et al., 2014; Sokolow et al., 2011; Van Brunt, 2015a), including training recommendations to meet evolving needs.

## The evolution of threat assessment in IHEs

Following the tragic shootings at Virginia Tech in 2007 (Virginia Tech Review Panel, 2007), the field of threat and violence risk assessment expanded quickly into university and college communities. Although threat assessment processes existed across the nation's K-12 schools, many of these approaches were built upon research based on the Columbine High School massacre in 1999 (Langman, 2014) or workplace shootings informed by U.S. Post Office policy and procedures (United States Postal Service, 2007). College-specific procedures had not yet been developed.

At first, college counseling departments, police departments, and/or student conduct officers attempted to individually address threats in a siloed fashion. Although each had essential perspectives, assessment tools, and rubrics from psychology, criminology, law enforcement, executive protection, and student conduct, their work addressed only part of the solution. The unique nature of the college community, stretching across community colleges, private and public four-year schools, residential universities, historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs), Hispanic-serving institutions (HSIs), and online institutions (hereafter referred to as Institutions of Higher Education [IHEs]), created challenges and debates about the path forward. Should threat assessment exist in the law enforcement area? Should college mental health professionals augment their training in assessing harm to self and others to include campus shooting risk? How might a team approach address threats and violence risk? These questions grew as college administrators, faculty, campus/public safety, and student affairs professionals struggled to respond as the frequency of campus shootings and attacks continued to increase. Around the same time, college counseling centers were reporting unprecedented rising demands for services from students reporting higher levels of distress and acuity (Association for University and Counseling Center Directors [AUCCCD], 2023).

Collaborative, multi-disciplinary behavioral intervention teams (BIT), campus assessment, response and evaluation/education/engagement (CARE), and threat assessment and management teams (hereafter referred to as campus teams) rose up to provide a framework, driven by The JED Foundation paper *Balancing safety and support on campus: A guide for campus teams* (The Higher Education Mental Health Alliance The Higher Education Mental Health Alliance [HEMHA], 2023). Calling for the reduction of "silos" and encouraging collaboration among the fields of counseling, law enforcement, and student conduct, this team-based approach began to be used to address

the central challenges of identifying potential attackers accurately and assessing the risk of violence. They attempt to balance multiple perspectives and potential biases in the threat assessment process, including counseling's reliance on hospitalization, student conduct's emphasis on separation from campus, and police arrest power. These three perspectives are welcomed as essential to campus teams' work (ASIS International and the Society for Human Resource Management, 2011; ATAP, 2006; Deisinger et al., 2008; NATC, 2018, 2019; Sokolow et al., 2011; Van Brunt, 2015a, 2016, 2018).

In the past 15 years, campus teams in the US have proliferated spurred by governmental, academic and legislative suggestions and mandates (Okada & Pollard, 2021), to the point of being expected (Goodwin, 2014; Pollard et al., 2015). In fact, the Center for Collegiate Mental Health (CCMH) noted that institutionally coordinated campus teams "have become the accepted gold standard of practice in higher education" (CCMH, 2016, p. 3). Although they have become more utilized (Camacho et al., 2023) and member roles more professionalized (Perloe & Pollard, 2016), IHE campus teams' practices, models and laws vary (Woitaszewski et al., 2018) and are less studied in the US than in K-12 educational settings (Camacho et al., 2023; Keller et al., 2011).

As the fields of threat and violence risk assessment generally, and in IHEs specifically, continue to evolve, the expectations for college counseling centers have changed, bringing opportunities along with increased demands and confusion in roles and practices (Camacho et al., 2023; Perloe & Pollard, 2016). College mental health professionals, notably those who serve as counseling center staff members, remain in a key position to not only provide community care and support, but also to address threat assessment and management through consultation, assessment, crisis mitigation, and violence risk/threat mitigation. Their evolving roles in college counseling centers is discussed next.

## The evolution of counseling centers' responses to threats and violence risk

Since their inception in the 1930s, college counseling centers have played a significant role in the well-being of students. Over time, the role of college counseling centers and other areas of student services have developed and become more formalized as the need to address increasing student mental health and safety concerns has become a priority, especially in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath (AUCCCD, 2023; Hodges, 2016; Mitchell, 2023). College mental health professionals no longer only offer individual therapy, they also provide outreach, consultation, crisis intervention, and prevention services as part of a community mental health and wellness model (Golightly et al., 2017). Counselors face personal and systemic challenges in trying to meet all of these needs, resulting in currently high levels of burnout and staff turnover (National Association of Student Affairs

Professionals [NASPA], 2022). Struggles over meeting increased demands for mental health and crisis services is expected to continue, with a majority of IHE professionals reporting "crisis management for students" as becoming an increasing part of their roles over the next five years (NASPA, 2022).

More specifically, college mental health professionals working in counseling centers are increasingly being asked to play a more active part in threat and violence risk assessment. Roles range from conducting (or obtaining training to conduct) a threat assessment for students, faculty, or staff (whether or not on a campus team) to offering consultation and support to campus teams. Other professionals who may take the lead in conducting threat assessments include police and campus safety, case managers or outsourced third-parties. Whether a campus counseling center is involved in conducting, reviewing, or vetting threat assessments with students, faculty and staff remains an evolving practice with some centers very involved in the work, others very opposed to threat assessment as part of their scope or worried about how being viewed in this role might negatively impact the therapeutic relationship (Mitchell, 2023; Perloe & Pollard, 2016) and other centers left somewhere in the middle.

