



University of Toronto

Student Crisis Response Programs



2002-2003

Annual Report

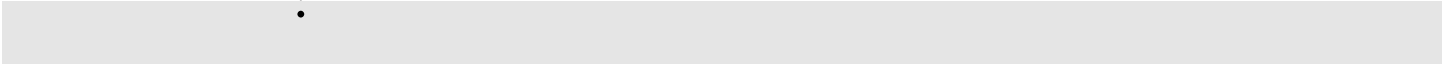


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University of Toronto

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Introduction

Description

The University of Toronto Student Crisis Response Programs are a series of initiatives designed to enhance support and access to resources for students in difficulty or distress. Through a series of programs and initiatives, we focus on connecting students in need with the resources that can assist them in resolving the difficult or critical situations they may encounter while engaged in their studies here. More broadly, we work to build capacities and develop networks across the university that facilitate connection, communication, and support for all students at the University of Toronto.

The Programs are administered by a Program Coordinator in conjunction with an Advisory Committee and a team of student volunteers, under the general direction of the Director, Student Affairs.

Background

In January of 1999, a group of concerned students and staff from across the university met to consider options for responding to crisis situations. Out of the discussions of this group, and in consultation with other members of the University of Toronto community, the need for a coordinated response to students dealing with acute traumatic stress, acute situational distress, and personal crisis was identified, as was the need for a comprehensive and systematic on-site critical incident response. Subsequent to that initial meeting, a Student Crisis Response Advisory Committee was formed, and in July, 1999 the Committee approached the Vice-Provost, Students for project development funding. A two-year pilot project was approved, with funding provided entirely through the Office of the Vice-Provost, Students. A .60 staff-appointed Co-ordinator was hired in March, 2000, and the position increased to .80 in July, 2002. The programs were reviewed and positively evaluated at the end of the pilot period in March 2002, and continued program funding was secured through the Office of the Vice-Provost, Students.



A fourth year student comes into her Registrar's office, distraught, saying that she has lost all hope of finishing the last course that would allow her to complete her program. She has met all of her program requirements satisfactorily so far, but says that she has been so consumed by worry about other issues – including a learning disability, financial difficulties, a history of depression, and trying to adapt to a new culture - that she not been able to attend classes this term. In Clara's words, she is "juggling so many balls that I can't possibly keep them all in the air for much longer". She is terrified that if she is unable to attend classes her student visa will be withdrawn and she will be forced to return to her family overseas in disgrace.

Student Crisis Response Programs can help by:

- Consulting with registrarial staff to identify issues, resources, and develop strategies for the student
- Meeting with the student directly to assist her in coordinating multiple demands and planning next steps
- Coordinating with the International Student Centre around visa issues and cross-cultural counselling resources
- Offering or securing case management services until the student is able to manage challenges on her own
- Providing staff and faculty with an opportunity to learn more about cultural issues in crisis situations through NESSIE¹ programming



A student in residence has become increasingly agitated over a period of several days, and is making bizarre statements about an elaborate international conspiracy against him. Although a few close friends and residence staff attempt to get him to see a counsellor or physician, he flatly refuses. Eventually, his behaviour deteriorates to the point where everyone on the floor is concerned and alarmed.

Student Crisis Response Programs can help by:

- Consulting with senior residence staff to identify issues, resources, and develop strategies for the student, including the development of an intervention plan for after-hours and weekends
- Consulting and coordinating with campus and community resources both pre and post intervention
- Debriefing residence staff post-intervention
- Providing information, support, and follow-up for students affected by the situation
- Providing staff and faculty with an opportunity to learn more about disruptive behaviour and serious mental health issues through NESSIE programming

¹ NESSIE is the Student Crisis Response program that provides education, outreach, and support around crisis issues through a variety of educational programming.



A student is experiencing a temporary visual impairment, so that he now feels unsafe crossing a busy street to get to one of his classes. He has been avoiding going to this class, and is now struggling to complete his assignments. Although he is registered with Accessibility Services, who have been very helpful in providing support in other areas, they do not have the staffing to provide an escort directly, and the student says he would not feel comfortable being seen with a staff escort. He is visibly distraught when meeting with Accessibility staff, noting that he was feeling only just barely able to manage before the visual impairment, and doesn't feel he can cope with one more challenge.

Student Crisis Response Programs can help by:

- Providing a trained Peer Support volunteer to accompany the student to his class
- Providing staff, students, and faculty with an opportunity to learn more about the relationship between crisis and disability issues through NESSIE programming



A second year student in a small graduate program has died suddenly over the weekend in her off-campus apartment, apparently of natural causes. Her best friend, a fellow student, was on site when police discovered the body. The family lives in another province and has not yet been reached. The department was notified Monday morning at 9am, and the first class which the student would have attended is scheduled for 10am.

