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Beyond Policies and Compliance:

Risk Management in Campus Culture and Student Learning

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Traditionally, campus risk management has been viewed as the responsibility of university counsel or risk management representatives from the insurance realm. But when it comes to working with students, campus risk management requires a campus community and culture that advocates responsible conduct and a co-curriculum that teaches that risk is multifaceted and that students have an ethical responsibility to do no harm. Beyond policies and compliance, educators must teach the reasons behind risk management while guiding students through the process of determining what should be done.

Many institutions do not explain the reasons for and methods of risk management to students, and students perceive risk mitigation policies and guidelines as obstacles to be circumvented on the way to their goals. This disconnect indicates a failure in both how students are asked to learn about managing risk and how the campus culture views risk.

Developing and sustaining a student-focused approach should become a primary goal that supports a campus culture which values proactive risk management.

Three key strategic efforts have proven to advance this effort:

- Establishment of proactive risk management as an organizational priority
- Identification of a guiding philosophy
- Development of key staff, faculty, and administrators as risk managers

Risk Management and Student Learning

The primary barrier to engagement in proactive risk management is the way educators have approached the risk management discussion. Rules, policies, and a litany of "thou shalt nots" remain the focus of many risk management programs and resources. Even though we understand that student learning occurs best through experiential and collaborative efforts, we have not yet shifted away from the language of policy and laws that originally shaped the risk management discussion.

In order to reconceptualize campus risk management, institutions must take the campus community beyond policies and compliance and into the shades of gray presented by ethics, values congruence, responsibility to self and others, and critical thinking. A successful system will adopt an approach that identifies potential and perceived risks involved in activities and operations while weighing

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those risks against the values that define the campus community. It will also include systems that monitor organization activities and provide opportunities for community members to take corrective actions and proactive steps to minimize risk.

The first step in creating a proactive risk management culture on campus is defining the types of risks to identify and mitigate. The law and policy approach on most campuses has led community members to think of risk as limited to things that can result in injury, death, or damage. This focus on physical risk can result in poor buy-in from students who resist hierarchical rules, feel invincible in life, and who do not readily see the inherent physical risks in the events, operations, or services they plan.

To enhance individual buy-in for university efforts to mitigate risk and support a dialogue with student partners as authorities of their own learning experience, consider the following categories of risks and conversation prompts:

- Physical risks:
  o Can include things such as food poisoning, injuries that may result from physical activities, injuries that may result from travel related accidents, etc.
  o "Do we agree that 'do no harm' is a fundamental ethical responsibility? If so, what decisions must we make to prevent physical harm from occurring in this activity?"
- Reputation risks:
  o May result in negative publicity for your organization, its members, staff, the institution, and/or the venue where you are holding event.
  o "What is the purpose of the activity? Please connect this activity to the values espoused by your organization and our educational community. If the activity does not reflect these values, could it be seen as espousing the opposite?"
- Emotional risks:
  o Can cause a participant at your event or seeking your services to feel alienated or that negatively affect the feelings of a member or members of the campus community.
  o "How will members of the campus and broader community feel about the activity? What responsibility do we have to these individuals? Is the principle of reciprocity honored (i.e., treating others as we want to be treated ourselves)? Is the activity accessible to students with disabilities? If not, what message will it send to them?"

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- Financial risks:
  o Can negatively affect the fiscal stability of your organization and/or other organizations financially supporting your event and/or services.
  o "Does this activity demonstrate responsible stewardship of the organization's short and long-term financial health? In what way does this activity expose the organization or community to financial risk?"
- Facilities risks:
  o May cause property damage or prevent your event from being held (e.g., bad weather, not enough space for the number of participants, lack of equipment or materials needed for the event, student accessibility).
  o "What location/venue would be required to support the activity in a safe way? How does a specific location/venue support the stated goals for this activity? How does the location/venue meet anticipated needs and how does it fall short? What decisions can be made prior to the activity to mitigate these concerns?"

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When an institution recognizes that their way of understanding risk management is more appealing to lawyers and insurance representatives than most students, faculty, and staff, it is time to take action to reach broader institutional support for efforts. A quick review of the campus' resources for students, faculty advisors, and staff will reveal whether your community is oriented toward laws and policies or the proactive categories noted above. Another indicator is the presence or absence of forums for community members to openly discuss risk assessment concerns, share resources and ideas, and help community members see the ethical responsibilities present in a values-driven educational community.