The nature of college mental health providers' roles in dealing with threat assessment differs due to a number of contextual factors, including college and university size, resources, logistical practices and expectations, counseling center directors' interests in exploring threat assessments as part of their service delivery, acuity of the campus community mental health needs, and the directives of state laws and campus legal services. Regarding the varied sizes and staffing of counseling centers. Hodges (2016) describes how college counseling centers range "considerably from large university centers of 50 or more with some attached to a medical center, to small college counseling 'offices' staffed by one counselor" (p. 7), and counselors vary in specialization (psychologist, counselor, social worker, etc.), degree (doctorate or masters in psychology, counseling, etc.), and credential (licensure and/or national certi-fication)" (p. 7). Accordingly, some counseling centers without licensed staff have counselors provide short-term guidance and support, while other coun-seling centers assign licensed counselors to collaborate with campus teams.

In these varied contexts, counseling centers and other stakeholders in the threat assessment and management process should clearly define their roles and responsibilities within their campus community, including how and the extent to which they work collaboratively and share information when appro-priate in a legal and ethical manner. Clearly written threat assessment policies and procedures are strongly advised in IHE contexts, especially for college mental health professionals balancing confidentiality and safety concerns (Camacho et al., 2023; Perloe & Pollard, 2016). For examples, while a release of information may be signed for the counseling center staff to provide information to a campus team regarding the results of an evaluation, this does not mean they have the right to then provide updates or information

about the ongoing care of the client to a campus team unless specifically noted in the release of information. If the student of concern is an existing counseling center client and/or if staff do not possess requisite knowledge and training, then strong considerations should be given to having the threat assessment completed by an off-campus qualified provider (Camacho et al., 2023; Perloe & Pollard, 2016).

## Building foundational threat assessment knowledge for college mental health professionals

Although college mental health providers are trained to deal with crises, research reveals that counselors feel better prepared to respond to threats of harm to self rather than harm to others, in part because they have "vastly more experience with assessing dangerousness-to-self over dangerousness-to-others" (Perloe & Pollard, 2016; Pollard et al., 2015, 2020, p. 125). To assist college mental health professionals in feeling better prepared, this section begins by providing an overview of the types of assessments involved in the work and then discusses our recommendations for ways to continue to build and demonstrate understanding and competencies with threat assessments.

### Key threat assessment terminology and procedures for counseling center professionals

When training counseling center staff to complete threat assessments or to increase staff knowledge to assist campus teams by consulting and vetting threat assessment reports, the ability to differentiate among the different types of assessments and selecting the correct process for the case at hand is an important first step. This step is valuable because as the field of violence risk and threat assessment evolves, its language becomes increasingly specific. Shared awareness of specific terminology is vital for IHS professionals, as consistent use furthers collaborative efforts to train, research, and practice. Thus, while there will always be room for debate on language, this subsection presents generally accepted terms and processes that counseling center staff and directors should understand to inform their practices and protocols related to assessments, notably the types of assessments used in campus teams' work. The next subsection and Appendix A offer a useful starting place to understand what common degrees, licensures and subject matter expertise we recommend for each of these different assessments.

### Differentiating psychological assessment from threat assessment

Counseling center professionals should be aware of the distinction between psychological/mental health assessments and threat assessments used in IHEs to help them choose which type is warranted in a situation (and how that

affects informed consent, confidentiality and who is considered the client), and if the person asked to perform the assessment possesses the requisite qualifications, and whether a referral to a community provider appears warranted. More specifically, when being asked to conduct an assessment, the college counseling center staff should ask questions to determine the desired outcome of the referral. If the referring party is requesting a diagnosis for a mental illness, needs an evaluation for medication, requires testing or assessment for a job or an academic accommodation, or requires a level of care assessment for danger to self or others, then a psychological or mental health assessment would be warranted. If the goal of the assessment is to better understand the risk of a verbal, written or social media threat or if there is reasonable concern the person to be assessed will act violently to others unless an intervention occurs, then threat assessment should occur.

More familiar to college mental health professionals because it is a foundational part of their education and training, a *psychological assessment* focuses on evaluating mental illness or functional behaviors. This type of assessment may incorporate the application of psychological tests to measure cognitive abilities, personality traits, emotions, and overall stability (Van Brunt, 2018). A psychological assessment may include a differential diagnosis, referrals for medication or other adjunctive services, a treatment plan, or a determination of the need for certain level of medical care (such as detox treatment, inpatient psychological hospitalization, medical crisis stabilization, or intensive outpatient treatment). In this type of evaluation, a history of suicidal and homicidal ideation and any immediate dangerousness is assessed to ascertain the appropriate level of mental health services for the individual and keep others safe (e.g., duty to warn).

In contrast, threat assessment in IHEs and schools is a "scientifically informed, fact-based process" (Pollard et al., 2015, p. 249) of identification, assessment and management to determine whether, and to what extent, an individual is moving on a pathway toward future planned violence (e.g., mass shooting) (Miller, 2014). When someone is "troubled or there's conflict or people are worried about them," this preventative method is designed to interrupt them on their pathway to commit predatory, affective or instrumental violence (Cornell & Meloy, personal communications cited in Miller, 2014).

