THE EXPERIENCE OF SENIOR STUDENT AFFAIRS ADMINISTRATORS MAKING PARENTAL NOTIFICATION DECISIONS ABOUT DISTURBED AND DISTURBED/DISTURBING STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

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The purpose of this phenomenological study was to examine how senior student affairs administrators experience disturbed and disturbed/disturbing students on their campuses and make the decision to involve parents in their care. Greater numbers of college students are coming to campus with mental health issues of increasing severity (Mowbray et al., 2006). Parental involvement is believed to be an appropriate response to critical incidents of this nature because of the relationship that exists between millennial students and their parents (Dickstein & Christensen, 2008). While FERPA allows for such contact, little is known about how it is employed during crises of this kind.

Participants in this study were senior student affairs administrators from small private liberal arts colleges and universities. Seven participants with at least three years of experience in senior level roles with crisis management responsibilities were interviewed. The first semi-structured interview was conducted either in-person or over Skype. A second interview was facilitated over the phone. All seven participants came from different institutions and represented a variety of backgrounds in terms of professional experience and education.

Three broad categories of themes emerged from this study: beliefs about involvement, experiencing the disturbed and disturbed/disturbing student, and the decision for contact. All participants expressed a commitment to student autonomy, but acknowledged that safety ultimately trumps student privacy. Participants described their experience of disturbed and disturbed/disturbing students as involving confidence and concern, working with parents and student peers, and being affected by institutional culture. Finally, participants described the
decision for contact as determined by certain factors including the imminence of risk, the student’s inability to function, consultation with colleagues, hospitalization, and the exhaustion of institutional resources. Conversely, destructive familial relationships and timing were identified as reasons participants might reconsider contact.

A number of implications were presented based on these findings. First, campus administrators can help educate parents about appropriate involvement with their student and about college student mental health. Second, administrators should also develop crisis management training for professionals at all levels of the institution. Third, utilizing a community-based approach to crisis management will likely lead to the most effective responses to it. Finally, administrators should remain cognizant that campus mental health professionals may be over-burdened and take steps to alleviate their loads.
This dissertation is dedicated to Stephanie.

For changing everything . . .

~

“He didn't mind how he looked to other people, because the nursery magic had made him Real, and when you are Real shabbiness doesn't matter.”

Margery Williams, *The Velveteen Rabbit*
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CHAPTER I. INTRODUCTION

After the Virginia Tech shootings in 2007, a review panel was created to evaluate the university’s response to the incident and assess the mental health history of the shooter, senior Seung Hui Cho (Virginia Tech Review Panel [VTRP], 2007). Amongst the lengthy findings that emerged was the suggestion that university stakeholders had not communicated with one another or Cho’s parents because they believed that such contact would violate federal privacy law (VTRP, 2007). This finding led to the clarification of a widely held myth related to student crisis management: in reality, “federal laws and their state counterparts afford ample leeway to share information in potentially dangerous situations” (VTRP, 2007, p. 2). This finding was and continues to be problematic because it highlights a pervasive issue within the American postsecondary system. That is, despite the fact that “one of the fastest-growing categories of disability in the college student population is psychiatric” (Belch, 2011, p. 73), questions remain about college and university administrators’ understanding of how to best avert and manage these potentially volatile situations.

The present study examined the experiences of senior student affairs administrators as they consider parental contact when faced with a student who poses a potential threat to self and/or others as a result of a mental health issue. The objective of this phenomenological study was to investigate how student affairs professionals experience these students and how they describe the decision-making process involved with the notification of parents under these circumstances. The primary aim of this study was to improve student affairs professionals’ understanding of campus crisis management, and specifically “human crises” (Zdziarski, Rollo, & Dunkel, 2007) related to college student mental health. Additionally, this study was designed with the intention of contributing to administrators’ ability to foster environments that are both
“reasonably safe” and “supportive of individuals with mental-health issues” (Lake & Tribbensee, 2002, p. 127). This study used the phenomenological approach to qualitative research to describe the essence of this experience. Participants in this study were purposefully sampled based on their involvement in the management of these crises, as well as their employment in the particular context of the small private liberal arts college or university.

The College Mental Health Crisis

Results from the 2011 American College Health Association’s National College Health Assessment II (ACHA-NCHA II) illustrated the mental health crisis on American college campuses. Designed to educate campus stakeholders about “students’ habits, behaviors, and perceptions on the most prevalent health topics” (ACHA, 2011, p. 2), the ACHA-NCHA II survey revealed that in the twelve months prior to its administration, approximately 45% of the college student participants reported “feeling hopeless,” over 30% felt “so depressed that it was difficult to function,” and about 36% reported feeling “overwhelmed with anger” (ACHA, 2011, pp. 13-14). Considering these statistics, it is no wonder that there has been a systemic push to attend proactively to student mental illness, particularly as it is regarded by many college mental health professionals as emerging with both greater frequency and severity (Mowbray et al., 2006). The recent tragedies at the hands of college students both in and outside the bounds of their respective campuses perhaps illustrate this problem best. The April 2007 Virginia Tech tragedy remains the deadliest mass shooting in U.S. history and continues to serve as a cautionary tale for all colleges and universities. Subsequent shootings by college students have revealed that the college mental health crisis can have a broader impact. Perhaps most notable since Virginia Tech were the shootings orchestrated by students associated with Pima Community College in Arizona and the University of Colorado at Denver. In January 2011,
former Pima Community College student, Jared Loughner, opened fire in a grocery store parking lot where U.S. Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords was speaking. This event resulted in the deaths of six and the injury of fourteen others, including the congresswoman. More recently, in July 2012, James Holmes, who recently withdrew from a doctoral program at the University of Colorado at Denver, orchestrated a mass shooting at an Aurora, Colorado movie theater. Although these events reflect the most extreme manifestations of the college mental health crisis, they prompt important questions about whether postsecondary institutions are in the position to prevent such events and how administrative decision-makers and campus mental health providers attend to students with severe mental health issues more generally.

**Student-Institution Relationship**

Although the student-institution relationship has changed over the years, colleges have always “maintained a responsibility to students well beyond academics” (Bowden, 2007, p. 480), albeit to varying degrees. The Colonial Colleges, which emulated the Oxford University and Cambridge University design of “mixing living and learning” (Thelin, 2004, p. 8), were educational arrangements that relied on a few faculty members to deliver the breadth of student services. These services included the delivery of lectures “in the entire range of the curriculum” (Caple, 1998, p. 10) as well as “supervision and parental concern for the well-being of the students” (Nuss, 2001, p. 24). In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, however, a new and uniquely American class of professionals emerged who undertook “the welfare of the whole student, responsibility for student discipline, and genuine care for offering students advice and support” (Rhatigan, 2009, p. 5). The advent of the earliest members of the student affairs profession (i.e., deans of men and women, and student personnel workers) is attributed to a number of educational and social developments, including the impact of the Germanic
philosophy of education (Veysey, 1965) that provided a level of student autonomy that made internal stakeholders uncomfortable, and the rapid expansion and diversification of college student enrollments (Caple, 1998; Rhatigan, 2009).

According to Bickel and Lake (1999), there have been three distinct philosophical periods for the student-institution relationship: *in loco parentis* ("in the place of a parent"), the bystander era, and the facilitator era. More recently, Henning (2007) proposed that *in consortio cum parentibus* ("in partnership with parents") more aptly describes our contemporary rapport with students. An understanding of this evolution is integral to the overall understanding of higher education law and particularly as it relates to the formulation of policy and practice for students who have come to be known as disturbed and disturbed/disturbing. In her Assessment-Intervention of Student Problems (AISP) model, Delworth (1989/2009) described disturbed students as typically having either an inward (i.e., depressed or withdrawn) or outward (i.e., "angry at the world and particular persons") focus and that they “may seem angry and destructive towards self or others” (p. 13). In contrast, Delworth (1989/2009) generally defined the disturbing student as one who “lacks skills in establishing close, age-appropriate relationships”, and who is “self-centered” and generally “disruptive” (p. 13). For the purposes of the present study, the focus is on the most disturbed of students (i.e., disturbed and disturbed/disturbing), or individuals who are perceived to pose an imminent threat to self and/or others.

**In Loco Parentis**

The philosophy of *in loco parentis* guided the student-institution relationship until the early 1960s, when college students achieved constitutional recognition as members of the age of majority. In practice, this doctrine offered “insularity” to college and university disciplinary
practices (Bickel & Lake, 1999, p. 17), allowing them to protect students as a parent would. Contrary to popular belief, however, there is no evidence that the doctrine was intended to create “a liability/responsibility/duty-creating norm” (Bickel & Lake, 1999, p. 29) beyond the expectation that discipline would not cause harm to the student (Henning, 2007). Despite the original spirit of the doctrine, many institutions saw their role as involving a great deal of student protection and their practices reflected this (Henning, 2007). The movement away from *in loco parentis* as the guiding philosophy for the student-institution relationship was a direct response to issues that incited student activism, including the absence of equal rights for women and visible minorities, the lack of procedural due process, and the “abuses” of a government that was perceived to be cavalier with its international policy, amongst other issues (Bickel & Lake, 1999, p. 36). The result of this movement was a new view of students which entailed that they no longer be viewed as children but instead as adults capable of making decisions on their own behalf.

**Bystander Era**

The bystander era defined the institution-student relationship from the 1970s through the mid-1990s. Bickel and Lake (1999) conceptualized this period into two distinct phases. The first phase, which lasted until the mid-1980s, was characterized by no duty rulings or court decisions indicating that college and universities owed no legal duty to students and as such could not be held liable for harm (Bickel & Lake, 1999). This period was heavily reliant on the idea that students were “uncontrollable” (Henning, 2007). The second phase, known as the duty era, involved a shift towards duty under particular circumstances including: to protect students from known dangers on university property, to alert students to foreseeable risks due to the actions of others, and to ensure safety while participating in campus events (Bickel & Lake,
In stark contrast to the first phase of the bystander era, the duty model was criticized for imposing too much responsibility on institutions and none on students (Henning, 2007).

**Facilitator Era**

Bickel and Lake (1999) projected that a relationship of shared responsibility would characterize the contemporary dynamic between students and their postsecondary institutions. More specifically, this dynamic was forecast to involve a balancing of the duty model of the bystander era with the notion that students are adults and in a position to make their own decisions (Henning, 2007, p. 546). Where Bickel and Lake’s (1999) projection seems to have missed the mark is that they could not have predicted the unique life events that would unfold over the course of today’s college students’ formative years. These events include the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks (the first of their kind on American soil), consistent engagement in international conflict, and the impact of Baby Boomer parents on students’ collective identity formation (Coomes & DeBard, 2004). These events and perspectives influence expectations for familial involvement and care in dealing with college students.

**In Consortio cum Parentibus**

For the reasons outlined above, Henning (2007) proposed that an alternative relationship, *in consortio cum parentibus* (“in partnership with parents”), be recognized within the postsecondary setting. Notable about this model is the fact that it incorporates all stakeholders, including institutions, students, and parents. Still, although the familial piece is regarded to be essential to the model, the primary relationship remains between students and their respective institutions (Henning, 2007). The complicated part of this model relates to the development of appropriate parameters for familial involvement. To some extent, this complication has been
attributed to the complex expectations of many Baby Boomer parents who remember “curfews, bed checks, and an all-knowing dean” and have long fostered a consumerist orientation towards the educational process (Daniel, Evans, & Scott, 2001, p. 8). Also adding to the complexity is the emergence of the Thirteeners (i.e., those individuals born between 1961 and 1981), a generation with wholly different collective values, who are also the parents of college students. When considering the role of parents in the lives of their college-attending children, this reality must also be considered, and particularly as policy is developed to manage disturbed and disturbed/disturbing students.

**Millennial Students**

Coomes and DeBard (2004) noted that while the generational perspective is an important “tool for understanding students” that it should be “employed with caution” (p. 13). This suggestion is based on the fact that not all individuals within a particular generation fit the attributes of this scheme. Similarly, it should not be presumed that all parents are heavily-involved in the lives of their college student children. However, if the generational lens is utilized to conceptualize this problem, it is important to note some attributes of today’s traditional-aged college students. Millennial students (i.e., those individuals born between 1982 and 2002) are known to have an extremely positive self-concept, a byproduct as suggested by DeBard (2004), of the sheltered upbringing afforded by Baby Boomer parents (p. 35). Additionally, Millennials are known for their confidence, sense of tradition, preference for teamwork, and drive to achieve (DeBard, 2004, pp. 34-38). Although all these generational characterizations are important to understand, particularly notable for the current problem is the fact that Millennials have a tendency toward strong parental relationships which generally entails unprecedented involvement. Attempting to explain this familial dynamic, Kennedy (2009)
remarked that it seems to be the result of a number of sociocultural shifts, including: a greater emphasis on “child-centeredness,” the “significant financial investment” associated with child-rearing, immediate accessibility via technology, and the discovery that “interference” produces results (p. 17). Regardless of its origin, however, the extent to which this new dynamic is integrated into current policies and practices is a good predictor of their success.

**Statement of the Problem**

The current generation of college students is known for being overwhelmed (Kadison & DiGeronimo, 2004). Hollingsworth, Dunkle, and Douce (2009) explained this phenomenon as being a product of new college norms, the stress associated with development, and a surge in mental health conditions amongst today’s students. The mental health component of this phenomenon is a particularly important consideration for policy and practice because not only are students with mental health issues reportedly coming to our campuses in greater numbers (Belch, 2011) and with conditions of greater severity (Hunt & Eisenberg, 2010), but many of them “have been medicated throughout their K-12 education and may require similar treatment in college to remain emotionally and physically stable” (Lake & Tribbensee, 2002, p. 126).

