

## Simulations help faculty ID at-risk students

New computer simulation lets college faculty members practice recognizing students who might need counseling

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Professors say the At-Risk simulation has made it easier to approach students.

Some students are cranky and irritable. Others are nervous and uneasy. College classrooms can include a variety of behaviors, and judging whether these behaviors could indicate something more troubling beneath the surface can be difficult. Now, a computer simulation is helping professors identify and approach so-called "at-risk" students and recommend a visit to a campus counselor.

Recently, web-based computer training company Kognito unveiled At-Risk, a simulation program that gives college faculty practice in identifying, talking to, and analyzing students who might need professional counseling.

Nearly two years after a Virginia Tech student whose behavior disturbed faculty and classmates killed 32 people on campus, professors are eager for formal training in how to refer troubled students to counseling centers.

"You can see clearly if a person is just an overwhelmed freshman or [someone] who has a serious issue," said Ted Henken, a professor at the City University of New York (CUNY) who trained with the Kognito At-Risk program. "[The simulation] really shows you how to go through the conversation with empathy and not just cut to the chase."

The April 2007 Virginia Tech massacre, Henken said, made it impossible for college faculty to ignore students showing tell-tale signs of depression, such as skipping class, failing to turn in homework or projects, and being abrasive with classmates.

"I didn't think about it very much until Virginia Tech," said Henken, a CUNY professor for six years. "You realize that anything can happen. ... You think most of that is dealt with at the high school level, but we realized that it's not."

The Kognito program leads users in a 45-minute, step-by-step process that examines grades, attendance, and class participation--along with behaviors such as rudeness, argumentativeness,

extreme nervousness, or avoidance of eye contact--before the student is asked for a one-on-one talk with the professor simulation.

In an online demonstration, At-Risk users are shown a classroom with six students who have shown consistently abnormal behavior. By clicking on a student, the user can see the student's academic record and behavior trends. Three of the six students can be chosen for interviews, where the professor asks a series of questions. If the answers warrant concern, the user can refer the student to on-campus counseling.

Ron Goldman, Kognito's co-founder and CEO, said the Virginia Tech incident and other campus violence have put professors in a quandary: They should be aware of behavioral problems, but they are not trained or qualified to offer professional advice, so a tempered, logical approach is necessary to get students help.

"Schools understood they needed to take more responsibility in identifying and helping those students," said Goldman, adding that the program's content was created in part by the Mental Health Association of New York City. "It is difficult to teach you without giving you practice. This is better than lists and PowerPoint presentations ... because you become much more comfortable in doing it, and not everyone is comfortable approaching students."