The threat assessment process begins with identification of information about the student of concern, including about their diverse and intersecting identities, and from various university and community contexts (Pollard et al., 2015). After learning as much as possible about the person and the threat they may pose during the identification and assessment process (described next), the management process involves developing a plan to mitigate risk by meeting their individual needs, providing supports for them in navigating challenges and resolving the threat to protect the community (Camacho et al., 2023; Mollenkamp, 2024; Pollard et al.,

2015) The assessment process involves a specific type of threat assessment, which can be conducted as part of a clinical violence risk assessment (VRA). A VRA can be visualized as an umbrella term covering specific threat assessment, psychological assessment, and/or a general evaluation of overall risk and protective factors (National Threat Assessment Center, 2018, 2019). These are discussed next.

A specific ***threat assessment*** addresses the level of dangerousness present in a threat that has been made verbally, digitally (e.g., text; social media), in writing or through artistic or visual expression (ASIS International and the Society for Human Resource Management, 2011; ATAP, 2006; Calhoun & Weston, 2009; Dilibertii & Pham, 2024; Meloy, 2000; O Toole, 2000; Turner & Gelles, 2003). It may also be referred to as a "behavioral threat assessment" to distinguish it from a physical assessment of a school's vulnerability to attack (Cornell, 2020). It involves asking: *Is there evidence of a potential attack given the nature of the threat made?* (Meloy et al., 2014).

When assessing the nature of a threat, professionals consider several qualities, including actionability (is the threat likely to be carried out or acted upon), lethality (would actionability result in death or great harm), and if the threat is transient (are low likelihood of being carried out; often an emotional reaction to a stressful situation where the person making the threat feels trapped, misunderstood, angry or unheard; may include jokes, expressions of feelings or figures of speech like "I am going to kill you" without an intention to follow through on the threat or substantive requiring more immediate attention; supported by access to weapons or lethal means; may be driven by a desire to harm or destroy a target (Blad, 2023; Burnette et al., 2017; Cornell, 2010, 2020) (these and other terminology definitions and clinical examples created by the first author are outlined in Table 1). Research on the nationally-recognized Comprehensive School Threat Assessment Guidelines (CSTAG) model's 5 step process has shown the majority of cases are resolved quickly as transient threats (Blad, 2023; Cornell et al., 2004; Cornell, 2020). Although created and studied in the K-12 context, the steps in the CSTAG model are helpful for IHEs to consider.

Just as seatbelts and speed limits prevent injuries without predicting who will crash a car, the threat assessment process aims to prevent violence without profiling or predicting (Cornell, 2020). Attempts to predict whether someone is a danger to themselves or others based on selected characteristics or profiles, dynamic factors, specialized research, psychometric measures and collateral information are involved in violence risk assessments (Cornell, 2020; Pollard et al., 2015). Pollard et al (2015, 2020). distinguish the two types of violence risk assessments: forensic VRAs conducted as part of legal processes (noting that counseling center staff seldom possess skills to conduct them), and clinical VRAs.

**Table 1.** Threat terminology.

| Threat term | Definition | Example |
|---|---|---|
| Direct | A straightforward threat made verbally or through writing/social media that communicates an intent to harm others and often includes details around method, time, and location. | "I'll kill her and myself if she breaks up with me." |
| Vague | The threat is less direct and may lack details related to method, time, or location. This may be made verbally, over social media or through artistic expression. | "You will pay for what you have done to me." |
| Conditional | The threat, whether vague or direct, carries with it a "do this or else" or "if you do this, this will happen" quality. | "If you don't change my grade, I will make you wish you had." |
| Transient | The threat, vague or direct, is made from an emotional and reactive state with less likelihood of it being acted upon because of a lack of method, means or general follow through. | "I'm going to show up at this office with a gun if this keeps up." |
| Substantive | The threat has a higher likelihood of being carried out, often because of details related to weapons access, time, or location. Assessment of substantive threats also involves contextual factors such as feeling trapped, hopeless, grievance collecting, and seeking revenge for perceived wrongs. | "I know what your car looks like and where you live. I am going to make everyone you love pay for what you have done to me next Friday at 5pm." |
| Lethal | This relates to the ability of the person to carry out a life-threating action due to their access to a firearm, fire, knives, weapons, poison, or other highly dangerous means. | Facebook post of a Glock 43× handgun and a box of hollow points |
| Actionable | This refers to the general likelihood of an attack or threat being carried out given the circumstances of the conditional ultimatum, past behavior, impulsiveness, and other related factors. | History of impulsive action and follow through with violence when challenged. |

As noted above, clinical VRAs in the IHEs threat assessment process are not intended to predict future violence, but rather offer an estimation of the risk present at a point in time to inform the risk and threat mitigation plan. Information that informs this risk estimate can come from components under its "umbrella" including specific risk assessments, and psychological assessments done by college mental health professionals that are routine. As described above, limited information from psychological assessments can be shared with campus teams, hospitals, university officials and law enforcement in emergency circumstances under confidentiality exceptions to ensure the safety of those involved, and/or when they are mandated and may be shared with a campus team with appropriate informed consent (Pollard et al., 2015).