4

Florida State University reached this conclusion in Fall of 2005 when an external consultation revealed the absence of a broad and guiding philosophical framework for risk assessment and of a forum for community members to align their language and efforts. To address these concerns, a student organization task force was established to explore risk assessment practices in the student affairs departments responsible for advising students and in organizations active in the community.

Academic Impressions

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From the beginning, students were enlisted as partners in the effort. Staff and students representing more than 10 offices and departments met monthly as a large group, as well as on smaller issue-based committees, to discuss and address concerns about student travel, hazing, student organization recognition, student organization accountability, large and complex campus events, off-campus events, professional development opportunities, risk assessment resources for student groups and their advisors, and more. The group has been so productive that it recently received approval to become a permanent standing committee named the Student Organization Risk Management (StORM) Team.

When students are treated as partners in campus risk assessment efforts, they are exposed to complex issues from a campus-wide perspective and gain insight into the student experience. This contributes substantially to the quality of risk assessment efforts and to the student learning experience as well.

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Proactive Risk Management in Campus Culture

Tragedy yields lessons – and part of healing is committing to learn from the experience. Texas A&M University's bonfire collapse in November of 1999 taught the campus community that their culture had a strong influence on the mitigation, and in some cases, facilitation of high risk decision making.

The Bonfire Commission Report (2000) generated by an independent team of investigators concluded that: "Cultural bias on the part of the university administration and staff resulted in several missed opportunities in reactive risk management of Bonfire, resulting in failure to identify that the Bonfire structure had grown too large to be constructed using past practices." Specifically, the following characteristics of Texas A&M University's organizational culture contributed to the tragedy:

- Cultural bias in decision making resulted in organizational tunnel vision
- Evidence was conclusive that the Texas A&M University administration was not always successful in correcting unsafe and unproductive bonfire behaviors in the reactive role of risk management
- Bottom line – the Texas A&M University organizational culture was such that no one at Texas A&M questioned what independent observers would have questioned

5

In the end, the Commission Report cautioned the university that changing its culture to reduce incidents of loss would be one of its greatest challenges.

Campus communities committed to integrating risk management practices must acknowledge the strong influence campus culture has on safety planning. Student beliefs, advisor attitudes, and staff training and professionalism can create either paper trails and complex administrative systems or conversations that educate and inspire community members to rise to the best possible outcome. Attaining the latter means creating programs and processes that help the community identify potential and perceived risks of the events they coordinate and/or develop strategies for using value-based judgment skills to eliminate, limit, or accept those risks.

The programs and processes involved manifest in conversations that challenge assumptions, add complexity to planning, and invite additional perspectives to ensure responsible decision making and the reduction of risk. These conversations also challenge the culture to shift toward a proactive effort.

Establish Proactive Risk Management as a Guiding Philosophy

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A critical element of proactive risk management is the identification of a uniting theoretical framework aligned with the institution's core values and mission.

This foundational philosophy should guide all efforts toward advancing proactive risk management while focusing on the empowerment of students and staff to continue the design, development, and facilitation of programs, events, and initiatives grounded in the pursuit of student and staff development. The philosophical framework should guide not only traditional risk management efforts, but also overall student development efforts.

The book, *The Rights and Responsibilities of the Modern University: Who Assumes the Risk of College Life?*, promotes the concept of a facilitator university in which administrators partner with students and share responsibility for management of campus life. The facilitator model encourages members of the university community to collaborate on the promotion of a positive university/student relationship and calls for a system that allows students, staff, and faculty to operate within an educational environment that helps individuals make intelligent, fair, and reasonable choices within the boundaries established by the law, institutional rules/polices, and the educational mission of the university.

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The facilitator philosophy allows clear identification of the roles of the administrator and student. The administrative role requires abandoning traditional thinking and accepting the newly defined responsibility voiced by the courts in recent tort liability cases involving colleges and universities.

Institutional leadership must clearly communicate its expectations, including levels of commitment and actively engage in risk identification and mitigation strategies to staff and students. They must respond appropriately to decisions and/or incidents not aligned with expectations while designing proactive processes to empower staff to create a safe and productive environment. General counsel should continue to frame strategies for meeting the challenges of administrative responsibility, allowing the law to guide efforts, but not to direct actions.

