

East Tennessee State University
Center for Community College Leadership

Dr. Sandra Perley
Columbia State Community College

Suicide Prevention Strategies in Tennessee Community Colleges: A Case Study

Abstract

Suicide is the second leading cause of death for college students; annually approximately 1,100 students in institutions of higher education die by suicide. However, most research related to college student suicide was conducted using the sample of 4-year institutions. Community colleges have seldom been included in the sample of suicide research studies. This qualitative case study research explored the student suicide prevention strategies in the 13 community colleges in the Tennessee Board of Regents higher education system. Data were collected from surveys, institutional web sites, and interviews with institutional personnel.

Approximately half of the institutions offer suicide prevention information to students. Technology is used sparsely to educate, screen, or provide suicide referral information. Whereas only six institutions have policies that specifically address suicide, personnel at most institutions identified area agencies that serve as resources for students. Three common themes relate to the institutional response to a suicidal student: the presence of a response team, the involvement of a counselor, and referrals to community mental health resources. Institutions that employ counselors generally have more educational strategies, more suicide prevention strategies overall, and more policies that specifically address suicide than those that do not employ counselors. Internal and external factors prompted the development of suicide prevention strategies at the institutions. Internal resources such as counselor and faculty support and external resources such as area mental health agencies and community suicide prevention agencies aid in the creation

and implementation of suicide prevention efforts. Lack of resources, competing priorities, and the discomfort surrounding the topic of suicide emerged as themes inhibiting the creation and implementation of suicide prevention efforts in rural institutions. While educational and institutional suicide prevention strategies are employed, most institutional efforts are directed toward preventing students from harming others.