Information gathered in the clinical also VRA includes the gathering of contextual details about a threat or risk, developing an understanding of current stressors and potential risk factors (see Table 2; ASIS International and the Society for Human Resource Management, 2011; ATAP, 2006; Calhoun & Weston, 2009; Lankford, 2016, 2018; Meloy et al., 2014; Meloy, 2000; O Toole, 2000; Turner & Gelles, 2003; Van Brunt, 2015a) in comparison

**Table 2.** Common risk factors for targeted violence.

| Environmental Risks | | |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Job or academic status loss | Victim of bullying/teasing | End of a relationship |
| Disciplinary/conduct action | Removed from important group membership or team | Loss of housing |
| Decline in academics | Death of pet, loved one | Extreme financial stress |
| Lack of access to health care | Lack of family support | Lack of peer support |
| Access to lethal weapons | Persecuted by others | Lack of anger outlets |
| Other catalyst event | Social supports in decline | Overwhelming stress |
| **Behavioral Indicators** | | |
| Direct threat | Explosive reactions/tantrums | Substance abuse |
| Acquiring weapons | Poor frustration tolerance | Lacking impulse control |
| Intimidates others | Vague or indirect threat | Suicide attempt |
| Self-injury (suicidal or non) | Sharing of an attack plan | Gifting prized possessions |
| Fixation on target groups | Focus on target | Conflict with authority |
| Leakage about attack plan | Leakage about attack location | Leakage about attack time |
| Creation of legacy token | Violent drawings or writings | Studying target |
| Countersurveillance actions | Last act behaviors | Objectification of others |
| Medication non-compliance | Overly defensive/aggressive | Lack of remorse when caught |
| Unable to take responsibility | Studying past attacks | Erratic or risk-taking behavior |
| Serious mental illness | Drastic behavior change | |
| **Cognitive Indicators** | | |
| Direct threat | Impulsivity (idea to action) | Lack of empathy; remorse |
| Hardened, inflexible thoughts | Injustice/grievance collecting | Hopelessness, lack of options |
| Fantasizing about death | Polarized, extreme thoughts | Glorification of violence |
| Oppositional thoughts | Developing attack pan | Desire for fame |
| Harboring violent fantasies | Driven toward violent action | Feels owed, entitled |

to the existing protective, stabilizing or anchor factors present (e.g., social support; community involvement; Table 3) to give an overall estimation of risk. These factors should always be seen in combination with each other. While some risk factors are more central to risk (e.g., direct threat; weapons acquisition) and others are secondary contributing factors (e.g., social isolation; substance abuse). experiencing life difficulties or having a few risk factors does not mean a person will become violent. Those who carry out mass shootings have many of these risk factors and few protective factors in their lives. Stress is manageable when the individual has the supports and

**Table 3.** Common protective, stabilizing or anchor factors for targeted violence.

| | | |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Positive work/job connection | Positive social connections | Fulfilling dating relationship |
| Successful academic progress | Involvement with sports team | Housing stability |
| Access to health care | Fulfilling relationship to pet | Financial security |
| Positive family support | Able to manage stress in life | Outlets to talk when upset |
| Empathy/awareness of others | Resiliency | Critical thinking skills |
| Emotional stability | Remorseful when appropriate | Demonstrated impulse control |
| Takes responsibility for actions | Talks through problems | Lack of extreme risk-taking |
| Belief in positive future | Avoids blaming others | |

Sources the first author used to create Tables 1–3 include: ATAP, 2006); ASIS International and the Society for Human Resource Management (2011); Calhoun and Weston (2009); Lankford (2016); (2018); Meloy et al. (2014); O Toole (2000); Turner and Gelles (2003); Van Brunt (2015a).

scaffolding needed while returning to balance (National Threat Assessment Center, 2018). College counseling centers as well as other campus services (e.g., health, wellness, disability, international student services); can offer such support and scaffolding.

Results from the assessment phase are then used to drive violence risk mitigation planning, which includes means restrictions, reduction of risk factors, and increasing protective and anchor factors. This mitigation process occurs over time and ideally involves a multi-disciplinary camps team to ensure the entirety of the context is addressed to prevent future violence.

The application of these assessment concepts in everyday practice is where training, experience and consultation with other professionals is crucial to provide a clearer path. It can be said with confidence that any approach to mitigation of threat should be multi-disciplinary and collaborative in nature, avoiding early mistakes in the field of simply tasking counseling departments, police departments or student conduct officers to assess and address the problem from their singular perspectives.

### Qualifications and training in threat and violence risk assessments: the checklist approach

Although campus teams are becoming standard, only a minority of states require threat assessment teams and no current federal laws outline competency when it comes to conducting violence risk or threat assessment and only a few states have operationalized what is required to be seen as knowledgeable, competent and proficient in these areas. Given the importance of training, knowledge and experience in this evolving field, this subsection offers a new resource as a starting place for college mental health professionals to use to guide their work in developing their abilities to conduct threat and violence risk assessments (Appendix A).

Our process checklist described below and in Appendix A was inspired by Atul Gawande's book, *A* Gawande (2011), which provides guidance when it comes to understanding the complicated and multi-faceted nature of assessment and decision-making processes. Gawande (2011) posited that when addressing complex tasks, having a checklist can be helpful to guide decision making and ensure areas are not missed. Accordingly, Appendix A summarizes the properties and knowledge base we believe are needed for the complex work of conducting violence risk assessments. Let us be very clear here, these are provided as a place to begin a discussion on what is required to have competency and proficiency in these areas. We acknowledge the work of professional associations dedicated to developing professionals in this field (e.g., Association of Threat Assessment Professionals' Certified Threat Manager Program; see also

Appendix B), and encourage future discussion and debate on what skills, degrees, and licensure a person conducting a violence risk or threat assessment should possess.