The student's role requires that each accept responsibility as individuals and as members of a community. Students are responsible for the safe and effective management of their events and must respond when their peers choose to act counter to the intended culture of good decision making and campus safety. The balance of rights with this responsibility calls upon our students to embrace the proactive processes that serve as the foundation for their development as partners with the institution.

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Establish Proactive Risk Management as an Organizational Priority

Establishing campus safety as an institutional priority necessitates the development of partnerships among university administrators, counsel, environmental health and safety professionals, campus safety officers, student leaders, staff responsible for the coordination of services to students, and faculty.

Through these partnerships, a campus community can begin to influence change. Identification of risk management as an institutional priority can take many forms:

- Drafting a strategic objective to enhance risk management efforts
- Developing risk management specialist positions within individual units
- Allocating fiscal resources to proactive efforts

One model of institutional commitment to proactive risk management is found at Texas A&M University. Under the leadership of President Robert Gates, the institution established the University Risk and Compliance Office to coordinate university-wide efforts related to risk management and to facilitate the sharing of information and build on various units' risk management initiatives.

One strength of this model is that independent departments and units are encouraged to pursue risk management strategies that fit within the framework of the services they offer while providing a formal avenue for communicating the efficacy of their efforts. For example, Residential Life, Academic Affairs, and Student Activities all have individual risk managers that coordinate programs geared towards their specific areas of operation.

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In addition to an institutional office to coordinate efforts, universities may choose to establish staff and volunteer expectations that clearly identify risk management as a top priority. For example, Arizona State University has developed of a Risk Management Team, through which risk management is added to job duties/responsibilities of individual members or in the advisor agreement letter designed to clearly communicate expectations to faculty and staff serving as advisors to registered student organizations.

Florida State University's Division of Student Affairs initiated departmental dialogues to foster collaboration on risk assessment efforts between areas that were clustered based on overlapping student populations and other commonalities. Florida State University also launched a committee to explore university-wide concerns such as events with minors on campus, staff travel, and office safety protocols.

Some institutions have established required risk management training for high-risk student organizations, while other institutions set expectations for the addition of risk management officers for high-risk student clubs. All of the above-mentioned efforts, or any combination of them, will serve to advance institutional efforts to integrate proactive risk management into the campus culture.

8

Identify Proactive Risk Managers in Your Community

The risk management professional is a manager that knows and advocates the risk management process and can communicate and lead the process to ensure risk evaluation and mitigation. The development of risk management skills in all students, staff, and faculty should be his/her objective. Not all campus community members will become proficient risk managers, but efforts should be made to provide training and development opportunities for those that have an interest in learning or whose job duties necessitate it.

The Arizona State University Student Affairs Risk Management initiative was established integrate proactive risk management practices into the services and operations of the Division of Student Affairs. The program has focused on the continued professional development of division staff, faculty advisors to student clubs, academic partners, and most recently, senior level administrators within the division. While the assistant director assumes greater responsibility for the oversight of risk management efforts, all staff are expected to advance the program.

Certain staff have been identified as liaisons to the risk management program and serve as unit representatives on the Risk Management Team. These individuals are more highly trained and regularly meet to discuss key concepts of proactive risk management. They are specialists, and take lessons learned back to their colleagues and assist with research, resource design, and student outreach efforts.

Conclusion

By its very nature, risk assessment is intended to be a proactive practice that informs responsible decision making as much as it protects person, reputation, and property. A student-focused approach to risk management encourages student involvement in the process of risk assessment while also developing and sustaining conversations among a broad range of campus partners.

The facilitator model calls for sustained interactions between community members that place a high value on students as partners in the process of assessing risk. Initiatives at Texas A&M University, Arizona State University, and Florida State University have adopted the facilitator model to shift toward a proactive campus culture and enhance student learning in the co-curriculum.

> **The development of risk managemnet skills in all students staff, and faculty should be the risk management professional's goal.**

8

Beyond policies and compliance, risk assessment is a natural fit for a community committed to educating its students about ethics, values congruence, responsibility to self and others, and critical thinking.

If you're ready to implement student-focused risk management at your institution, you can begin by:

- Assessing the readiness of your campus to make a cultural shift toward a student-focused risk management plan
- Determining who on your campus should be involved in the effort
- Identifying the campus areas that will need to shift first to a facilitator model of risk management

SOURCES

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8

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