There is some controversy about whether the phenomenon of increased mental illness amongst college students is “real or perceived” (Mowbray et al., 2006, p. 226), as there is generally less stigma associated with mental illness and as a result a greater willingness amongst students to seek out help (Hunt & Eisenberg, 2010). Additionally, it is likely that medical advancement “may be enabling more emotionally disturbed students to attend and remain in college than in the past” (Hunt & Eisenberg, 2010, p. 6). Regardless of the reasons for the influx of student demand in this regard, with the emergence of this growing subset of students on campus, has come a greater need for campus mental health care (Dickstein & Christensen, 2008;
Lee & Abbey, 2008; Mowbray et al., 2006), and more nuanced concerns about student safety and crisis management (Dunkle, Silverstein, & Warner, 2008; Eels & Rockland-Miller, 2011). These concerns have only been exacerbated by the high profile events involving mentally ill students and campus violence (Dunkle et al., 2008).

In 2008, the Health and Safety Exception to the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) was revised to explicitly allow for parental notification. More specifically, parental notification was identified as an appropriate disclosure during emergencies, which some believe indicates that parents should be regarded as “a partner who has a very significant investment . . . in the success of the student” (Dickstein & Christensen, 2008, pp. 232-233). Still, as a permissive piece of legislation, the ultimate decision to contact parents is in the hands of institutional decision-makers, which O’Donnell (2003) posited allows institutions to act within the bounds of their institutional values. Despite the amount of literature related to the FERPA, little is known about how administrators actually operationalize the health and safety exception on their campuses when confronted with a student believed to pose an imminent threat to self and/or others. More fundamentally, little is known about how parents, a key stakeholder in the lives of the current generation of college students, have been integrated into the crisis-management equation. In this study, this phenomenon was considered from the perspective of senior student affairs administrators charged with determining whether to involve parents when their students suffer from the most acute of mental health issues.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to understand how senior student affairs administrators experience disturbed and disturbed/disturbing students on their campuses and make decisions to involve parents when working with students who they believe are a potential harm to self and/or
others. It was expected that a better understanding of how student affairs professionals experience these students and approach parental contact decision under these circumstances might lead to normative practices for parental contact during critical incidents of this kind, as well as alleviate some of the apprehension surrounding parental notification as an intervention for health and safety emergencies. Although there is a great deal of research about the college mental health crisis, federal privacy law, and parental involvement in general, a significant gap in the literature exists in so far as how administrators operationalize this knowledge in their institutional policies and practices. Therefore, this study will specifically focus on the decision-making process associated with contacting parents during an acute mental health crisis.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study: (1) How do senior student affairs administrators experience the phenomenon of the disturbed and disturbed/disturbing student on their campuses? (2) How do senior student affairs administrators decide when to contact parents about disturbed and disturbed/disturbing students who pose a threat to self and/or others?

Rationale and Significance

The rationale for this study stemmed from the need for senior student affairs professionals to know how and when to involve parents when students are perceived to be a threat to self and/or others as a result of a mental health issue. The significance of this study lies in the fact that apprehension about this decision can have life and death consequences. Examining this particular decision-making process stands to enhance our ability to manage “human crises” that affect both “individuals and groups in the campus community” (Zdiarski et al., 2007, p. 41). For disturbed students, communication between key members of their support system is paramount for effective supervision and care. For the larger campus community, this
type of communication is not only essential for safety, but is integral to the success of students living in community alongside disturbed peers. Speaking of the impact of students struggling with severe mental health issues on others, Kadison and DiGeronimo (2007) remarked, “Students have far too many of their own social and academic stresses to deal with, never mind trying to handle the distressed students around them” (p. 160). Effective intervention not only provides disturbed students with the support they need, but has positive implications for the campus community and postsecondary context at large.

Research Design Overview

Using qualitative research methods, I sought to describe the essence of a particular decision-making process within the scope of administrators’ work with disturbed and disturbed/disturbing students. More specifically, I attempted to illustrate the experience of senior student affairs professionals making the decision about whether to contact the parents of a student who presents an imminent threat of harm as a result of a mental health issue. The present study’s design was informed by the phenomenological approach as articulated by van Manen (1990), a proponent of the hermeneutic tradition. According to van Manen’s conceptualization of hermeneutic phenomenology both description and interpretation are essential tasks (Creswell, 2003). Additionally, this study was situated in the social constructivist research paradigm, as the objective was to gain an understanding of the experience of the administrators being studied. As such, it was also guided by relativist ontology and subjectivist epistemology or the belief that truth and knowledge are dynamic and susceptible to time and place (Creswell, 2003).

Definitions of Key Terminology

The following terminology will be used throughout this manuscript. When these terms are used it should be understood that they capture the definitions provided here.
Disturbed, Disturbing, and Disturbed/Disturbing Students

This language was drawn from Delworth’s (1989/2009) Assessment-Intervention of Student Problems (AISP) Model which continues to be regarded as a “useful tool to student affairs professionals as they confront the complex issues on American college campuses” (Barr, 2009, p. 3) and specifically those related to difficult students. Delworth (1989/2009) defined the disturbed student as one who typically has either an internal (i.e., “depressed or withdrawn”) or external (i.e., “angry at the world and particular persons”) focus and “may seem angry and destructive towards self or others” (Delworth, 1989/2009, p. 13). Disturbed students present themselves with behavior that is “out of sync” with their peers and in line with a significant mental health issue (Dunkle & Presley, 2009, p. 280). In contrast, she described the disturbing student as one who “lacks skills in establishing close, age-appropriate relationships,” and who is “self-centered” and generally “disruptive” (p. 13). Administrators most commonly remediate issues related to disturbing students through the student conduct process (Dunkle and Presley, 2009). A third term used within the model is disturbed/disturbing, which refers to the student who exhibits behaviors that fall into both of the broader categories. Dunkle and Presley (2009) noted that working with this type of student can be difficult because “differentiating the mental health component from the conduct issue” (p. 280) is critically important. For the purposes of this study, the focus is on the most disturbed of students (i.e., disturbed and disturbed/disturbing) or individuals who are perceived to pose an imminent threat to self and/or others and specifically as a result of a mental health issue. Figure 1 illustrates the relationship between the student designations provided in Delworth’s (1989/2009) model.
Parent

This term entails the broad spectrum of individuals who serve as the primary points of support and contact for today’s college students. Acknowledging the multidimensionality of this term in our society today, the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) officially defines a “parent” as including “a natural parent, a guardian, or an individual acting as a parent in the absence of a parent or guardian” (Family Policy Compliance Office, 2010, p. 2).

Senior Student Affairs Administrator

The term senior student affairs administrator generally refers to those individuals in upper administrative roles in their campus student affairs divisions. In the small college setting, the most senior of these professionals often oversee a broad portfolio of functional areas and responsibilities. Areas typically under the senior student affairs administrator’s purview include: the office of the dean of students, judicial affairs, residential life, student activities, career services, health and counseling services, greek life, multicultural affairs, and religious life, amongst other areas (Heida, 2006). Additionally, it is common place for these professionals to serve in a leadership capacity on crisis management and behavioral intervention teams. For the present study, the term “senior student affairs administrator” or any variation should be
understood to include student affairs administrators in a senior administrative capacity at a small private liberal arts college or university with at least three years of experience in their current position or as a senior-level practitioner with crisis management responsibilities.

**Severe Mental Health Issues**

Mental health diagnoses and determinations of their severity should only be made by licensed mental health professionals and are not the focus of this study. By definition, mental health diagnoses of this magnitude are based on “having a diagnosable psychiatric disorder,” “lasting at least a year, and producing impairment significant enough to be considered disabling” (Mowbray et al., 2006, p. 226). For the purposes of this inquiry, the umbrella term “severe mental health issues” should be understood to refer to individuals who qualify as “disturbed” (Delworth, 1989/2009) and likely as a result of one of the many conditions known to plague young adults in the traditional college age category, such as “major depression, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, and other psychiatric disorders” (Mowbray et al., 2006, p. 227). Important to acknowledge explicitly is the fact that not all individuals suffering from mental illness pose a threat of harm to self and/or others. Additionally, although mental illness is a common and likely precursor to suicide, there are a number of risk factors for self-harm which fall outside of such diagnoses.

**Overview of the Study**

This manuscript is composed of five chapters. The first chapter was designed to contextualize the study, present the guiding research questions, and provide evidence of the study’s significance. The second chapter offers an overview of the extant literature related to parental involvement, the college mental health crisis, legal issues, interventions for disturbed students, and the small private liberal arts college. The third chapter addresses the
phenomenological approach and outlines the procedures that were selected to conduct the present study. The fourth chapter is dedicated to the analysis of the study’s major findings as they relate to the research questions. The fifth chapter provides a discussion of the study’s most significant findings, addresses the study’s implications for practice and future research, and concludes with a brief summary of the limitations of the study.
CHAPTER II. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe how senior student affairs administrators experience disturbed and disturbed/disturbing students on their campuses and decide to involve parents when a student is believed to be a threat to self and/or others as a result of a mental health issue. To provide context for the study and gain a greater understanding of the issue, a thorough review of literature has been conducted. More specifically, to begin this section I discussed parental involvement and the college mental health crisis, provided a brief historical account of the emergence of college counseling and mental health services within the American postsecondary system, and described the relationship between mental illness and violence. Additionally, I discussed important legal frameworks for working with students suffering from mental illness (i.e., FERPA and the Americans with Disabilities Act), as well as considered commonly used interventions for the most critical students: those who pose an imminent threat to safety. Finally, I touched upon the small private liberal arts college, which served as the particular context for this study.

The review of parental involvement, the postsecondary mental health crisis, the emergence of mental health care in the postsecondary setting, the relationship between mental illness and violence was structured to contextualize the issue while giving due attention to all the aspects of the phenomenon. The discussion of relevant legal frameworks was meant to provide important background knowledge about the regulations that must guide our decision-making processes and practices with respect to students with mental health issues. The discussion of commonly-used interventions was provided as a status report for the practices extended to this subpopulation of students. My discussion surrounding the small private liberal arts college and its organizational culture was meant to provide insight into the particular environment in which
the present investigation took place. Important to note with respect to the section addressing
commonly-used interventions is the particular emphasis given to parental notification and the
controversy surrounding its regular use within the postsecondary context. This is the case
because the involvement of parents during mental health crises was the specific campus
intervention of interest for this study.

**Parental Involvement**

As touched upon briefly in chapter one, the distinct relationship that characterizes the
current generation of traditional-aged college students and their parents is an imperative
consideration for student affairs work and the policies that administrators create on students’
behalf. This phenomenon becomes clear as early as the admissions process, which is often
administrators’ first meeting with students and their families. In light of parents’ investment at
this point, Howe and Strauss (2003) described college admission and recruitment as the
“copurchasing” of a college experience (p. 4). Noting the continued impact of parents beyond
college choice, Carney-Hall (2008) further remarked that “one would expect that they [parents]
also would continue their involvement with their college student” (p. 6). Indeed, the intricacies
of the college experience are fundamentally different for today’s students as compared to their
parents, many of whom can claim membership in the Baby Boomer generation. More simply
put, “College is no longer the kind of place where parents send students to learn from experts
while readily abdicating their role” (Daniel, et al., 2001, p. 3).

Without a doubt, the intensified role of parents in the lives of their college-attending
children is a reality about which few campus stakeholders disagree. However, queries about the
extent to which parental involvement should play a role in administrative work elicit divergent
responses. Even a cursory review of the literature reveals the prevailing position that
contemporary parental involvement can be “intrusive” and potentially distracting from valuable developmental learning outcomes, such as individuation from one’s family and ultimately achieving autonomy (Cullaty, 2011; Flanagan, 2006; Kennedy, 2009; Taub, 2008). On the other hand, some student affairs professionals have posited that it makes sense for institutions to build parental involvement into institutional infrastructures because of what it can mean for their student-children (Daniel et al., 2001; Kennedy, 2009). That is, parental involvement has not only become an expectation for students, but has additionally become a source of significant social support (Birch, O’Toole, & Kanu, 1997). In one particular study (Birch et al., 1997), researchers even concluded that this social support has the potential to yield positive outcomes for students in terms of their health and wellness decisions, a finding which arguably suggests that parental involvement in student health crises makes sense.

The College Mental Health Crisis

Kadison and DiGeronimo (2004) remarked that the college mental health crisis may be attributed to a “multitude of hidden problems” (p. 5). More specifically, over the years, this phenomenon has been attached to normal developmental tasks coupled with a variety of social and cultural factors (Dunkle & Presley, 2009; Kadison & DiGeronimo, 2004; Kitzrow, 2003). Social and cultural influences that are consistently discussed within college mental health literature (Dickstein & Christensen, 2008; Dunkle & Presley, 2009; Kadison & DiGeronimo, 2004) include: familial instability, the diversification of the college student population, violence, early experimentation with alcohol, drugs, and sexual activity, the stress associated with a weakened economy, and the post 9/11 “culture of fear,” which has been the unique reality of the current generation of college students for as long as many of them can remember (Coomes & DeBard, 2004).
Three additional factors that must be considered when conceptualizing this issue include the biology of mental illness, and medical and legal advancements (Dunkle & Presley, 2009; Kitzrow, 2003; Shuchman, 2007). That is, the prevalence of mental illness during the college years can be traced to the age of onset coinciding with that of traditional college enrollment, the increased “precision” of mental health care and wide-availability of psychotropic drugs, and the legal protections afforded by antidiscrimination laws, such as the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (Dunkle & Presley, 2009; Kitzrow, 2001). Medical and legal development are particularly important considerations to keep in mind as one thinks about this issue because it is these measurements of progress that have allowed for individuals with mental health issues to attend college, when historically they would have been unable to do so.