To assist college mental health professionals in considering the skills and knowledge to develop proficiency and competency in both the VRA and threat assessment process, our checklist begins with academic/professional training, such that the person conducting the assessment should have an academic degree in the field of criminology, psychology, or law enforcement (Department of Justice DOJ/Federal Bureau of Investigation FBI, 2017; Van Brunt, 2015a). Along with this, the evaluator will have a detailed understanding of transient and substantive threats, affective and targeted/mission-oriented violence, and have an understanding and system to assess common risk and protective factors related to emotionally driven/affective violence as well as targeted/mission-orientated violence (ATAP, 2006; Calhoun & Weston, 2009; R. Meloy et al., 2014; O Toole, 2000; Randazzo & Plummer, 2009; Turner & Gelles, 2003). They should be trained in the assessment of written threats based on an evidence-based approach (Smith, 2007; Van Brunt, 2015b, 2016).

A person conducting a VRA or threat assessment will clearly understand the difference between a psychological assessment to determine if a person is an immediate danger to themselves or others (inpatient admission criteria) and a violence risk and/or threat assessment to determine the likelihood of future violence and determine a mitigation plan. In addition, they will have a detailed knowledge of information standards as they apply in a college setting including FERPA, HIPAA, and state confidentiality laws (American Counseling Association, 2014; Harris et al., 2023b; Van Brunt & Sokolow, 2019). They will have the ability to clearly explain these applications to those completing the assessment, along with explaining documentation processes, if the interview will be recorded, who will have access to the results, where records are kept and for how long. Clarity is needed when addressing any dual relationships or potential conflicts that could impact the assessment.

Evaluators will receive continuous training on the topics of bias mitigation and cultural awareness and responsivity and take steps to safeguard the process of gathering contextual data while considering bias, cultural, and disability factors related to the assessment of risk and development of an intervention and threat management plan (Chen, 2017; Crenshaw et al., 1995; Van Brunt & Pescara-Kovach, 2018). They will be trained in interviewing techniques that are trauma-informed and consider assessing truthfulness, creditability, and impression management (ATAP, 2006; Van Brunt, 2015a). Future directions for education and training are provided at the end of this article.

## Recent advances and future needs: what's here, down the road and around the corner?

Given the evolving nature of the work in threat and violence risk assessment, college mental health professionals should be aware of recent advances in the field and changes on the horizon. This section meets this need by (1) sharing new areas related to risk and protective factors, including members of high-risk groups, the use of expert systems and AI in risk assessment, and increased attention to protective factors, and (2) recommending current and future practices for campus teams. A review of these areas should help college mental health professionals who engage in psychological and risk assessment as well as those who vet others doing work for their IHE in teams.

### *Advances in risk and protective factor assessment*

### *New areas related to risk of targeted violence*

Recent research related to risk of targeted violence is working to narrow the range of risk factors identified in Table 2 to consolidate them into those most indicative of violence risk (ATAP, 2006; Meloy et al., 2014; O Toole, 2000; United States Postal Service, 2007; Van Brunt, 2012, 2015a), and increasing attention to the risk factors of members of certain groups who have more recently been engaging in community violence. More specifically, we have seen an increase in research together with recent attacks related to the incel community (i.e., involuntarily celibate) (Van Brunt & Taylor, 2020; Van Brunt et al., 2021), and those engaged in racial or religious hate, white supremacy (Van Brunt et al., 2022), and political division (Hodo et al., 2023).

While many of the traditionally recognized risk factors (Table 2) are present in these groups, there are additional factors to be considered when assessing risk. When conducting a violence risk or threat assessment involving these groups, the level of indoctrination and presence of susceptibility and the presence of a cognitive opening to such indoctrination should be assessed. A cognitive opening is an emotional vulnerability exploited by those with extremist perspectives to indoctrinate people to their cause (Goli & Rezzei, 2010; Horgan, 2008). As they experience disenfranchisement, dissatisfaction, and disillusionment with life, people can seek out those with similar pain points who offer a respite or direction to their suffering (Horgan, 2008; Pressman, 2009). Disconnection from their social group, hopelessness, despair, and isolation further expand the cognitive opening, allowing for greater radicalization and indoctrination (Commission's Expert Group on European Violent Radicalisation [CEGEVR], 2008; Taarnby, 2005). Internet, social media and chat groups offer a fertile ground for these ideas to be explored by those who are searching for connection, relief

from pain and who have a higher risk of indoctrination due to these traits. Accordingly social media use is being researched to inform prevention and intervention options (e.g., Peterson et al., 2023).

When some people who identify with involuntarily celibate or white supremacist ideology progress down the pathway toward violent action, they seek justification for their actions and a deeper sense of meaning and purpose (Moghaddam, 2005). The escalation occurs parallel to a moral disengagement, a narrowing fixation and focus on targets, and the adaptation of a mission-oriented commitment to act (O'Toole, 2000; O'Toole & Bowman, 2011; Van Brunt, 2012, 2015a). A pervasive frustration, injustice collecting, and determination moves them to revenge (Pressman, 2009). Since students in these groups may present in counseling centers as part of a campus conduct process or concern brought to a campus team, college mental health professionals should consider the above information as relevant to their psychological and threat assessment work as well as treatment planning.

