

Campus heeds warning signs

Program instructs how to prevent potential behavioral dangers

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The city of Houston recently hosted a new federal training program that is being offered to professionals from university campuses.

Nationally renowned campus security authorities Steven J. Healy, and former University of Vermont Chief of Police, Gary J. Margolis, led the training program, which took place at the Houston Marriot Hotel on the East Sam Houston Parkway on Jan. 13.



Daily Cougar file photo

Malcolm Davis

Because of the 2007 Virginia Tech and the 2008 Northern Illinois University shooting incidents, many organizations urged university campuses to establish behavioral threat assessment teams in order to prevent any further acts of violence on university campuses.

The U.S. Department of Justice's Office of Community Oriented Policing Services developed the first campus threat assessment. Because COPS funded the program, attendance was free. The UH Department of Public Safety's assistant vice president for public safety and security Malcolm Davis hosted the event at UH.

"We wanted to address how a crisis on campus can occur. It's not necessarily for people who present a threat, but anyone who has a particular kind of crisis," said Davis, who also serves as chief of UHPD. "All kinds of threats can happen around campus. We decide how serious the threats are to investigate."

The program offers a person the opportunity to submit a problem anonymously so that there will be less of a chance that someone will hesitate to report a crisis. Davis said it is important to bring attention to someone who has an issue before the campus is in danger.

"We've had this program at UH for over 10 years to help students who are in an emotional crisis," Davis said. "To give an example, when someone acts out in class, the professor will notify the dean of students to try and find out what's going on."

"We look for changes of attitudes, such being withdrawn or a drop in grades. We also try to see what caused the problem. We want to know if only one student or the whole school is affected by some sort of problem."

Healy said that collaboration and strong partnerships within the campus community are important in threat assessment studies.

“Our model for campus threat assessment is based on empirical information about the causes of campus crime and violence,” Healy said.

The mission of a campus behavioral threat assessment is to provide various supportive resources to help a person in need solve the problems that might otherwise lead them to cause harm or endanger others.

“Maybe something needs to be changed; if not, maybe we can try to change the behavior,” Davis said. “The whole point is catching problems while they’re small.”

According to the 2004 National Summit Meeting on Campus Public Safety that was held in Baltimore, there are three essential steps to a campus behavioral threat assessment. The steps include promotion of collaboration, operation of a safe and sound campus — including the prevention of criminal acts — fast response after a crime occurs and increasing campus operations and administrative functions around the University.

Thanks to sufficient funding, the program is free to all campus security relations and enforcement, student affairs, campus faculty, risk management, administration offices, and human resources.

More information about the program is available at www.CampusThreatAssessment.org

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