**Mental Illness and Violence**

In their thirteen-year longitudinal study of college counseling center client problems, Benton et al. (2003) found that today’s college student mental health issues are both more complex and severe. More specifically, this study revealed that students often have “more complex problems that include both the normal college student problems … as well as the more severe problems such as anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation, sexual assault, and personality disorders” (Benton, et al., 2003, p. 69). Although the researchers cautioned against generalizing the results of this single site study, their findings garnered a great deal of attention because they seemed to substantiate what many professionals had been seeing on their own campuses (Benton, Benton, Newton, Benton, & Robertson, 2004). More specifically, this study’s importance lies in the extent to which it illustrates the current mental health climate in the postsecondary setting, and helps to conceptualize an issue that is often discussed in conjunction with the college mental health crisis – that is, the relationship between mental health and violence.
The relationship between the mental health of college students and violence became most provocative after the 2007 Virginia Tech tragedy (Lake, 2008), an incident that has been referred to as “the ‘9/11’ of higher education” (Dunkle, et al., 2008) because of “the substantial scrutiny of university policies and procedures” that resulted (Hoffman, 2013, p. 1). Subsequent acts of violence at the hands of college students, including the shootings at Northern Illinois University in 2008, the 2011 off-campus shootings in Arizona by a former Pima Community College student, and most recently the mass shooting allegedly orchestrated by a recently withdrawn doctoral student at the University of Colorado at Denver only solidified this issue as systemic in nature. As such, these events also posed a mandate for professionals to develop policies and practices that meet the needs of disturbed students within the scope of the law, while also maintaining the safety of the campus at-large.

In their article on managing violent and troubling students, Dunkle et al. (2008) made the important point that not all college students suffering from mental health issues “cause disruption or are violent” (p. 587). In fact, most mentally ill students not only attend and graduate from college without incident (Dunkle et al., 2008) but they are “intellectually capable” (Bertram, 2010, p. 30). Still, the fact that suicide is the second leading cause of death for 25-34 year olds and third leading cause of death for 15-24 year olds (CDC, 2007) should render a collective pause within professional circles. This is the case because although the relationship between mental illness and violence has long been regarded as “tenuous” (Pavela, 2011), we also know that suicide and violence are not isolated events. For instance, in their study of student suicide, Barrios, Everett, Simon, and Brener (2000) found that students experiencing suicidal ideation are more likely to engage in a number of dangerous behaviors, including carrying a weapon, getting in physical altercations, and drinking and driving. For this reason, suicide can be characterized
as a “cluster risk” or an act that “tends to correlate with other high-risk behavior” among college students (Lake & Tribbensee, 2002, p. 128). Moreover, as such, it is inaccurate to regard suicide as “primarily an individual event,” but rather should be seen as a threat to “environmental wellness” (Lake, 2008, p. 3). This is the case because suicidal individuals can be inadvertently dangerous to the physical safety of others, and an incident of self-harm has the propensity to obstruct other students from taking full advantage of the academic and developmental opportunities on campus (Lake, 2008).

**College Counseling and Mental Health Services**

Following the 2007 Virginia Tech tragedy, administrative staff and college counselors came under fire for their failure to communicate about and properly monitor students with known mental health issues (Lake, 2008; Prescott, 2008; VTRP, 2007). More broadly, this event raised questions about the effectiveness of policies and practices for mentally ill students within the postsecondary context. Amongst the areas in question was the “role and responsibility of the university counseling center in dealing with the seriously mentally ill” (Flynn & Heitzmann, 2008, p. 7). This question is an important one, particularly as it relates to how administrators make decisions about critical interventions and care for these students with the guidance of these professionals. For this reason, a brief history of college counseling and mental health services in the American postsecondary context has been provided. The purpose of this aspect of the review is to illustrate the evolution of the relationship between students and the professionals charged with this service. This is important for the current inquiry because it also provides insight about expectations for the decisions we make and the care that we provide this population of students.

On-campus counseling has been provided to college students since the early 1900s (Barreira & Snider, 2010). At the time, this advice was provided by administrative professionals
who went by the titles of “advisors, deans, and counselors” (Archer & Cooper, 1998) and mainly dealt with educational and vocational issues (Barreira & Snider, 2010). An important influence in the development of mental health services was the emergence of the mental hygiene movement which aimed to normalize psychiatric treatment by taking it out of psychiatric institutions and applying it more broadly “in the home, workplace, schools, and other social institutions” (Prescott, 2008). Still, it would not be until the 1920s that mental health services would make a notable appearance on campus along with more comprehensive health care in general (Prescott, 2008). The initial emergence of mental health services was sparked by the ending of World War I, during which it became apparent that not only were many college-aged soldiers suffering from a number of physical diseases, but they were susceptible to a condition referred to as “shell-shock” (Prescott, 2008). These discoveries led to the provision of greater physical care on campus which was accompanied by care for students’ emotions (Prescott, 2008).

Although the first mental hygiene programs emerged during the twenties and thirties, historical sources (Barreira & Snider, 2010; Prescott, 2008) point to World War II as being the true catalyst for widespread mental health services in the college and university setting. Part of this movement was a result of the need for a professional class to attend to the many veterans who were taking advantage of the GI Bill, the other was the fact that “over 2.5 million men and women were rejected or discharged from military service for emotional problems” (Prescott, 2008, p. 260). Although the counseling focus at the time remained predominantly on occupational and educational matters, a new emphasis on “personal adjustment counseling” also emerged (Heppner & Neal, 1983), as did the distinction between college personnel and mental hygiene counselors (Archer & Cooper, 1998). Personal counseling would be the emphasis from
the 1950s through the 1980s with the last decade of that period marking a shift toward “outreach and consultation” with the campus community (Dunkle & Presley, 2009). Since then, there has been yet another telling evolution in the college counseling movement which has largely been attributed to students coming to college “overwhelmed and more damaged than those of previous years” (Kitzrow, 2003, p. 167). That is, the outreach/preventative model of counseling has shifted more towards a “clinical and crisis-oriented” or “directive” model (Kitzrow, 2003; Grayson & Meilman, 2006). The evolution of counseling and mental health services on campus speaks to the “distinctive” nature of practice within this environment, which Grayson and Meilman (2006) suggested is influenced not only by the nature of students’ developmental issues and college experiences, but also “the influence of the academic institution” (p. vii).

**Legal Issues**

In this section, the legal considerations associated with working with disturbed and disturbed/disturbing students will be discussed. These considerations include the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), disability law, and the guidance that is offered through key legal cases and Office of Civil Rights (OCR) letters.

**Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act**

Although FERPA was written to protect the interests of K-12 students, and specifically targets the misuse of their records in that regard, it has grown to become most recognized for its impact within higher education (Weeks, 2001). Practically speaking, this statute exists for one overarching purpose: to provide parents and students with a level of control over the records that are maintained by educational institutions. More specifically, it applies to all records maintained by colleges all postsecondary institutions receiving any federal funding (e.g., loans, grants, etc.),
and all active and former students, whether they participate in face-to-face instruction or distance education programs (Weeks, 2001, p. 42).

**The Health and Safety Emergency Exception.** The health and safety emergency exception was drafted to balance student privacy with the need to communicate broadly during times of crisis (Weeks, 2001). In its original form, the lawful release of information was dependent upon the extent to which the circumstances satisfied the following four prongs related to an emergency’s severity: (1) the seriousness of the issue, (2) the integrality of the information to remediation of the problem, (3) whether the requestor was in a position to act, and (4) whether time was critical (Weeks, 2001). In 2008, the Department of Education (DOE) issued several amendments to FERPA as a direct response to the Virginia Tech incident, and more broadly, “the confusion [that] often abounds on campuses regarding what information about troubled students legally can be shared” both within and outside of their walls (Dunkle et al., 2008, p. 618). Amongst these amendments were two important modifications to the language of the health and safety emergency exception. Namely, “parents of an eligible student” was added to the list of “appropriate parties” to whom information could be disclosed, and the term “an articulable or significant threat” replaced the four conditions that had previously qualified an emergency (34 C.F.R. § 99.36, 2008). These alterations were meant to extend greater “discretion” to institutional decision-makers and provide a clearer understanding about how they may lawfully and efficiently share information during times of crisis (Chapman, 2009; Dunkle et al., 2008; Newhart & Lovelace, 2009; VTRP, 2007). Still, questions remain about how to appropriately employ the health and safety emergency exception during critical incidents (Brusca & Ram, 2010; Chapman, 2009). Brusca and Ram (2010) attributed these apprehensions to the nuanced nature of “FERPA privacy analysis” (p. 168). That is, the “burden” placed on
institutions for “determining both when a health or safety emergency exists and who has a ‘legitimate educational interest’ in the record at issue” is what leads to less administrative confidence when making such decisions (Chapman, 2009, p. 7). Given the often ill-structured nature of this decision-making process, Dunkle et al. (2008) advised that decisions about the employment of the exception should be handled collaboratively amongst threat assessment team members and university staff. Also a potentially important point to consider with respect to this decision is the spirit of the law, which can be tied to its lead sponsor Senator James Buckley, an ardent advocate for parental participation (Weeks, 2001). Although the many stakeholders (e.g., administrators, faculty, staff, students, families, mental health professionals, etc.) involved in the privacy discussion might hold differing opinions about how much weight this information should have, good practice seems to require consideration of the spirit of the law before making decisions about how to implement it.

**Issues Surrounding Disclosure.** Without a doubt, the most significant concern related to FERPA involves inappropriate disclosure. This fear is grounded in the potential consequences of such decisions, which include compromising one’s federal funding, and the potential for private action. Though these concerns are understandable, and particularly in light of the pressing issues of college affordability and the litigious nature of our society, they are rooted in significant misunderstandings about the law. The *Gonzaga University v. Doe* (2002) opinion effectively clarified any concerns related to the loss of federal funding, as the expectation is only that an institution “complies substantially” with FERPA legislation (20 U.S.C §§ 1234c(a), 1232g(f)). Newhart and Lovelace (2009) further offered that there are many steps that must be taken before such a penalty would be enacted. Specifically, the DOE must “first find that an institution has a policy or practice” that violates FERPA, and if it does, the institution must be
given “a reasonable period of time to come into compliance with the law” before imposing such a consequence (p. 20).

With respect to concerns surrounding private action, the majority opinion written by Chief Justice Rehnquist in *Gonzaga University v. Doe* also effectively dismissed this area of concern. More specifically, Chief Justice Rehnquist stated; “The current structure of FERPA does not contain ‘rights-creating’ language, but instead contains an aggregate, as opposed to individual, focus, as well as internal compliance mechanisms for enforcement” (*Gonzaga University v. Doe*, 2002). In this opinion, it was the Court’s conclusion that because an administrative complaint process was provided through the Department of Education, that the drafters of the statute must have meant to disallow private action against institutions for unauthorized breaches of FERPA. Further consolation should be provided by the fact that a FERPA violation hearing board has “never been convened” to discuss the improper actuation of one of the statute’s exceptions (Weeks, 2001, p. 44). Certainly, this is not to say that institutions should lessen their regard for student privacy; such decisions should absolutely not be haphazard. However, the Court also seems to be saying that under the proper conditions, institutions should not be afraid to make disclosures. Important for institutions to keep in mind, however, is that the applicability of state privacy law is a wholly different matter and is often the mechanism through which students and parents do sue colleges and universities for inappropriate breaches (Sidbury, 2003). For this reason, colleges and universities should also be well-versed in their state standards for student privacy.

**Federal Disability Law**

Federal disability law plays a critical role in our work with students with disabilities, including those with mental health conditions. Most pertinent to this study are the laws which
guide administrative procedures for attending to students who are potentially violent. The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Section 504) and the American with Disabilities Act (ADA) regulate disability rights in higher education settings. Although these laws are rather complex, it is imperative for student affairs professionals to have a clear grasp of how they govern our procedures, and particularly those related to crisis management. The validity of this assertion becomes clear when one considers the scope of the problem and the consequences for malpractice. That is, informed practice is important because the increasing numbers of students coming to campus with such conditions require it, and because federal funding is contingent upon compliance. In this section of the review, an overview of Section 504 and ADA law will be provided, as will a discussion about the implication of the law in the management of the most disturbed students.

**Section 504.** Section 504 prevents the discrimination of “otherwise qualified” students with disabilities from any programs and activities that are federally funded, and applies to both public and private colleges and universities (34 C.F.R. §104.11). The language of this statute defines an individual with a disability as someone who: (1) has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities, (2) has a record of such an impairment, or (3) is regarded as having such an impairment (34 C.F.R. §104.11). Like FERPA, Section 504 is regulated by the Department of Education, although it is within the purview of the Office of Civil Rights (OCR). Students who believe that they have been subject to a 504 violation must report this to the OCR within 180 days of the incident (OCR, n.d.). An investigation is then conducted to determine whether the claim of noncompliance is valid. If noncompliance is substantiated, the OCR approaches the institution to establish terms for resolution. Provided the institution meets the agreed upon terms, the violation is considered remedied.
an institution is not amenable to remediation, the process continues and the institution could be subject to administrative sanctioning, including the possible suspension of federal aid (OCR, n.d.). At this point, students would also have the option of filing suit against their institution in federal court.