### Expert systems and AI

Due to the costs, time and effort involved in the multidisciplinary work of threat and violence risk and need assessment, some colleges and universities may be hesitant to invest in optimal approaches to the work. Thus, there is a reasonable assumption that the field will continue to see the use of computer based expert systems and AI to create greater efficacy and accessibility to professionals doing this work. Two dozen IHEs use these systems in their threat assessment processes.

Currently available automated triage systems like Pathways and DarkFox (Appendix B) appear to help with providing more timely access, consistency, error reduction and bias mitigation in decision making (Gawande, 2011). This automation has reportedly been successful in the analysis of written threats in essays, e-mail communication and on social media posts (Smith, 2007; Van Brunt, 2015b, 2016). Impressive advancements in this area also include the work of Drs. Nazar Akrami, Lisa Kaati, and Amendra Shrestha in their Structured Threat Assessment of Written Communication (Appendix B). Of note, the analysis of written threat should be part of a wider violence risk assessment process.

Streamlining processes and automating tasks which can be automated, while retaining human expertise and oversight, will allow for expert measures to be used more widely. Continued research into these new methods, including attention to the role of human and systemic bias in AI (Hanacek, 2022), is needed. The promise of well-researched automated methods will allow for risk and interventions to occur more efficiently, effectively, and equitably.

### Increased focus on protective and anchor factors

The field of IHE threat assessment has also been shifting to include an increased focus on the mitigation and management of threat through case management training and how some campus teams have adopted a broader prevention scope to

provide a community of care. According to the Jed Foundation (HEMHA, 2023), some campus teams charge themselves with "marshalling school resources to promote student success, health, and development by intervening in various ways that could help a struggling student continue his or her education … identifying problems and intervening before they have become severe and potentially dangerous" (pp. 8–9). Some teams also extend care to faculty and staff. Attention can also extend to team members themselves to prevent burnout and compassion fatigue (AUCCCD , 2023).

Organizations in higher education supporting these changes include the International Alliance for CARE and Threat teams, the National Association of Behavioral Intervention and Threat Assessment, and the Higher Education Case Management Association (Appendix B). Even the United State Department of Homeland Security has invested in the importance of protective and stabilizing factors through its Center for Prevention Programs and Partnerships or CP3 (Appendix B).

Since violence is bred in part from desperation, often related to systemic factors including poverty and systemic oppression, case management/community care models can address underlying needs, such as food and housing insecurity. These approaches can also offer students nonviolent outlets for their frustrations and pain, model and promote prosocial relationships and social justice advocacy, teach concepts of emotional intelligence and problem solving, and address issues of food insecurity and job access. Such work, familiar to college mental health professionals, should be done in the context of trauma informed and culturally congruent care.

## Advancing the work of campus teams: education and training

### Strengthen the core: community education

College mental health professionals as well as others serving on campus teams engage in the vital role of educating their campus community, which often extends into their personal and professional communities. One such area of core community education is helping people understand that while gun access and mental illness are risk factors for targeted violence, they are not the entirety of the problem (Van Brunt & Pescara-Kovach, 2018). Understanding violence risk and threat assessment from a wider perspective of multiple risk factors balanced with stabilizing, anchor and protective factors will need to be reinforced to a community looking for simplistic answers to a complex problem.

Another core educational area concerns a need to address the growing trend in the media to label attackers as "evil" or "monsters." The objectification of the attacker can unintentionally result in community members feeling powerless to prevent this kind of violence and may also lead potentially violent individuals to believe there is no other path for them (Van Brunt & Murphy,

2022). James Densley, a professor of criminal justice at Metro State University, describes it this way,

> If we explain this problem as pure evil or other labels like terrorist attack or hate crime, we feel better because it makes it seem like we've found the motive and solved the puzzle. But we haven't solved anything. We've just explained the problem away . . . . This is hard for people to relate to because these individuals have done horrific, monstrous things. But three days earlier, that school shooter was somebody's son, grandson, neighbor, colleague or classmate. We have to recognize them as the troubled human being earlier if we want to intervene before they become the monster. (Warner, 2022, p. 2)

While an understandable emotional reaction, this tendency in the media and writing should be addressed by campus team members (Van Brunt & Murphy, 2022). Education and verbal modeling of appropriate terminology can be done proactively during community education about campus safety and campus teams (e.g., during new student orientation) or during an active case. There is wide agreement to avoid naming or drawing any attention to the attacker for fear of contagion or copy-cat attacks. Campus teams should instead focus on behaviors rather than labels, follow due process protections, and provide consistent and equitable evaluations designed to address the reason for the referral.

### *Education and training for campus team members: deliberate practice model*

While effective campus team work should involve threat assessment education, a less discussed facet of the process involves the skills required to actually conduct the assessment. Imagine an athlete or musician who only studied videos or read books about their skill area, yet never intentionally practiced the actual sport or instrument they were hoping to develop an expertise in? We believe that it is critical to devote learning activities to the interviewing part of the threat assessment process. Pollard et al. (2015) similarly identified the need for "an intensive amount of training in conducting such risk assessments" (p. 135) for counseling centers in order to deal with low base rates for assessing danger to others.