Student Crisis Response Programs can help by:

- Arranging for someone from the CIRT team to be on-site to provide information and support for students in the 10am class, and in subsequent affected classes
- Working with senior staff and faculty in the department to develop a comprehensive response strategy, including arranging for staff and student support and debriefing sessions, one-to-one student support and referrals, and coordinating with campus and community resources
- Assisting in the organizing of memorial services or remembrances
- Providing staff and faculty with an opportunity to learn more about critical incident response issues, such as how to break bad news, through NESSIE programming

Description of Current Programs

1.1 NESSIE

Education on issues related to students in crisis is an important focus of the Student Crisis Response Programs, as it raises awareness in the University of Toronto community about these issues, as well as informing staff, students, and faculty about the existence of the services provided by the programs. Created in response to an expressed need for an alternative resource to replace the discontinued Association of Counsellors, NESSIE (The Network to Enhance Student Support through Information Exchange) works to build capacity and develop networks to assist students in difficulty, and provides ongoing opportunities to share ideas, information, and support for individuals across the University who work with students in crisis.

NESSIE programming is designed to reflect the real-life needs and issues of the university community in dealing with students in crisis situations. This year, NESSIE has offered the following workshops:

- Suicide Awareness: Basic Assessment and Intervention Skills Workshop
- Helping Students Through Crisis, Session I: A Referral Guide for Front-Line Staff
- Helping Students Through Crisis, Session II: A Resource Guide for Front-Line Staff
- Understanding Psychosis: Responding to Students in Severe Mental Health Crisis
- Diversity Issues in Crisis Situations, Part One: Dealing with Issues of Sexual Orientation, Race, and Culture
- Diversity Issues in Crisis Situations, Part Two: Dealing with Issues of Ability and Class
- How to Break Bad News

1.2 Critical Incident Response

In response to the identified need for a systematic on-site response to critical incidents affecting University of Toronto students, the Student Crisis Response Programs and the Community Safety Office have worked together to develop an organized response existing within a network of connected teams.

The Critical Incident Response Team (CIRT) works in tandem with the Crisis Management (Red Book) Team and the Employee Assistance Plan (EAP) Trauma Response Team as part of the overall Critical Incident response at the University of Toronto. It is designed to supplement existing local resources in the event of a serious event or crisis – for example, the unexpected death of a student. Composed of a volunteer roster of about 25 staff members across all three campuses, it responds to critical incidents involving the University community, and provides immediate on-site support and trauma management to students affected by the incident. For example, members of the CIRT team were called to provide support and information to over two hundred first-year students after the in-class collapse and subsequent death of one of their classmates at the Scarborough campus.

In addition to the services provided by the CIRT Team, the Coordinator of the Student Crisis Response Programs also provides practical and organizational support to staff and students dealing with critical incidents that occur on campus.

The Coordinator also serves as Secretary for the Task Force on Emergency Preparedness and Crisis Response, which is developing comprehensive plans for responding to a range of emergency and crisis situations that may occur on campus.

1.3 The Student-in-Difficulty Project

The Student In Difficulty Committee model is based on the idea that collaboration and communication serve the needs of both staff and students in dealing with demanding student crisis situations, and that the development of locally-based crisis response capability is essential to ensuring best practices in a large, decentralized university environment.

Three types of crisis situations are addressed by the Committee – individuals in personal crisis, individuals with behavioural issues that precipitate a local crisis, and groups of students affected by a crisis situation or critical incident. The purpose of the Committee is fourfold -

- To provide assistance to students in various stages of difficulty or crisis through case consultation and strategy development.
- To create a forum for the development, implementation, and revision of strategies, protocols, and policies designed to assist those students.
- To serve as local resources to a central campus-based Critical Incident Response Team in the event of a critical incident.
- To enhance staff professionalism, effectiveness, and support through the communication of relevant information about student crisis issues.

Committee composition depends on the local context, but members might include representatives from the following offices and areas: Registrar's Office, Faculty, Residence Staff, Student Life, and Counselling. Student representatives also sit on the committee.

The Student in Difficulty Committee model was tested as a one-year pilot project at University College, and evaluation research conducted by the Centre for Applied Social Research at the Faculty of Social Work has shown it to be helpful in enhancing the ability of that community to respond to a variety of crisis situations. A template and manual has been developed, and the Committee model is available for adaptation and implementation by other divisions.

1.4 Peer Support Program

The Student Crisis Response Programs (SCRPs) are committed to developing and supporting graduate and undergraduate student leaders. Working in the Student Crisis Response Programs enables students to learn more about student crisis issues, develop practical skills, and collaborate with diverse campus and community organizations. Under the supervision of professional staff, practicum students, work-study students, and student volunteers have an opportunity to contribute to the development and implementation of SCRPs programming. The Peer Support Program currently provides the most opportunities for direct student involvement.

Volunteers in the Peer Support Program engage in a variety of activities related to crisis prevention. In addition to working directly with students through liaisons with designated student services, they assist in developing and presenting educational programming on issues of concern to students, such as stress management, crisis prevention, and self-care. Volunteers also take on specialized roles with the program, for example:

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- The Program Liaison volunteers facilitate connection between the Peer Support Program and the other student services and programs with whom we have established relationships. They help to ensure that requests for support are matched with the available peer support services offered by volunteers, and assist in coordinating shared initiatives with other programs. This year, the program liaison volunteers developed a program with Accessibility Services so that students registered with the service could access peer support as needed to help prevent a crisis situation related to a disability issue.