**ADA.** The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) also protects disabled persons from discrimination. This law is comprised of three sections, two of which apply to the postsecondary context. Title II regulates the discrimination of disabled persons within public colleges and universities, while Title III does the same for students within private colleges “that provide public accommodations” (Bubert & Bender, 2011, pp. 187-188). There are many commonalities between Section 504 and ADA law, as both were subject to the 2008 amendments to ADA which were enacted in May of 2011. Amongst these commonalities is their shared definition of the term “disability.”

The impetus behind the 2008 amendments to ADA was to provide greater support for persons with disabilities. This was achieved primarily by changing the disability standard. More specifically, the amendments shifted the burden from the plaintiff (i.e., the disabled individual) to the defendant. That is, instead of focusing on whether a condition would qualify as an actual disability, the amendments call for the court to consider whether the entity “complied with its obligations” (Bubert & Benders, 2011, p. 189). Another important change incited by the amendments was the broadening of the disability designation. According to the amendments, entities (e.g., employers, colleges/universities, etc.) must regard conditions being treated as active conditions and subject to ADA law; additionally, a much wider net was cast in terms of defining “major life activities” (Bubert & Bender, 2011).
**ADA/504 direct threat standard.** The ADA/504 direct threat standard is one of the most pressing aspects of law for the management of disturbed students. This is the case because similar to the FERPA health and safety emergency exception, the direct threat standard provides an exemption from ADA/504 protection. In practice, this standard and its three-pronged test provide institutions with a framework for assessing and legally removing or denying admission to a disabled person, provided they are determined to pose a direct threat (Lewis, Schuster, & Sokolow, 2012, p. 6). More specifically, the language of the direct threat test calls for an “individualized assessment that the preponderance of evidence indicates that an individual represents a high probability of substantial harm” and requires that the following criteria be met: (1) the nature, duration and severity of the risk, (2) the probability that the injury will actually occur, and (3) whether reasonable modifications of policies, practices or procedures will sufficiently mitigate the risk (28 C.F.R. § 35.139).

ADA’s Title III, which applies to private entities, has always articulated the direct threat standard as pertaining solely to “harm to others.” Conversely, Title II/504 institutions have always functioned under the “harm to self or others” language which allowed for “involuntary medical withdrawal, emergency removal policies and disciplinary procedures for their students” (Lannon & Sanghavi, 2011, p. 1). Important to note is that in March of 2011, Congress passed several amendments to Title II (and in effect Section 504) which fundamentally altered how institutions subject to this law may work with disturbed students. Specifically, the Department of Justice (DOJ) revised the definition of a direct threat as one that poses “a significant risk to the health and safety of others that cannot be eliminated by a modification of policies, practices or procedures, or by the provision of auxiliary aids or services as provided by §35.139” (28 C.F.R. § 35.104). Since this amendment, institutions subject to Title II/504 that in the past had greater
flexibility in so far as how they approached students at risk for self harm, remain uncertain about what the new language will allow. Lewis et al. (2012) suggested that these institutions look to three recent OCR decision letters (Mt. Holyoke College, 2008; Spring Arbor University, 2010; and St. Joseph’s College, 2011) for guidance. Although these letters predate the implementation of the Department of Justice’s changes, they are regarded as instructive for how to proceed under the new direct threat standard.

**Relevant Legal Cases**

Although there are numerous cases dealing with suicide or serious self-inflicted injury in the postsecondary context, there are fewer cases that are discussed with respect to parental notification. This is the case for several reasons. First, as previously mentioned FERPA is a funding statute and does not allow for private rights of action (Gonzaga v. Doe, 2002). Instead, matters are investigated and redressed administratively through the Department of Education. Second, FERPA’s disclosure exceptions are permissive rather than mandatory, which means that institutions may elect not to disclose information even when a situation meets the criteria to do so (Weeks, 2001). Third, no court decisions have indicated that student affairs professionals have a legal duty to contact parents about suicidal behavior (Baker, 2005). As a result, guidance related to the duty to prevent harm to mentally ill students and the notification of parents typically emerges from the professional analysis that follows these incidents.

The cases/incidents related to college student mental illness, and tangentially parental notification, that most inform our professional practice are Jain v. State of Iowa (2000), Schieszler v. Ferrum College (2002), Shin v. Massachusetts Institute of Technology (2005), Mahoney v. Allegheny College (2005), and the tragedy at Virginia Tech in 2007. The facts of
these cases and the courts’ rulings as they relate to mental health and parental contact will be discussed here.

**Jain v. State of Iowa (2000).** Despite being a successful student in high school, Sanjay Jain struggled both academically and socially during his first semester at the University of Iowa (*Jain v. State of Iowa*, 2000). His struggles first became evident to the university through two student conduct violations, one for vandalism and the other for smoking marijuana (*Jain v. State of Iowa*, 2000). Although Jain was put on disciplinary probation for the latter infraction, his parents were not notified of the incident due to the university’s student privacy policy and Jain himself did not share his troubles with them (*Jain v. State of Iowa*, 2000). Not long after these disciplinary incidents, Jain made his first attempt at suicide by inhaling the fumes from his moped that he had stored in his residence hall room (*Jain v. State of Iowa*, 2000). Jain readily admitted this attempt to both his resident assistant and to the hall coordinator (*Jain v. State*, 2000). In a meeting following the event, Jain refused to give the coordinator the required permission for her to contact his parents, so he was advised to seek help from campus mental health services and to remove his moped from his room (*Jain v. State of Iowa*, 2000). After returning to campus in December following Thanksgiving break, Jain returned to his residence hall after a night of drinking and committed suicide by inhaling the fumes of his moped, which he once again had been storing in his residence hall room without the knowledge of university officials (*Jain v. State of Iowa*, 2000).

Following Jain’s death, his parents filed suit against the state claiming that the university had a special relationship with him that required university officials to notify them of his “self destructive behavior” (*Jain v. State of Iowa*, 2000). In “the only court opinion to address directly parent notification in a university setting,” the court ruled that there was no special relationship
because at eighteen years of age Jain was a legal adult and as such a “K-12 standard” of care
could not be applied (Baker, 2005, pp. 525-525). Moreover, the court pointed out that FERPA
did not require university staff to contact parents about their student (Baker, 2005; Jain v. State
of Iowa, 2000). Johnsen (2007) suggested that the importance of this case lies in the fact that it
illustrates how “an affirmative duty to inform parents” makes sense (p. 1087). More specifically,
had the FERPA standard for parental contact been less strictly construed, Sanjay may not have
died.

**Schieszler v. Ferrum College (2002).** After a semester of “disciplinary issues,” Ferrum
College freshman Michael Frentzel was required to attend anger management classes as a
condition of his continued enrollment (Schieszler v. Ferrum Coll., 2002). Frentzel complied
with this sanction and returned to campus in the spring semester (Schieszler v. Ferrum Coll.,
2002). That February, Frentzel’s resident assistant (RA) and campus police responded to reports
of an altercation between Frentzel and his girlfriend in the residence hall (Schieszler v. Ferrum
Coll., 2002). Shortly thereafter, Frentzel sent his girlfriend a note in which he detailed his plan
to commit suicide by hanging himself in his room with his belt (Schieszler v. Ferrum Coll.,
2002). This note was shared with Frentzel’s RA and campus police who responded to his room
where they found him with self-sustained injuries (Schieszler v. Ferrum Coll., 2002). This event
was shared with the dean of students who required Frentzel to sign a document indicating that he
would not commit any other acts of self-harm (Schieszler v. Ferrum Coll., 2002). Frentzel
complied with this request but proceeded to send several other notes to his estranged girlfriend
suggestions that he planned to hurt himself again (Schieszler v. Ferrum Coll., 2002). Frentzel’s
girlfriend shared these notes with university staff members who eventually went to check on
Frentzel and discovered that he had successfully hung himself in the manner he had planned \textit{(Schieszler v. Ferrum Coll., 2002)}.

Frentzel’s aunt sued Ferrum College alleging that they failed “to take adequate precautions to ensure that Frentzel did not hurt himself” or based on a special relationship \textit{(Schieszler v. Ferrum Coll., 2002)}. In response, the defendants filed a motion to dismiss \textit{(Schieszler v. Ferrum Coll., 2002)}. The court denied this motion stating that the dean of student’s request that Schieszler sign a statement promising not to engage in self-harm and knowledge of his specific plans indicated an “imminent probability” that Frentzel would commit suicide \textit{(Schieszler v. Ferrum Coll., 2002)}. Ferrum College then settled the case with Frentzel’s estate, accepting “shared responsibility” for the incident and conceding that they made “errors in judgment and communication” \textit{(Schieszler v. Ferrum Coll., 2002)}. Although, the settlement precluded the court from making a determination on duty, this case is viewed as important in that the court’s opinion suggests that a plaintiff might be successful in a duty to protect from foreseeable harm claim in situations involving a student’s suicide (Lake, 2008)

\textbf{Shin v. Massachusetts Institute of Technology (2005).} In 2000, after a very severe episode of depression, Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) sophomore Elizabeth Shin set herself on fire in her residence hall room \textit{(Shin v. Massachusetts Institute of Tech., 2005)}. This event followed years of mental illness, both in high school and throughout her freshman and sophomore years \textit{(Shin v. Massachusetts Institute of Tech., 2005)}. The first critical incident occurred during Shin’s first year when she overdosed on Tylenol Codeine, an event that led to her hospitalization (Lake, 2008; \textit{Shin v. Massachusetts Institute of Tech., 2005}). Following her overdose, Shin’s parents were notified that she had been hospitalized and arranged for subsequent outpatient care with a MIT psychiatrist (Lake, 2008; \textit{Shin v. Massachusetts Institute
of Tech., 2005). Her parents also alleged that a staff member promised to keep them abreast of any further health issues (Baker, 2009). Although Shin’s mental health issues continued for the duration of her freshman year and administrators and mental health staff were aware of this (Lake, 2008; Shin v. Massachusetts Institute of Tech., 2005), her parents were never notified again. After returning to school for her sophomore year, Shin began speaking very openly about her suicidal ideations (Shin v. Massachusetts Institute of Tech., 2005). Shin’s condition continued to escalate and she continued to receive care until she set herself on fire in April of 2000.

Following her death, Shin’s parents filed suit against MIT, and several administrators and staff members based upon their claim that their daughter was provided “ineffective care” (Kaplan & Lee, 2007). This claim was rooted in the fact that Shin committed suicide even though University officials were aware of the ongoing manifestations of her mental health condition, including suicidal ideations (Kaplan & Lee, 2007; Lake, 2008; Shin v. Massachusetts Institute of Tech., 2005). Shin’s parents further claimed that they should have been notified of their daughter’s threats of self-harm, because this information qualified for disclosure under the health and safety emergency exception of FERPA (Kaplan & Lee, 2007). Although the court dismissed the charges against the University, the case against the administrators and staff proceeded based on the grounds that they had a “special relationship” with Shin and in this capacity had a “duty to protect her from reasonably foreseeable harm to self” (Kaplin & Lee, 2007, p. 103). Ultimately, this case was settled out of court, which Lake (2008) noted “deprived higher education of the possibility of a very clear directive in an all too common scenario” (p. 15).
Mahoney v. Allegheny College (2005). Chuck Mahoney received treatment at the Allegheny College Counseling Center since early in his freshman year, when he was on campus for pre-season football (Mahoney v. Allegheny Coll., 2005). At that time, he was diagnosed with depression (Lake, 2008; Mahoney v. Allegheny Coll., 2005). In addition to the counseling that he received on campus, Mahoney also saw a psychiatrist who prescribed him antidepressants (Mahoney v. Allegheny Coll., 2005). Early in Mahoney’s sophomore year the campus counselor assessed Mahoney as being suicidal and referred him for hospitalization (Lake, 2008; Mahoney v. Allegheny Coll., 2005). Mahoney returned to campus shortly thereafter and continued with regular campus counseling visits (Mahoney v. Allegheny Coll., 2005). At the beginning of Mahoney’s junior year he not only quit the football team, but broke up with his long-term girlfriend, and reportedly began to distance himself from his closest friends who were in his fraternity (Mahoney v. Allegheny Coll., 2005). At that time, he continued seeing his counselor but his condition had significantly deteriorated and she was aware that he was experiencing suicidal ideation (Mahoney v. Allegheny Coll., 2005). After Mahoney discovered that one of his fraternity brothers was dating his ex-girlfriend he also began to have disciplinary issues (Mahoney v. Allegheny Coll., 2005). Due to his deteriorating mental health, Mahoney’s counselor approached the associate dean about a possible involuntary leave of absence (Lake, 2008; Mahoney v. Allegheny Coll., 2005). At the time, the associate dean knew of Mahoney only because of his recent disciplinary problems and was not aware of the extent of his mental health issues (Mahoney v. Allegheny Coll., 2005). During that conversation, the counselor and the dean discussed parental notification as a potential intervention but determined that it would not be helpful because the student explicitly stated that he did not want his parents involved (Mahoney v. Allegheny Coll., 2005). The last communication between the counselor and
Mahoney was an e-mail in which he expressed his desire not to live (Mahoney v. Allegheny Coll., 2005). Before Mahoney’s next counseling appointment, Mahoney committed suicide in his fraternity house (Mahoney v. Allegheny Coll., 2005).