These learning activities are often referred to as deliberate practice, a phrase developed by Ericsson et al. (1993) which refers to a structured and focused approach to learning through systematic training, practice, feedback and reflection. The psychotherapy literature shows a growing interest in deliberate practice learning across different theoretical models of therapy (Boritz et al., 2023) and specific client populations (Harris et al., 2023a). Related to the topic of interviewing around concerns of violence toward others, experts in the field of suicide assessment and intervention using the Collaborative Assessment and Management of Suicidality (CAMS) model have also emphasized the importance of ongoing skill-building and feedback (Jobes, 2016).

We believe that achieving competency in threat assessment interviewing requires opportunities to engage in two types of knowledge acquisition and

learning – declarative and procedural (Koziol & Budding, 2012). Declarative learning occurs when a person can demonstrate an understanding of concepts through memory recall and written and/or oral expression. For example, people applying to be an ATAP Certified Threat Manager have to pass a written exam. While learning declarative knowledge may be a starting point in the education of professionals conducting threat assessments, procedural knowledge is also needed to learn how to interview a client around themes of violence. Procedural learning involves multiple repetitions of a specific activity, which in this case would involve practicing violence threat assessment interviews, obtaining feedback from peers and expert trainers and making adjustments based on these suggestions.

Unfortunately, most professionals faced with evaluating a student who has made a violent threat, have very limited training and experience (Pollard et al., 2015). Even those who have significant declarative knowledge may lack procedural learning opportunities. As one way to remedy this need, we next present an example of how the deliberate practice model may be used to promote both declarative and procedural learning in conducting threat assessments and offer recommendations for next steps in training and education.

*Deliberate Practice Threat Assessment Interviewing Skills Example.* A Deliberate Practice approach would start by engaging professionals in declarative learning of the different steps in the threat assessment process and identifying specific variables within respected protocols and tools. A deliberate practice approach would then target developing competency one relevant variable area at a time.

For our example, one key variable, aggrieved or grudge holding, is a critical assessment target. Almost every known school shooter has been known to have a strong sense of being wronged by people in their lives (Peterson & Densley, 2022). Learning questions to ask someone, such as "Is there a certain person or group who is most responsible for the way your life turned out?" or "how often do you think about how others have hurt you?" is a starting point in gaining declarative knowledge competency. The next step would be to engage in some procedural learning activities, such as creating case examples, practicing role-playing of asking questions around specific assessment content areas (such as those listed above), gaining feedback from peers, and then being given an opportunity to re-do the role-play again until the professional had gained an adequate level of competency in that skill area.

Thus when accessing the training resources provided in Appendix B, we recommend that IHEs as well as professional trainers, organizations and graduate programs devote more emphasis to deliberate practice strategies that include behavioral rehearsal, assessing performance, and obtaining feedback from peers and subject matter experts. A specific example is interactive use of *Campus Threat Assessment Case Studies: A training tool for investigation, evaluation and intervention* developed by the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS),

U.S. Department of Justice (2012). Otherwise, the risks of having undertrained and unprepared staff conducting these types of assessments is concerning considering the high stakes for higher education institutions, the subject of the assessment, possible victims and the professional conducting the evaluation (Pollard et al., 2015).

## Conclusion

Over the past twenty years, college mental health professionals working in counseling centers have come to play an integral role in threat assessment and campus teams, which have become more common and expected in IHEs. Since many college counselors feel under-prepared for this type of work, we hope this article and accompanying resources have increased their knowledge about this evolving field and its practices and equipped them with tools to self-assess their training needs.

As the field of violence risk and threat continues to develop, new processes and threat content will constantly change, as risk and protective factors for targeted violence will be studied and consolidated, assessment processes will be increasingly researched and automated to mitigate bias, and counseling theories and practices will continue to develop, related to both suicide and targeted risk and violence assessment. IHEs will continue to expect and rely on departments working together to address these complex issues. New training methods, such as Deliberate Practice, are recommended for threat assessment practices and campus team work. The aim of this article was to inform college mental health professionals in each of these areas and encourage further attention, research and investment in this regard.

## Disclosure statement

Authors Dr. Van Brunt and Bethany Van Brunt have business connections to Pathway and DarkFox.

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# Appendix A

Checklist approach for developing threat and VRA:
  Evaluator qualifications and knowledge

| Evaluator domain | Recommended | Required |
|---|---|---|
| BA/BS in psychology, criminology, legal or related field | | X |
| Master in psychology, criminology, legal or related field | X | |
| Doctorate in psychology, criminology, legal or related field | X | |
| Coursework, certification in VRA (40 hours) | | X |
| Does not have dual relationship with person assessed such as current or past treatment provider, family member, personal relationship or supervisory relationship | | X |
| Has cross-discipline experience with law enforcement, psychology, criminology, conduct, and disability | X | |
| Holds a position that maintains a degree of impartiality and is free from making sole decisions related to separation from the college/university | | X |
| Free of past felony charges or professional actions under review in court | X | |