- The Student Committee representative provides student representation for the Student Crisis Response Programs and the Peer Support Program for University of Toronto committees, and helps to develop connections between our programs and related initiatives. These committees include the Student Crisis Response Programs Advisory Committee, the Student Affairs Advisory Committee, and the Status of Women Advisory Committee.
- The student member of the Critical Incident Response Team provides student representation from the Student Crisis Response Programs and the Peer Support Program to the University of Toronto's Critical Incident Response Team. They provide assistance to the CIRT Team Coordinators as required, both in preparing for and responding to critical incidents on campus.
- The Resource and Display Materials Coordinator ensures that printed and display materials related to crisis intervention and prevention, as well as the activities of the Peer Support Program are complete, up-to-date, and available to the University of Toronto community. For example, program volunteers create and staff a display at the annual Student Health Fair, and a wide range of crisis related materials are made available to students through that event.
- The Website Administrator plays a key role in communicating clear and current information about the Peer Support Program to the University of Toronto community. Their efforts have a direct impact on making information about crisis resources for students accessible to students, staff, and faculty via the Internet.

Additional Services and Activities

2.1 Case Consultation

The Student Crisis Response Programs Coordinator provides case consultation to staff and faculty with questions or concerns about students with whom they work. Together with staff in Academic Departments, Residences, Registrars, Student Services, and other divisions, the Coordinator works to develop strategies and options that will both support the student and resolve the crisis. Depending on the particular requirements of the situation, the Coordinator may intervene directly to assist a student, and can provide follow-up and debriefing as needed.

The Coordinator has been consulted on dozens of incidents and crisis situations this year involving a variety of crises, including a number of consultations on crisis prevention with students known to be aggressive or disruptive, and several more consultations with staff and faculty concerned about suicidal students.

2.2 Education and Outreach

Training and education on issues related to students in crisis is an important focus of the Student Crisis Response Programs, as it raises awareness among members of the University of Toronto community about these issues, as well as informing them about the existence of these programs. Although NESSIE offers centralized programming, the SCRP Coordinator also provides education and outreach in a variety of other settings:

Orientation to Student Crisis Response Programs

- University of Toronto Police

Dealing with Disruptive Behaviour

- Teaching Assistant Training Program
- School of Graduate Studies

Self-Care As Crisis Prevention

- Teaching Assistant Training Program
- Student Leadership Development Office at the Faculty of Physical Education and Health
- The New U Student Leadership Development Conference
- Residence Staff Training
- Luker House Residence @ University College
- Graduate House
- Ontario Medical Students Association Conference

Referrals and Resources for Students in Difficulty

- Teaching Assistant Training Program
- Residence Staff Training

In addition to educational seminars and presentations, the Student Crisis Response Programs also produces a 16-page guide, entitled ***Connections: Identifying and Referring Students in Difficulty***. This booklet is

intended to assist staff and faculty in identifying when professional assistance might be beneficial to a student, how to make an effective and appropriate referral, and provides information on consultation and emergency resources available to the University of Toronto community. Requests for this booklet have come from all over University of Toronto, as well as from other universities in Canada and the United States. The booklet is available online, and the second edition is now in print.

The Coordinator also meets regularly with key personnel in different departments on all three campuses of the University, and attends meetings of related committees and working groups. These developing liaisons allow the Coordinator to become more informed about current issues and efforts, and to co-ordinate the Student Crisis Response Programs efforts with those initiatives. Ongoing liaisons with numerous individuals and offices also help to enhance the effectiveness and visibility of the Student Crisis Response Programs.

Some of the Committees include the Student Affairs Advisory Committee, the Women's Safety Network, the Interim Room Committee, the Status of Women Advisory Council, and the Scarborough Campus Committee on Safety and Security. The Coordinator has also served on the Task Force on Emergency Preparedness and Crisis Response since July 2002.

Program Priorities for 2003-2004

- Continued implementation of the recommendations arising out of the program evaluation report at the end of the two-year term for the pilot project in March 2002.
- Ongoing training and development of the Critical Incident Response Team, and the refinement of its role within the overall critical incident response at the University.
- Continued capacity and network building through the expansion of NESSIE programming, with a particular focus on outreach to faculty.
- Continued development of crisis-related educational materials for University of Toronto faculty and staff.
- In concert with local staff and students, the further development and implementation of Crisis Response strategies tailored to the needs of the UTM and UTSC campuses.
- Expansion of connections with community crisis response agencies and services, such as the Gerstein Centre and the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health.

Summary

Serving the diverse needs of students in crisis requires not only adequate resources and effective programming, it also requires increased sensitivity and capacity among the many individuals at the University who regularly encounter students in difficulty or distress. The Student Crisis Response Programs endeavour to address both of these needs – by offering student-centred programs and centralized resources to fill in some of the identified gaps in service (such as specialized case consultation and case management, and on-site critical incident response), as well as by providing opportunities for local communities to develop their own knowledge and expertise in assisting students in crisis.