Following Mahoney’s death, his parents filed suit against the college, the two deans involved with the disciplinary proceedings, the college counselor and the psychiatrist alleging that they breached their duty of care to prevent the suicide and to notify them of the seriousness of their son’s condition (Mahoney v. Allegheny Coll., 2005). In their summary judgment opinion for the defendants, the court used the Jain case to explain why a duty of care to prevent the suicide and notify parents did not exist for the two deans (Mahoney v. Allegheny Coll., 2005). Namely, as professionals without mental health training and with no significant knowledge of the student’s condition, they had no duty to prevent it (Lake, 2008; Mahoney v. Allegheny Coll., 2005). Moreover there was no special relationship between the parties as the deans only knew of Mahoney for a matter of days and primarily in the context of the disciplinary process (Lake, 2008; Mahoney v. Allegheny Coll., 2005). Also important for the court’s decision was the fact that unlike in the Shin and Schieszler cases, Mahoney had never actually attempted self-harm prior to his suicide, which made the act unforeseeable for these two professionals (Lake, 2008; Mahoney v. Allegheny Coll., 2005). Claims against all the other parties in suit were also subsequently dismissed (Mahoney v. Allegheny Coll., 2005).

Virginia Tech (2007). The shootings at Virginia Tech were perpetrated by senior student Seung Hui Cho, another individual who had very serious and documented mental health issues (VTRP, 2007). While at Virginia Tech, he was documented for stalking several female students and articulating his suicidal ideations (VTRP, 2007). These events, led to an institutional mandate that he be evaluated at the state mental health agency (VTRP, 2007). The
result of this evaluation was the determination that he “presented an imminent danger to himself as a result of mental illness” (VTRP, 2007). As a result he was ordered to receive outpatient treatment, which he never did receive (VTRP, 2007). Cho’s behavioral issues also extended into the classroom, as he was documented as acting “menacing” towards his professors and fellow students, and writing stories that frightened his classmates (Ward, 2008, p. 410). These behaviors were so disruptive that they led to Cho’s indefinite removal from one particular class (VTRP, 2007). Following this event, the chair of the English department reported Cho’s behavior to both student affairs and campus security, but in both instances was told that without a threat to a specific individual, nothing could be done (VTRP, 2007). Despite knowledge of Cho’s mental health issues within several units across campus, his parents were never contacted. On April 16, 2007, Cho went on a shooting rampage in a residential and an academic building on the Virginia Tech campus which led to 33 fatalities, including his own (VTRP, 2007). As evidenced in the aforementioned cases and incidents, an understanding of FERPA is critical for the effective management of mental health crises.

Federal Guidance on Disability Law

The Spring Arbor letter is regarded by many professionals as the preeminent OCR decision of its type because it is the only letter that reflects the new Section 504 standard. The actual facts of the Spring Arbor complaint are remarkably common within the higher education context. In this case, a student with an undocumented, preexisting mental health condition engaged in self-harm behaviors and openly discussed them with classmates (OCR, 2010). Although he finished his first year in good standing, upon his return to school in the following fall, he was asked to complete a behavioral contract (OCR, 2010). The student refused, instead opting to take a voluntary medical leave (OCR, 2010). When the student sought out readmission
the following spring, the university asked that he provide extensive documentation of his condition and care along with the readmission paperwork required of all students returning from a leave (OCR, 2010).

In its letter, the OCR stated that because the student was treated as though he had a disability, he de facto became disabled in the eyes of the law (OCR, 2010). The letter also very clearly outlined the evidence of discrimination, which included the request for excessive documentation, despite the fact that his withdrawal and in academic good-standing (OCR, 2010). Finally, it was determined that the school had not adequately satisfied the direct threat test because this student was only a threat to himself (OCR, 2010). The takeaways from this decision include the following: (1) institutions can inadvertently create disability status thereby causing them to be in breach of the law; (2) the direct threat test no longer allows for matters related to harm to self; and (3) it provides readmission requirements that are now regarded as being in congruence with the law (Lewis, et al., 2012).

A second letter (Mount Holyoke, 2008) dealt with a student who violated a behavioral contract with her institution when she engaged in self-harm behavior which was deemed to be distracting to her fellow community members (OCR, 2008). In response to the breach of the behavioral contract, Mount Holyoke gave the student a number of options all of which required her to leave the on-campus community, and the most extreme being medical withdrawal (OCR, 2008). The student opted for the latter of these options, and in response her father filed a complaint with the OCR based upon what he believed to be discriminatory treatment (OCR, 2008).

In its letter, the OCR determined that the student did, in fact, qualify as a student with a disability, but she had not been subject to discrimination because she was treated like any other
student who violated behavioral expectations (OCR, 2008). Because in this case, Mount Holyoke was able to effectively remove a student from campus due to the risk of self-harm, it is regarded as a case study for an alternative to the immediate threat standard for a student’s removal. More specifically, policy makers are advising institutions to focus on actual conduct, rather than trying to meet the lofty thresholds of the direct threat standard.

In the final matter (*St Joseph’s College*, 2008), the OCR found that when a student exhibiting disruptive behavior was removed without notice or adherence to any explicitly stated conduct process, the institution was found to have discrimination against her (OCR, 2011). This matter speaks strongly to the importance of creating and subsequently following one’s due process.

**Interventions for Disturbed Students**

Although the findings articulated within the recent OCR letters provide some guidance about how universities should respond to students who present a threat of self-harm, they by no means provide clear directives for practice in light of the recent changes to law. Interventions are typically conceptualized as being of two major types: “removal interventions” and “campus interventions” (Delworth 1989/2009). Removal interventions can originate for a broad spectrum of reasons including poor grades, and issues related to behavior or mental illness, while campus interventions involve a variety of on-campus programs and resources such as judicial sanctions, counseling, social/interpersonal interventions (i.e., peer and professional mentorship), and skills and competencies training (e.g., interpersonal skills and behavioral coping skills) (Delworth, 1989/2009, pp. 19-20).

Because the focus of this study was the disturbed and disturbed/disturbing student or the student who is believed to pose an imminent threat to safety, removal interventions were the
most pertinent. That said, for disturbed students who pose an imminent threat to others, the use of removal interventions is straightforward. Provided these students’ behaviors are deemed to “represent[s] a high probability of substantial harm” (28 C.F.R. § 35.139), which in effect means the facts of the situation meet all three prongs of the direct threat test, professionals may pursue emergency removal/involuntary withdrawal procedures without violating disability law.

However, as discussed above, for students who also pose an imminent threat to their own safety, the direct threat analysis is no longer applicable (Lannon & Sanghavi, 2011). With risks to student safety on one hand and risk of losing federal monies on the other, this new language creates a conundrum for institutions seeking to address students at risk for self-harm.

Recognizing the importance of interventions for student safety and the absence of clear guidance from the OCR, The National Association of College and University Attorneys (NACUA) has offered several recommendations for institutions as they approach student situations which call for removal, withdrawal, or discipline due to a risk of self-harm, many of which can be directly traced to the more recent OCR letters discussed previously. These will be briefly discussed here.

The first recommendation, which involves focusing on actual conduct as opposed to the student’s disability, is very clearly drawn from the OCR’s Mount Holyoke letter (2008). The second recommendation stated that “policies must ensure that an individualized assessment is made” (Lannon & Sanghavi, 2011), which speaks to the need to have each student comprehensively assessed by members of the threat assessment team and mental health professionals. This level of assessment is important, of course, because it substantiates the significance of the threat or validity of the violation of conduct policy, thereby providing evidence that the student may not be “otherwise qualified” to participate in the educational program offered by the institution. NACUA’s (2011) final suggestions relate to the provision of
reasonable accommodations and due process. The first of these suggestions can also be connected to the incident at Mount Holyoke, as while the student’s disruptive behaviors led to her being unable to stay on campus, she was offered a number of alternatives including moving off campus or electing to take a medical withdrawal (Lannon & Sanghavi, 2011). Finally, the emphasis on due process can be traced back to the St. Joseph’s College (2011) OCR decision which found the institution to have discriminated against a student for having dismissed her without following the published conduct procedures at the institution (Lannon & Sanghavi, 2011).

**Parental Notification**

Silverman (2006) noted that there is a lack of consensus among mental health professionals in the postsecondary context about the use of parental notification for suicidal students. This disagreement is attributed to the potential impact of such contact on the counseling relationship, one that depends upon a high level of trust and confidentiality (Association for University and College Counseling Center Directors, 2007; Remley & Herlihy, 2010). In contrast, in administrative circles, the cases of Shin v. Massachusetts Institute of Technology (2005) and the Virginia Tech (2007) tragedy are often discussed in light of the missed and potentially impactful opportunities to involve an important stakeholder in the process (Baker, 2009; VTRP, 2007). That is, many administrators are of the opinion that “provided parents do not complicate the student’s counseling and recovery,” they can be a key partner in attending to students with severe mental health issues such as suicide (Baker, 2009, p. 515). This view is based on a number of perceptions about the contemporary student-parent relationship including parents’ knowledge of their student’s medical history, the fact that students often live at home, and the remarkably close dynamic between Millennials and their parents (Baker, 2004;
Kennedy, 2009). For some student affairs professionals (Grasgreen, 2012), the recent shift in ADA/504 direct threat language which serves as an obstacle to the removal of students who pose a real threat to self points to parental notification as an increasingly worthwhile intervention as a matter of policy. Given the severity of the college student mental health crisis and in light of changes to student privacy law since Virginia Tech and more recent changes to ADA law, parental notification is emerging as a potentially impactful intervention for students with the most severe mental health issues. It is this phenomenon that inspired this study.

**Small Private Liberal Arts Colleges**

According to the most recent Carnegie Classification list, there are approximately 233 private liberal arts institutions in the United States (Carnegie Classifications, n.d.). The first American liberal arts colleges sought to prepare their students “in an educational tradition that was presumed to instill qualifications for leadership of a theocratic community” (Lang, 2000, p. 134). Generally, this institution type has maintained an “humanistic” mission of “produc[ing] graduates who are thoroughly prepared to become productive citizens and contributing members of society” (Hirt, Amelink, & Schneiter, 2004, p. 95). Administrative culture in the liberal arts college is highly reflective of this tradition of service, as administrators are often student-focused and tend to communicate closely with parents (Hirt, 2006). Speaking of the complexities surrounding the relationship between senior administration and parents in the small private liberal arts college context, Tederman (1997) remarked,

> Often [parents] are paying all or most of the cost of education for their children, and, even if they are not, they are usually making a substantial economic sacrifice to send their child to a private college. Students will often turn to [parents] first for advice and support, and [parents] are often the first to offer constructive help. (p. 33)
In the scope of the current study, this description is important for two reasons. First, it seems to suggest that parental notification might be a particularly appropriate crisis management tool within this context. Second and relatedly, it reveals compelling reasons for why this particular context is deserving of more in-depth study in terms of administrative practices as they relate to students with severe mental health issues. More specifically, students who elect to attend this institution type often have close familial relationships, and research (Astin, 1999) has indicated that these institutions promote significant levels of “trust between students and administrators” and allocate “generous expenditures” to student services (p. 85). These facts suggest that there is a distinct student-oriented focus within this context. With this information in mind, it is logical to ask how senior student affairs administrators in this setting decide whether parents should be notified in situations where students pose a risk of harm to self and/or others, and particularly given the evolution of federal privacy law that previously made doing so seem more risky. This is not to say that all other institutions attract absentee parents and ignore student needs; this is certainly not the case. However, the small private college/university is a unique context worthy of investigation in the scope of this very timely issue.
CHAPTER III. METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe how senior student affairs administrators experience the disturbed and disturbed/disturbing student on their campuses and make the decision to contact parents when their student is believed to be a threat to self and/or others. As previously mentioned, it was believed that an understanding of this phenomenon would be informative for institutional decision-makers, and might contribute to a clearer understanding of campus crisis management as it relates to the college mental health crisis. The following research questions provided the organizing framework for this study:

- How do senior student affairs administrators experience the phenomenon of disturbed and disturbed/disturbing students on their campuses?
- How do senior student affairs administrators decide when to contact parents about disturbed and disturbed/disturbing students who pose a threat to self and/or others?

This chapter focuses on the present study’s research design, specifically addressing the role of the researcher, the guiding paradigmatic framework, the rationale for my choice of methodology and methods, and issues related to trustworthiness.

**Role of the Researcher**

Speaking of the importance of reflexivity in qualitative research, Creswell (2007) remarked that “how we write is a reflection of our own interpretation based on the cultural, social, gender, class, and personal politics that we bring to research” (p. 179). Jones, Torres, and Arminio (2006) further offered that three questions should be answered in order for researchers within the realm of higher education to achieve reflexivity. These questions are provided and answered here.
1. “Why is it that I am engaged in the present study? What is it about me and my experiences that lead me to this study” (Jones et al., 2006, p. 125)?

My own experience of college could be characterized as that of a traditional college-aged student, as I matriculated the fall after graduating from high school, attended a residential institution, and was enrolled on a full-time basis. Additionally, I attended a small private liberal arts college that enrolled approximately 1,500 students. Moreover, like most other institutions of this type, my undergraduate institution prided itself on intimate classroom environments, co-curricular involvement, and opportunities to be relational with faculty and staff.

