

Media Relations



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Thursday, Feb. 25, 2010

SAFEZONE ONLINE SIMULATION TRAINING OFFERS K-STATERS SKILLS NECESSARY TO HELP AT-RISK STUDENTS

MANHATTAN -- How should a professor respond to a student who is expressing symptoms of depression or expressing suicidal tendencies? What does one say and how does one say it? These are questions that a recently-implemented Kansas State University at-risk training program is addressing.

The training is offered through SafeZone, a 25-year-old campus program which addresses safety issues for all K-State community members. SafeZone is composed of faculty, staff and students, known as SafeZone Allies.

"The allies are trained to listen, support and assist students in finding help through campus resources," said Dorinda Lambert, SafeZone coordinator and associate director of K-State's counseling services.

Over the summer, Lambert took the concept of safety a step further, introducing a pilot of the at-risk training program. She said it has been so successfully received that some departments have given the at-risk training to their faculty and staff who are not SafeZone Allies.

During the at-risk training, an ally or other faculty/staff uses an interactive online training simulator, similar in style to a videogame. The player -- in this case the SafeZone participant -- takes on the role of a college instructor. The objective is to find three students within the class who are at risk for factors like suicide, depression and anxiety. To aid in the search, the player is given access to a student's attendance record, grades, behavior and appearance. Once the information is analyzed, the player can then approach the student(s) believed to be at risk. A conversation tree allows for different dialogue options as the player attempts to find the best way to not only approach the student, but gather verbal information from him/her in an effort to get the best help needed.

Lambert stressed that the training does not give allies or other faculty and staff the same skills as the professionals to whom the students will be referred; it does, however, give them more confidence in reaching out to students in need.

To illustrate what many college professors may be facing, though, Lambert said one needs look no further than to the at-risk training simulator's introductory video.

It begins with a professor talking about a student in his class who started becoming frequently absent and turning in work late. One day the student showed up in the professor's office and apologized for his attendance, saying his mother had recently been killed in a car accident. The professor tells the player that he wanted to say something meaningful to the student, but that he did not know how or what to say. Eventually, the professor discovers that the student has not only dropped out of his class but out of school all together. It ends with the professor saying he believed things would have been different if he had been able to tell the student something.

Lambert said that losing this student is a situation that she and other staff and faculty want to avoid at K-State.

"We want it so that students don't just drop out of school if they have a problem," she said. "We want to get them the resources necessary to get back on track and become successful at K-State."

Lambert said she believes the SafeZone program gives instructors, faculty and staff the tools necessary to do just that for the students.

Despite the program being well received, Lambert said the budget crisis facing colleges and universities around the nation may put a damper on keeping the SafeZone program and even the at-risk training on campus.

"Right now the SafeZone program does not have allies designated in every building on campus yet, but that's the goal," she said. "My hope is that we get continued funding for it next semester. At the moment, it's really up in the air while we wait for funding for next year."

With support behind the at-risk program, Lambert believes SafeZone could bring that training to help in student-to-student interactions as well. Currently, she said, Kognito Interactive, creator of the at-risk training program -- is beginning to develop peer-to-peer scenarios, which she believes would benefit student leaders in residence halls, Greek houses, clubs and campus organizations.

The next SafeZone Ally training will be offered in April. Applicants can register at the organization's Web site, <http://www.k-state.edu/safezone>. Enrollment is open to everyone on campus, Lambert said.

SafeZone is an acronym for Students, Staff, Administrators and Faculty for Equality. The program was expanded with the assistance of the K-State Campaign for Nonviolence, and is a coordinated effort between the office of student life, the women's center, the affirmative action committee and counseling services.

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February 25, 2010