

Supporting Students: A Model Policy for Colleges and Universities

Bazelon Center for Mental Health Law
www.bazelon.org

The Bazelon Center for Mental Health Law has a suggested model policy to help colleges and universities develop a non-discriminatory, non-punitive approach to students in crisis because of mental health problems. The document offers a response to serious mental health problems among college and university students and schools' lack of consensus on what to do when such students are in crisis.

In the 2006 National College Health Assessment, 43.8% of the 94,806 students surveyed reported they "felt so depressed it was difficult to function" during the past year, and 9.3% that they had "seriously considered suicide" during the year. Students also named depression as one of the top ten impediments to academic performance.

Most campuses today have counseling services that are confidential and free of charge. However, when students are in crisis, particularly if they manifest self-injurious thoughts or behavior, colleges and universities often are unsure of how to address these issues. Some are concerned about potential harm and legal liability.

"Too often colleges and universities respond to students with mental illnesses in punitive ways, requiring them to leave or evicting them from school-sponsored housing," says Bazelon Center senior staff attorney Karen Bower. "Such punitive measures discourage students from seeking help and isolate them from social and professional supports at a time of crisis, increasing the risk of harm."

"While this policy is not an attempt to address the full range of activities and services that educational institutions should undertake to promote student mental health," says Bower, "it offers a fair and humane approach to dealing with students who are in crisis."

The Bazelon Center policy offers guiding principles for how to deal fairly and non-punitively with students in crisis and how to support those whose mental health problems may be interfering with their academic, extracurricular or social lives. It also lists potential approaches to various situations and examples of accommodations that schools can make to enable such students to continue their education successfully.

"We truly believe that colleges and universities can do more to promote personal and academic success for all students," said Bower.

The model policy provides suggestions on the following topics:

- Counseling and Mental Health Services
- Confidentiality
- Accommodations
- Leaves of Absence
- Alternative Housing While Enrolled
- Disciplinary Action
- Education and Training

The Model Policy can be downloaded at <http://bazelon.org/pdf/SupportingStudents.pdf>