Including my graduate positions, I have worked in higher education for approximately seven years. In the graduate position that I held during my master’s degree program in college student personnel, I worked in community wellness. In this role, I designed and implemented wellness outreach programs for students, including those related to mental health, and assisted with counseling center initiatives like biannual mental health screenings and a yearly mental health fair. While holding this position, I was physically located in the health and counseling center and I reported directly to its director. This job, the environment, and the interactions that I had with campus counselors and psychologists are what first opened my eyes to the pervasiveness of college student mental health issues.

In my capacity as a professional live-in staff member in the office of resident life at a small private liberal arts college, I oversaw student staff members whose primary responsibility it was to support and promote the engagement of first-year students as they navigated the new college environment. This experience called upon me to refer students struggling with mental health issues to campus resources, address students of concern within my buildings, and in one memorable instance, supervise the move-out process of a student who faced a mandated
withdrawal after a suicide attempt. Although the policy of mandatory withdrawal was seldom implemented on this campus, as a staff member who was involved, I was compelled to consider how student affairs professionals should treat students who are perceived to be a threat to their own or others’ safety. The cultures of my department and the larger division were such that even as an entry-level staff member, I was treated as a valuable stakeholder in the effort to attend to students who were struggling with mental health issues. This involvement further challenged me to consider the effectiveness of campus interventions for this population of students.

As a doctoral student in the higher education administration program at Bowling Green State University (BGSU), I have continued to study college student mental health particularly as it related to privacy and disability, and institutional interventions such as parental notification. In fact, these topics were the inspiration for my cognate (law and ethical leadership) which I felt was an appropriate title given the need for administrators to not only have a working understanding of applicable legal frameworks, but to conceptualize policies related to college student mental health with an ethic of care. Without a doubt, the work that I have done and experiences I have had inform the way that I view students with mental health concerns, and particularly as they exist within the context of small private liberal arts colleges and universities. It is this background that has led me to this particular study.

2. “What personal biases and assumptions do I bring with me to this study” (Jones, et al., 2006, p. 125)?

As mentioned above, I am drawn to the topic of college student mental health and crisis management because of my professional experiences and the time that I have devoted to this topic’s study as a doctoral student. However, I must acknowledge that I foster particular views about the role of postsecondary institutions in the care of students with mental illness. Kadison
and DiGeronimo (2004) adeptly summarized the conflicting viewpoints which exist within administrative circles on the amount of responsibility colleges and universities should have with respect to this issue. At the extremes are the professionals who believe that institutions are solely “charged with assisting students to define and meet their academic and career goals” (Kadison & DiGeronimo, 2004, p. 155), and then those who argue that the provision of comprehensive mental health services stands to benefit both students who will find greater success and institutions who will ultimately achieve higher retention rates (Kadison & DiGeronimo, 2004). In the middle, according to Kadison and DiGeronimo, are those administrators who recognize that in a perfect world we would offer students all the mental health interventions available but acknowledge the growing fiscal constraints surrounding the services we may provide. As a professional, I ascribe to the latter of the three positions. More specifically, I believe that we owe our students the very best care we can provide, but in some cases, the referral of students to off-campus resources is necessary and appropriate.

I also have biases associated with my experiences as a student and staff member in the small private liberal arts college context. That is, generally speaking, I see great value in parental involvement when severe issues of this nature arise. Since I could not presume that this was a shared point of view or practice within every institution of this type, as I collected and analyzed my data, I tried to be very cautious about taking into account my predispositions as they relate to the current study.

3. “What is my relationship with those in the study” (Jones, et al., 2006, p. 125)?

As mentioned above, I am a graduate of a small private liberal arts college and having had a good experience in that setting, I foster certain beliefs surrounding it’s worth and the nature of the environment. Specifically, I consider the close-knit community that exists between
students, faculty, and staff within this institutional setting to be highly impactful for students’ holistic development. I also believe that under some circumstances parental involvement can be a crucial intervention for students who are struggling. While my opinions and experiences within a similar setting did not render me a member of the actual communities from which participants were drawn, I had to remember that I could be perceived as an insider in so far as the culture of the larger institutional type. More specifically, I put forth a great effort to understand and interpret the stories and perspectives of my participants in an objective fashion even though my personal and professional backgrounds were inextricably linked to the way that I processed information and interacted with others. Fine (1994) eloquently referred to this process as “work[ing] the hyphen” which she defined as “reconcil[ing] the slippery constructions of Self and Other” (p. 78).

As the primary human “instrument” (Lincoln & Guba, 2000, p. 183) of this particular inquiry, it was necessary for me to provide information related to my background, biases and assumptions, and relationship with participants and the setting. This was the case because it may shed light on how my identity may have impacted the interpretation of this research.

**Paradigmatic Framework**

This study’s design was situated in the social constructivist research paradigm, as the objective was to “rely as much as possible on the participants’ views of the situation being studied” which are often “negotiated socially and historically” (Creswell, 2007, pp. 20-21). As such, it was guided by a relativist ontology and subjectivist epistemology. In other words, it was informed by the assumption that truth is “subjective and multiple” to the participants in the study (Creswell, 2007, p. 17) or that truth is dynamic and susceptible to time, place, and development. Additionally, this study was informed by the idea that the production of knowledge is not an
independent endeavor but rather involves a partnership between “knower and respondent” who willingly come together to “cocreate understandings” (Jones & Abes, 2003, p. 473). Also important to understand with respect to this particular paradigm was that congruent research study design is emergent, it is “a context-dependent inquiry,” and incorporates “an inductive analysis” (Creswell, 2007, p. 341). That is, studies grounded in this worldview are fluid in design, highly linked to context, and “the examination of topics and themes, as well as the inferences drawn from them” is grounded in the data (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009, p. 308).

**Rationale for Qualitative Research Design**

Denzin and Lincoln (2000) remarked that qualitative researchers “seek answers to questions that stress how social experience is created and given meaning” while quantitative research “emphasize[s] the measurement and analysis of causal relationships between variables, not processes” (p. 8). These purposes very directly speak to the philosophical orientations of each of these approaches. More specifically, it is the qualitative camp’s postmodernist position that truth is subjective and pluralistic. This allows for research that can be defined as more inclusive “storytelling” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). On the other hand, quantitative researchers’ positivist/post-positivist stance entails that there is, in fact, a reality and truth that may be discovered, albeit only to some degree (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Broadly speaking, the present study was designed to understand what prompts individual decision-makers to make critical decisions surrounding students with mental health issues. These areas of interest assumed no universal truth; in fact, their focus on the individual and socially-constructed culture insinuated that there would be many answers to these questions. For these reasons, qualitative inquiry lent itself to truly answering the research questions. More specifically, the research questions required an understanding of participants’ points of view, how these questions were answered in
context, and were best informed by “thick description” which is not a part of quantitative inquiry (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

Rationale for Phenomenology

The methodological approach selected for this study was phenomenology. Merriam (2009) broadly defined the goal of phenomenologists as the pursuit of “the essence or the basic structure of experience” (p. 25). According to van Manen (1990), the essence of a phenomenon has been captured “if the description reawakens or shows us the lived quality and significance of the experience in a fuller or deeper manner” (p. 10). Also important to note with respect to the selection of phenomenology for the current study is the fact that it is considered most fitting when the aim is to “understand several individuals’ common or shared experience of a phenomenon” (Creswell, 2007, p. 60) which essentially was the goal of this study. That is, to understand how senior student affairs professionals experience a particular phenomenon within the scope of their work.

Within the phenomenological tradition, there are several approaches available to the researcher including hermeneutic and transcendental (Creswell, 2007). Most commonly used within educational research (Merriam, 2009), hermeneutic phenomenology involves both description of the phenomenon and interpretation by the researcher, whereas, transcendental phenomenology focuses on pure description and requires researchers to engage in the bracketing (“epoche”) of their prior experiences from the investigation (Creswell, 2007). According to van Manen (1990) to pursue hermeneutic phenomenology means “to construct a full interpretative description of some aspect of the lifeworld, and yet to remain aware that lived life is always more complex than any explication of meaning can reveal” (p. 18). Hermeneutic phenomenology was the most appropriate approach for the proposed study because it allowed for
a greater understanding of the “essence of the experience” while allowing the researcher to provide some interpretation of what it means to be a senior administrator confronted with a particular phenomenon of interest. In the case of the current study, this phenomenon was making the parental contact decision when faced with a student who poses a threat to self and/or others as a result of a mental health issue.

Methods

In this section, the methods used to complete this study will be discussed. More specifically, the context for the study, participant selection, and the data collection and analysis techniques will be touched upon here.

Context for the Study

The context for the present study was the small private liberal arts college/university. More specifically, participants in this study were employed at four-year baccalaureate degree-granting institutions with almost exclusively undergraduate student populations and enrollments between 1,000 and 2,999 students (Carnegie Classifications, n.d.). Additionally, students at these institutions are typically enrolled full-time and primarily live in on-campus housing (Carnegie Classifications, n.d.). This context was selected because of the nature of student affairs work in this environment and the relationship between these institutions, students, and their parents. That is, while administrators at these colleges typically foster a high regard for student-centeredness, they also find themselves working closely with a population of parents who often bring with them “a sense of entitlement” with respect to the services and care that the college will provide for their students (Hirt, 2006, pp. 33-34).
Participant Selection

Experienced senior student affairs administrators with crisis management responsibilities in the small private liberal arts college/university context were recruited for participation in this study. Creswell (2007) noted that criterion sampling “works well” in phenomenological research because “it is essential that all participants have experience of the phenomenon being studied” (p. 128). With this in mind, student affairs professionals were purposefully sampled according to the following criteria: (1) they must have a senior administrative title (e.g., dean of students, chief judicial officer, etc.), (2) they must be employed at a small private liberal arts college/university, and (3) they must have at least three years of experience in their current position or as a senior-level practitioner with crisis management responsibilities and have experienced disturbed and disturbed/disturbing students. The criterion related to years of service was included because it was believed to be more likely that professionals with this level of tenure would “have greater breadth of experience” (Ajjawi & Higgs, 2007, p. 616) with the phenomenon of interest.

Participants were primarily located using snowball or chain sampling which entails identifying participants “from people who know people who know what cases are information-rich” (Creswell, 2007, p. 127). More specifically, after generating a list of institutions using the Carnegie Classifications search engine, I distributed this list to my administrative contacts and asked if they knew of senior student affairs professionals at those institutions who met the experiential criteria. These administrative contacts then either sent an email to qualifying participants on my behalf with my recruitment letter attached (“Gatekeeper Referral”) (Appendix A) or allowed me to contact these professionals directly. Participants in this study also assisted in the participant selection process as they served as gatekeepers to other professionals within
their network of small private liberal arts college professionals who fit the criteria for participation in the study. Additionally, I sent an e-mail to participants at schools from the list that I believed might offer a different perspective on the phenomenon due to unique institutional cultures (“General E-mail”) (Appendix B). In all, this process connected me to seven senior student affairs professionals and was effective largely because of the efforts of my professional contacts.

**Data Collection**

Within the phenomenological tradition, the most common techniques for gathering data are multiple, in-depth interviews (Creswell, 2007). According to van Manen (1990), interviewing plays two distinct roles in hermeneutic studies. First, interviews allow for “exploring and gathering experiential narrative material,” and second they are a way of establishing rapport with participants about the “meaning of an experience” (van Manen, 1990, p. 66). Jones et al. (2006) further offered that “phenomenological research focuses on the everyday and the ordinary occurrences in human life and on generating thick description” (p. 49). With these aims in mind, in the present study, there were multiple points of contact with participants and much care was taken to craft a protocol that would get to the essence of the research questions.

Before the first interview, participants were asked to review and sign informed consent forms (Appendix C) to indicate their understanding of the study and willingness to participate. Participants were also asked to complete demographic sheets and provide copies of their respective resumes. These documents were collected to provide insight into participants’ professional backgrounds and ultimately were used to guide the writing of participant profiles. Additionally, prior to the first round of interviews, the interview protocol (Appendix D) was pilot
tested with two senior student affairs officers, one of whom has spent her career working her way through the ranks at a public mid-sized institution, and the other who has spent the bulk of her career within the small private liberal arts college setting. Additionally, my interview protocol and the feedback provided from pilot study participants were also reviewed with my dissertation chair/advisor. From the pilot study process, I gathered valuable feedback about how I should “refine the interview questions and the procedures” (Creswell, 2007, p. 133) associated with this study.

The first interview was semi-structured and conducted either in-person at the participant’s home institution or face-to-face using the Skype video function. First interviews lasted between 60-90 minutes and were digitally (audio) recorded and transcribed with the prior permission of each participant. Following the first interview, participants were e-mailed their respective transcripts, and were asked to review them for accuracy and provide clarification, when applicable. Second interviews were conducted over the phone, typically lasted between 45 minutes to 1 hour in duration, and also were digitally (audio) recorded and transcribed with permission. These interviews involved collaboration with each participant about the themes that emerged from the initial phase of the data analysis process. More specifically, between the first and second phases of data collection, I completed an initial phase of data analysis, and during the second interview I asked participants to comment on the themes that emerged from their respective first interviews. These themes served as the “starting point for further sharing about the nature of the lived experience” (van Manen, 1990, p. 99) of the phenomenon. At the conclusion of each of the second interviews, participants were asked if they would be willing to communicate with me via e-mail if I needed further clarification about their data. All
participants agreed and additional e-mail exchanges occurred between me and two of the participants (i.e., Elizabeth, Heidibeth).