| Knowledge domain | Awareness | Proficiency | Mastery |
|---|---|---|---|
| Transient and substantive threats | | | X |
| Affective and Targeted violence | | | X |
| Cultural awareness, responsiveness and humility | | X | |
| Implicit Bias mitigation | | | X |
| Open-Source Intelligence (OSINT) | | X | |
| Timely and clear documentation | | | X |
| Suicide Assessment | | X | |
| Risk Factors for targeted violence | | | X |
| Protective, Anchor, Stabilizing factors | | | X |
| Involuntary Celibate (incel) indoctrination process | X | | |
| White Supremacist Violence indoctrination process | X | | |
| Structured Professional Judgement (Hart) | | X | |
| Pathway to Violence/Approach Behaviors (Meloy) | | X | |
| Ability to use one or more of these systems WAVR-21, TRAP-18, SIVRA-35, HCR-20, MOSAIC, DarkFox | | | X |
| Psychological and Mental Health Assessments | X | | |
| Violence Risk and Threat Assessment | | | X |
| Able to differentiate VRA and psychological assessment | | X | |
| FERPA, HIPAA, State confidently laws | | X | |
| Informed consent and release of information | | X | |
| Interviewing and information gathering techniques | | | X |
| Violence Risk and Threat mitigation planning | | | X |
| Restraining orders, protective orders, wants/warrants | X | | |

Note. This table was created by the first author to stimulate discussion in the field about requisite threat and violence risk assessment qualifications, knowledge and training, as inspired by *A Checklist Manifesto* (Gawande, 2011).

## Appendix B

### Recommended reading and resources

There are several approaches to the threat and violence risk assessment processes put forward by researchers, practitioners, membership organizations and trainers. This list is not meant to be an endorsement or a complete list, but rather a starting place for those interested in advancing their knowledge of these topic earning more about the topic.

### Organizations and educators

- Association of Threat Assessment Professional (ATAP)
- Canadian Association of Threat Assessment Professionals (CATAP)
- DHS Center for Prevention Programs and Partnerships (CP3)
- DPrep Safety Division
- The International Alliance for Care and Threat Teams (InterACTT)
- National Association of Behavioral Intervention and Threat Assessment (NABITA)

### Assessment tools

- DarkFox Violence Risk Assessment Tool
- HCR-20
- NABITA Risk Rubric
- Pathways Triage Tool
- Structured Interview for Violence Risk Assessment (SIVRA-35)
- Structured threat Assessment of Written Communication
- TRAP-18
- WAVR-21
- Violence Risk Assessment of the Written Word (VRAWW)

### VRA/Threat books

- An Educator's Guide to Assessing Threats in Student Writing by Brian Van Brunt, W. Scott Lewis, and Jeffrey Solomon
- Harm to Others: The Assessment and Treatment of Dangerousness by Brian Van Brunt
- Guidelines for Responding to Student Threats of Violence by Dewey Cornell and Peter Sheras
- International Handbook of Threat Assessment edited by J. Reid Meloy and Jens Hoffman
- Threat Assessment and Management Strategies: Assessing Hunters and Howlers by Frederick Calhoun and Stephen Weston
- Threat Assessment: A Risk Management Approach by James Turner and Michael Gelles
- Violence Assessment and Intervention: The Practitioner's Handbook by James Cawood
- School Shooters: Understanding High School, College, and Adult Perpetrators by Peter Langman
- Why Kids Kill: Inside the Minds of School Shooters by Peter Langman
- Dangerous Instincts: Use an FBI Profiler's Tactics to Avoid Unsafe Situations by Mary Ellen O'Toole and Alisa Bowman

- Left of Bang: How the Marine Corps' Combat Hunter Program Can Save Your Life by Patrick Van Horne and Jason Riley
- The Gift of Fear by Gavin de Becker
- Just 2 Seconds by Gavin de Becker
- Assessing Student Threats: Implementing the Salem-Keizer System by John Van Dreal
- Violence Assessment and Intervention: The Practitioner's Handbook by James Cawood

## Campus/BIT/CARE team development

- Balancing Safety and Support on Campus: A Guide for Campus Teams from the JED Foundation
- Black Box Thinking: The Surprising Truth About Success by Matthew Syed
- Ending Campus Violence by Brian Van Brunt
- The Logic of Failure: Recognizing And Avoiding Error In Complex Situations by Dietrich Dorner
- The Book on BIT by Brett Sokolow, Brian Van Brunt, Saundra Schuster and Daniel Swinton
- The Handbook for Campus Threat Assessment & Management Teams by Gene Deisinger

## Government resources

- Averting Targeted School Violence: A U.S. Secret Service Analysis of Plots against schools from the National Threat Assessment Center
- Enhancing School Safety Using a Threat Assessment Model from the National Threat Assessment Center
- Threat Assessment and Management Teams from the DHS Center for Prevention Programs and Partnerships, Homeland Security
- Threat Assessment and Reporting from SchoolSafety.gov, the public-facing vehicle of the Federal School Safety Clearinghouse (Federal Clearinghouse on School Safety Evidence-Based Practices), an interagency effort among the Departments of Education, Health and Human Services, Homeland Security, and Justice.

## Articles and whitepapers

- Foundations of Threat Assessment and Management by Andre Simons and J. Reid Meloy
- The Role of Warning Behaviors in Threat Assessment: An Exploration and Suggested Typology by J. Reid Meloy, Jens Hoffman, Angela Guldimann and David James.