**Data Analysis**

The goal of phenomenological research is to “construct an animating, evocative description (text) of human actions, behaviors, intentions, and experiences as we meet them in the lifeworld” (van Manen, 1990, p. 19). Phenomenological data analysis as described by van Manen’s hermeneutic tradition involves an extensive process of theming. More specifically, van Manen (1990) proposed three methods for “uncovering or isolating thematic aspects of a phenomenon” (p. 92), including: (1) the wholistic or sententious approach; (2) the selective or highlighting approach; and (3) the detailed or line-by-line approach (pp. 92-93). The wholistic or sententious approach involves the reading of a transcript in its entirety and composing a statement that encapsulates its significance. The selective or highlighting approach then entails the review of a transcript multiple times and identifying phrases that “seem essential or revealing about the phenomenon” (van Manen, 1990, p. 93). Finally, the detailed or line-by-line approach involves a more focused review of each sentence or several sentences and then determining what each sentence or phrase says about the phenomenon. From this extensive procedure emerged a preliminary list of themes, which I discussed with two peer debriefers who reviewed my transcripts and preliminary analysis and offered their thoughts on my coding of the data. These preliminary themes were then shared with participants during the second interview in order to elicit further conversation about the essence of the phenomenon under inquiry. Following the second interview, I met again with my peer debriefers who discussed the themes which had emerged and helped me to arrange them into three overarching categories. The resulting themes and categories are discussed at length in chapter four of this manuscript.
Trustworthiness

Lincoln and Guba (1995) posed the fundamental question associated with trustworthiness as follows:

How can an inquirer persuade his or her audiences (including self) that the findings of inquiry are worth paying attention to, worth taking account of? What arguments can be mounted, what criteria invoked, what questions asked, that would be persuasive on this issue? (p. 290)

Guba (1981) went on to clarify that the trustworthiness of a qualitative study is established by the extent to which it meets the following four criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. These criteria remain widely accepted within the bounds of qualitative research (Shenton, 2004) and as a result were given special attention throughout the course of the present study. The techniques utilized to ensure trustworthiness are elaborated upon here.

Credibility

Credibility refers to whether a study “measures or tests what is actually intended” (Shenton, 2004, p. 64). Techniques that make credibility more likely, include: prolonged engagement, persistent observation, triangulation, peer debriefing, researcher reflexivity, negative case analysis, referential adequacy, and member-checking (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In the present study, credibility was achieved through peer debriefing, researcher reflexivity, and member-checking. Peer debriefing allows researchers to talk with peers about their biases, techniques, and about their interpretation of the data. This technique was employed during weekly meetings with two doctoral students in my writing group who provided critical insight into my preliminary analysis, as well as, assisted in the categorization of themes. Credibility was also attended to through regular entries in my researcher journal where I
recorded my observations, impressions, and made sense of the data. Finally, member checking or sharing “data, analytic categories, interpretations, and conclusions” with “members of those stakeholding groups from whom the data was originally collected” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 314) was employed. Shenton (2004) further offered that member checking can occur at multiple points during the study, such as: “‘on the spot’ in the course, and at the end, of the data collection dialogues” (p. 68). In the present study, member checking occurred after the first interview when participants were given the opportunity to review their transcripts for accuracy, and during the course of second interviews when I sought out verification of my “emerging theories and inferences” (Shenton, 2004, p. 68). More specifically, during each of the second interviews, I provided the participant with a summary of their first interview and a synopsis of the preliminary themes which had emerged and then asked each participant to respond to this data.

**Transferability**

Transferability refers to whether or not findings are transferable to other settings (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Transferability was accomplished in the present study by providing descriptions of context and methods, as well as through the use of rich quotes throughout the analysis and findings sections of the report. With these techniques I provided “the data base that makes transferability judgments possible on the part of potential appliers” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 316).

**Dependability**

Dependability centers on whether the researchers did what they articulated with respect to the processes and methods of the study. Shenton (2004) remarked that dependability can be achieved by reporting the processes of the study “in detail, thereby enabling a future researcher to repeat the work, if not necessarily to gain the same results” (p. 71). Dependability is a
particularly important issue for qualitative research because of the methodology’s reliance on an emergent design. During the course of the present study, dependability was reached by keeping track of method-related changes in my researcher journal and updating the methods section to reflect these changes, as well as addressing the effectiveness of any changes to the study’s methods.

**Confirmability**

Confirmability involves the idea that both the data and findings are a product of the research and not just the researcher, that researcher biases and experiences are a part of the record, and that methods of analysis and interpretation are coherent (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). The confirmability of qualitative research is achieved through a confirmability audit which keeps track of the researcher’s ideas and decisions (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Confirmability was accomplished through triangulation; and more specifically, through extensive discussion about my assumptions and research design decisions within my reflexive journal and with my peer debriefing group, and through the provision of a highly detailed methodology section in this manuscript.

**Ethical Considerations**

Jones et al. (2006) remarked that “qualitative research, like most endeavors involving human relationships, is replete with ethical issues at every step of the process” (p. 153). Confidentiality and anonymity are two of the most obvious aspects of ethicality that researchers are beholden to consider as they initiate and proceed with their study. Confidentiality refers to the idea that information provided by participants will not be shared without their prior consent, while anonymity relates to the non-disclosure of personally identifiable information (Jones et al., 2006, p. 155). In the current study, these ethical issues were expressly addressed within my
statement of informed consent which participants completed prior to their participation in the study, and attended to by asking participants to select pseudonyms for themselves and my assignment of pseudonyms to participant institutions. Participant confidentiality was also of particular importance for this study because information provided about students of concern and the manner in which participant institutions attended to them was at times highly sensitive in nature. Other aspects of the data collection and analysis processes that were important ethically-speaking were being cautious about not “direct[ing] participants so much that they are telling your story rather than their own” and taking the time to “get the interpretation of the data close to participants’ meaning” (Jones et al., 2006, pp. 166-169). I believe that these ethical issues were of particular importance for the current study because I approached it from the social constructivist perspective, which by definition calls for the co-creation of knowledge with my participants. I specifically addressed these ethical issues during the course of the study by including peer debriefing, member checking, and the use of a reflexive journal.
CHAPTER IV. FINDINGS

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand how senior student affairs administrators experience parental involvement decisions when working with students perceived to be a threat to self and/or others. Two primary questions guided this study: (1) How do senior student affairs administrators experience the phenomenon of disturbed and disturbed/disturbing students on their campuses, and (2) How do senior student affairs administrators decide when to contact parents about disturbed and disturbed/disturbing students who pose a threat to self and/or others? To begin, profiles for the seven participants and their respective institutions have been provided. Next, major findings gathered through two semi-structured interviews with each participant are presented. The chapter concludes with a summary of findings, that are discussed in chapter 5.

Participant and Institutional Profiles

Participants were selected based upon their employment at small private liberal arts colleges, classified by the Carnegie Foundation (n.d.) as highly residential, selective, and serving almost exclusively undergraduate student populations. An additional criterion for participants was that they serve in a senior student affairs capacity with parental notification responsibilities for at least three years. Four men and three women participated in this study. Of the seven participants, five identified as White/Caucasian, one identified as Latino/Mexican American, and one identified as Asian American. Participants’ tenure within higher education ranged from 17 to 40 years.

The profiles in this section provide information about both participants and their respective institutions. More specifically, background about each participant including their professional histories and accompanying responsibilities appears here. Other background information about
participants can be found in Table 1. Following a brief description of each participant is a general overview of their institution. Amongst the institutional information provided are their respective policies/practices for crisis management/threat assessment in general and parental notification as it relates to disturbed and disturbed/disturbing students specifically. In the interest of confidentiality, each of the participants in this study was given the opportunity to select a pseudonym identifier. Six of the participants elected to come up with their own pseudonym, one participant (“Elizabeth”) allowed me to choose an identifier for her. Additionally, functional area titles appear as they are articulated by the Council for Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS, n.d.). The confidentiality of institutions was similarly protected through the use of pseudonyms, which I selected, and the masking of identifying characteristics and titles.

Alex: “We really respect our students here and treat them as educators in many ways on our campus, and so I think that informs even something like parental notification.”

Alex is one of the senior student affairs officers at Dillon College (“Dillon”). Working in student affairs for approximately 17 years, Alex has worked for a total of 14 years at Dillon, although not consecutively. Still, what was notable during both interviews was the fact that Alex’s longstanding professional relationship with the college has led to a deep understanding of how institutional culture impacts the way that work gets done at Dillon. Additionally, to a degree, Alex credits the mentors he has had at Dillon for his approach to working with students in crisis. Alex remarked, “I think I’ve had just a great opportunity to be mentored by folks who have really exercised sound educational judgment.” In his current capacity at Dillon, which he has held for almost nine years, Alex has taken on various responsibilities. To this end, Alex commented, “I think as you will hear from other folks at small colleges, I wear many hats.” Specifically, the areas included in Alex’s portfolio
Table 1

Basic Information on Study Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Number of years in current position</th>
<th>Number of years at small private liberal arts colleges</th>
<th>Number of years in higher education</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alex</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>L/MA</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elizabeth</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fred</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heidibeth</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mike</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patricia</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>AA</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prufrock</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(a\) Research participants were given the opportunity to choose a pseudonym. I chose the pseudonym for Elizabeth.

\(b\) Race as identified by participants: AA = Asian American, L = Latino, MA = Mexican American, W = White

include responsibilities such as developmental advising, directing residential life and housing, supervising first-year student programming initiatives, coordinating student conduct, serving as a member of Dillon ’s crisis response team, and serving in the dean-on-call rotation. Alex’s role as a dean-on-call is particularly important to note because professionals in this role receive notification of after-hours emergencies and are often a part of parental notification decisions. In addition to his full-time administrative duties, Alex is in the process of completing a doctoral program.
Prior to his current tenure at Dillon, Alex worked for three years at a community college that enrolled approximately 13,000 students. During this three-year period, he took on a number of different roles related to at-risk student populations and specifically in the realms of developmental advising and assessment. Prior to his stint in the community college sector, Alex spent five years at Dillon taking on duties related to multicultural student programs and directing an access-driven scholarship program. During this period of time, Alex also completed a master’s degree in education.

**Dillon College.** Dillon College is a small private liberal arts college located in a Northeastern town of around 8,000 people. Serving approximately 3,000 domestic and international students, Dillon is known for its academic rigor, support for the arts, and engaged student culture. At Dillon, the average ACT composite score for incoming first-year students is a 30, the average high school GPA is a 3.6, and the majority of students admitted are in the top tenth of their high school class.

Alex described Dillon’s crisis management plan as extensive with “any number of scenarios that are laid out and that we have protocols laid out for.” More specifically, protocols exist for incidents, “ranging from suicidal ideation to a student who is injured in a bicycle accident.” In addition, there is a committee of professionals that meets weekly to review campus incidents which “are ongoing or that came out of safety and security reports over the weekend.” This administrative body is composed of a number of professionals representing different areas of campus, including the dean of students, the associate dean who oversees the on-call system and coordinates the weekly meeting, conduct hearing officers, residence life and housing staff, the counseling center director, the director of campus safety and security, a representative from academic affairs department, and class deans.
Relevant to this study is the protocol for mental health transport which would be utilized when a student is believed to be in need of psychiatric care. According to Alex, this protocol addresses the logistics associated with transport, communication with hospital staff, as well as the notification of administrative staff at the college including the dean-on-call, a member of the housing and residential life staff - a subset of professionals who are often the first responders to such incidents - and the class dean for the particular student in crisis. Also included in the collection of protocols for crises and emergencies is a written policy on parental notification. Generally, this protocol states that if a student is transported to the hospital, parents should be notified. However, students should have the opportunity to make the first call, if possible. Additionally, a part of the policy is the fact that the college should be conscious of the relationship between the student and his/her parents and that it should “take care not to inadvertently complicate [it].” According to Alex, this statement very accurately encapsulates the college’s philosophy about parental involvement when issues arise at the college. That is, “our hope is . . . that we'd actually encourage the student to initiate the call to the parent and as much as possible again try to have the student take some level of ownership where possible.” In terms of who actually makes this call, while the senior administrator on call is typically expected to make this sort of contact, Alex noted that there are a number of other ways that this type of contact might occur:

It could be that a class dean makes that call. It also depends on the entry point, I think, and who the primary support person is for that student in any given moment. But in the protocol there is an expectation of parental notification, but as you might imagine that conversation can be difficult with the student. I think we most often try to have the
student, as much as possible, sort of on board with us as part of that process. And that's not always possible.

Elizabeth: “I’m one of those people who really cares a lot about FERPA, and I really care a lot about not prematurely stepping on a student’s opportunity to fix things for themselves.”

Elizabeth is the senior student affairs officer at Peaceful College (“Peaceful”). What stood out most about Elizabeth’s first interview were her friendliness and the sincerity with which she approached my questions. When asked about her current role at Peaceful, Elizabeth offered a description that she often provides to parents and families. That is, her focus and that of her division is that “85% of the time the student is not in class, the lab, or the studio.” As the senior student affairs officer in the division, Elizabeth has direct responsibility for a number of functional areas including orientation programs, campus religious and spiritual programs, health and counseling services, campus safety, housing and residential life, student activities, student conduct, multicultural services, and disability support services, to name a few. Additionally, Elizabeth takes the lead on a number of the institution’s critical processes, including its crisis management and emergency response, and the college’s early alert committee which convenes regularly to addresses matters related to students of concern on campus.

After graduating from a small private liberal arts institution where she was highly involved in student government, Elizabeth began her almost-30-year tenure in student affairs. Elizabeth’s first professional position was as a live-in residence life staff member at a public research institution. Following this position, she completed a student affairs administration preparation program before moving on to oversee housing and residence life at a small private liberal arts college. After several years in this position, Elizabeth enrolled in a doctoral program, during which time she held a research assistantship. After completing her doctorate, Elizabeth
spent the next five years working in enrollment management at a community college and in first-year programming at a public research institution. Elizabeth then moved on to a senior student affairs position at a private liberal arts institution, where she took on complete oversight for a number of student affairs areas, including student conduct, international student programs, and alcohol and other drug prevention. Elizabeth’s next position allowed her to serve as the senior student affairs officer in a small private liberal arts college. In this role, she gained experience supervising a broader list of functional areas, as well as direct oversight for critical processes such as student withdrawal and leave policies and crisis response and emergency management. Elizabeth’s position at Peaceful marks her second as the senior student affairs officer on campus. In addition to her various administrative appointments, Elizabeth has served as an adjunct faculty member and is active in professional organizations.

**Peaceful College.** Peaceful College is a small private liberal arts college in the Northwest. Located in a city of approximately 75,000 people, Peaceful neighbors a large public institution of about 25,000 students. Classified by the Carnegie Foundation (n.d.) as a highly residential and exclusively undergraduate baccalaureate institution, Peaceful College serves a small population of students of approximately 1,400 students from around the world. At Peaceful, the average ACT composite score for incoming first-year students is a 28, the average high school GPA is a 3.6, and the majority of students admitted are in the top quarter of their high school class. What is notable about Peaceful’s physical location is how neatly it is tucked into a residential area, with private homes being closely adjacent to campus.

As the dean of students, Elizabeth is the convener of the crisis management team on Peaceful’s campus, which is composed of approximately twelve professionals and has “two-levels of backup” if a member is unavailable at any given time. Members of the team include the
dean of students; provost; the vice presidents for advancement; business and finance; the chief
information officer; the dean of admissions and financial aid; the assistant to the president; the
head of facilities management; the communications officer; the director of safety and security;
and other relevant staff members, as needed. According to Elizabeth, Peaceful’s crisis
management plan is an “all-hazards approach” in that they “have a single approach to any kind
of crisis that occurs, and there are sub-plans that branch off of that.” Perhaps most relevant to
this study is the protocol utilized by the counseling center for psychological emergencies, which
Elizabeth noted is the branch of the crisis management plan that is most applicable to students
who pose a potential threat to self or others when hospitalization is required. This protocol exists
for the after-hour care of a student who, as Elizabeth described it, is going through a “really bad
patch” after the college has closed for the day. According to the protocol, safety and security is
alerted to the student’s condition and instructed to contact the counselor on call for assessment if
any issues arise. If, through the assessment, the student is deemed to be in need of additional
care, the student may be asked if parental contact can be made, or they might decide that the
student needs to be admitted into a psychiatric unit of one of the local hospitals. The secondary
and tertiary pieces of this protocol include decisions about transportation, if hospitalization is
deemed necessary, and how information flow will be maintained between the college and
hospital.

Another important piece of crisis management response at Peaceful is the early alert
committee, which convenes weekly during weeks 2-8 of each of the college’s 10-week quarters.
This group includes the dean of students and two associate deans from student affairs, an
academic dean, the registrar, a representative from athletics, and the dean of admission. Anyone
on campus is able to bring to its attention students believed to be struggling. Once this
information is brought to the committee’s attention, the professional with purview over the issue
(for instance, for a student not going to class, the academic advisor would respond) will check in
on the matter and report back to the committee. For students who are reported multiple times or
are “particularly unresponsive,” often it is Elizabeth herself who will make contact with the
student and based upon the result of this meeting, parental contact may be considered as a
possible intervention.

While the Peaceful website delineates times in which the college may lawfully make
contact with parents, when asked about the parental notification policy at Peaceful, Elizabeth
noted that the college has a practice. Explaining the difference between a policy and practice,
she noted that a practice is “gooier” than a policy in that it is something that the college
“typically does” rather than something that can be “referred to” like a handbook. When asked
about what the college’s practice specifically entails, Elizabeth explained that “the decision to
contact a parent without a student’s permission rests with [me].” This decision, according to
Elizabeth, is made “if there’s sufficient reason for me to believe that a student is not able to stay
here safely because they are a threat to themselves or a threat to someone else.” At Peaceful,
parental contact without the student’s permission only happens around “three times a year;” with
the more common practice being that a student who is experiencing difficulty is a part of that
call. When making the decision to contact parents without the student’s consent, Elizabeth
offered that the colleagues that she most often consults with are the director of residence life, the
counseling center director, and perhaps the dean of advising. However, she also noted that when
there is a physical health side to the issue that the director of the health center may also be a part
of the conversation.
Fred: “My own good practice is to not put my head on the pillow at night until I know some family member has been involved.”

Fred is the senior student affairs officer at Bricks College (“Bricks”). Fred’s first interview occurred at the beginning of Bricks’ winter break, which allowed me to observe his staff as they wrapped up the semester. For instance, as I sat in the office awaiting my appointment, I could hear members of Fred’s staff on a conference call, which Fred later explained was with a student and the student’s parents and related to a return to campus after a leave of absence. Of all the interviews, this one was perhaps the most notable because of its timing. Specifically, six days prior to the interview was the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting in Newtown, Connecticut, an incident that resulted in the deaths of twenty children and six adults and is the second deadliest mass shooting in the U.S. Prior to that, only the 2007 Virginia Tech tragedy had more deaths. The feelings surrounding this event and their relationship to the topic of this study were palpable as Fred and I spoke.

Fred has worked as the senior student affairs officer at Bricks for approximately 10 years. As the dean of students, Fred oversees a number of different functional areas on campus, including but not limited to his dean of students’ staff, health and counseling services, campus safety and security, housing and residential life, student activities, recreational sports programs, career services, and international student programs. In addition to the management of a variety of departments, Fred is a member of the president’s cabinet and played a leadership role in the creation of all campus emergency protocols, which he currently manages directly.

Following his completion of a master’s degree in higher education, Fred began his twenty-five year administrative tenure, twenty of which have been spent in roles in small private liberal arts colleges. Fred’s first professional positions were in residence life, first as a hall
director in a public liberal arts university and then as a mid-level residence life staff member at a small private liberal arts college where he received extensive experience in the supervision of professional staff. Fred remained at that small private liberal arts college for almost a decade, an experience that allowed him to take on many different roles and areas of supervision all over campus, including supervision over campus safety and security, and student conduct, as well as budgetary oversight for the division. Fred’s experience at this institution culminated in a senior student affairs position that he held for two years. As Fred considered his professional background, he credited his experiences at this small private liberal arts college as central to how he views his work with students and particularly students in crisis. More specifically, he described this experience as having given him “a sense of how to work with students in difficult scenarios, how to show value to them, [and] how to treat them as adults and independently.”

Fred’s next professional step led him to Bricks College, where he began as a member of the senior staff as well as worked closely with academic affairs on an experiential learning program. After two years in this capacity, Fred moved into his current dean of students’ role in which he oversees a division of almost one-hundred staff members with approximately 15 direct reports.

**Bricks College.** Bricks College is a small private liberal arts institution in the Southwest region of the United States. Serving approximately 2,000 students, Bricks is located in a small town of approximately 13,000 people and is less than one hour away from the closest major city. At Bricks, the average ACT composite score for incoming first-year students is a 26, the average high school GPA is a 3.7, and the majority of students admitted are in the top quarter of their high school class. The area surrounding the college can be described as highly residential with private homes touching the boundaries of campus. Still, when one drives into the town, the heart of the town seems to be the college. I visited Bricks at the beginning of winter break and was
struck not only by the quaintness of the community, but also the stillness of campus due to the absence of students.

As the dean of students, Fred plays a preeminent role in emergency response planning and implementation at Bricks. Specifically, he designed many of the campus protocols, coordinates the crisis management team, and arranges for ongoing crisis management training for college staff. For instance, Fred noted that while Bricks’ crisis management plan has “been around for a while” that “[it was] reviewed extensively after Virginia Tech” by a task force that the college assembled. This review incorporated “table top exercises dealing with student matters,” a practice that has continued up until this past summer during which time the group simulated the scenario of an active shooter on campus.

When asked to describe the college’s crisis management plan, Fred offered that it is designed to prepare staff to respond to 15 different types of scenarios which fall into the categories of “individual and campus emergencies.” Fred defined individual emergencies as including matters related to student health and safety such as a suicide attempt or management of influenza, and campus emergencies as being incidents that “[are] a big thing for campus and other players are involved other than my office and the counseling center,” including severe weather, a bomb threat, or a chemical spill. Another important distinction made by Fred in this regard is that individual emergencies are more about case management, as they occur with greater regularity and are handled through the dean of students’ office. Campus emergency response, on the other hand, is far less frequent and more fluid in terms of its membership.

The core team that attends to individual emergencies is led by the dean of students and includes the director of campus safety and security, the director of the counseling center, the director of the health center, an associate dean, the student conduct officer, and the director of
residential life and housing. This group of professionals meets twice a week: every Monday morning to discuss “what’s gone on in the last week, who’s got what, who’s taking care of x case” and every Wednesday afternoon to determine “who’s done it, who’s taken care of it.” To further keep track of individual emergencies, Fred informally checks in with individuals on the committee, as well. Speaking of the amount of time and effort put into case management, Fred remarked:

In terms of practice, I never imagined that we would need that. But, it’s a way to understand the environment, as well. And it’s helpful for faculty to know there’s a crisis management team that is attentive to these things. It’s really helpful for them to know that.

At Bricks, parental notification is a formal policy in that information is readily available in the student handbook about when parents will be involved in instances of a conduct violation and in general as it is permitted by FERPA. A unique component of this policy at Bricks is that at the outset of the school year, a letter is sent home that explains FERPA, the fact that “if there is any reason to believe there is an issue about health or safety” the college will call parents or families, and asking that the student provide the name of an emergency contact person. In terms of who operationalizes this policy, according to Fred, although it is primarily him who contacts parents in cases of imminent harm, that a counseling center staff member might also make contact if they are working with a student of concern and the student has given them permission to do so. With few exceptions, at Bricks, the practice is that if a call is being made to parents, the student is aware of the contact.
Heidibeth: “I have had times when involving parents has been tremendously helpful in managing the situation and so I think that has made me more willing to consider involving parents.”

Heidibeth is a senior student affairs officer at Small College (“Small”). According to Heidibeth, much of her current position is “very typical of the dean of students at a small college.” Specifically, she coordinates the student conduct process and receives incident reports, makes determinations about charges, and refers cases to administrative hearing officers on campus. Less frequently, Heidibeth serves as the hearing officer for more high profile or more harmful cases, including those related to sexual misconduct and harassment. Another aspect of Heidibeth’s position commonly under the purview of the small college dean is the management of an early-warning committee that attends to students at-risk for attrition and students exhibiting behaviors of concern. Explaining the overarching purpose of this committee, Heidi remarked, “We really address student problems from the whole gamut, from folks on probation to folks who we think might be at risk of suicide or violence or something like that.” In addition to this role, within in her current position, Heidibeth manages the emergency operations plan, chairs the crisis response team, and oversees a number of director-level staff within the division, including those individuals within the areas of residential life and housing, campus safety and security, health and counseling, and multicultural student programs and services.

Heidibeth has worked in higher education for nearly 30 years, beginning her career as a live-in residence life staff member at a private, mid-sized institution. Next she served as counselor, providing both developmental and clinical counseling to students at a technical college. Amongst her duties in this position was establishing protocols for psychological emergencies. Heidibeth’s subsequent position was her first within a small private liberal arts
college where she served as the director of counseling services and had responsibilities related to orientation and multicultural programs. Next, she spent approximately five years working at a comprehensive midsize public institution where she directed the counseling center, as well as worked on assessment projects related to student alcohol use and retention programs for at-risk students. Following this position, Heidibeth spent nearly a decade as the director of health and counseling at a public liberal arts college where she had the responsibility of strategic planning for health services offered on campus and oversight over matters related to budget and personnel. Heidibeth’s position at Small is her first as a senior student affairs officer. When asked about her transition from a director-level position to a purely administrative role, Heidibeth offered:

I spent years vacillating about that. I had thought about whether or not I wanted to move to a broader administrative role. People suggested that I would be a good dean or vice president. I had participated in a women’s leadership program and that got me thinking about my career path. I really gave that a lot of thought for a while and came to the conclusion that I wanted to stay at the director level. So [I] thought I’m one of those folks who could have a really successful career as a director and retire from that . . . and then I realized that I was getting bored.

Important to Heidibeth’s decision to pursue a senior administrative position was her beliefs about the type of environment in which she could be most effective. Specifically, Heidibeth noted that a smaller residential campus best fit her leadership style:

One of the things that I have come to know about myself is that I’m very relationship-focused and I would describe my leadership style as very relational. I think that I lead most effectively through the connections I form. The relationships I make with other people on campus and my experience at institutions of different sizes has taught me that
at a smaller campus, it’s easier to get to know a broader swatch of the members and the community.

Heidibeth’s interviews were most notable because of what she offered in the way of experience in both student health and counseling and administration. As a result of this experience she was able to provide a comprehensive understanding of this decision-making process.

**Small College.** Small College is a private liberal arts college in the South that serves approximately 1,200 students. Located in a rural town of around 4,500 people, Small is less than one hour away from a major city. The Carnegie Foundation (n.d.) classifies Small as a highly residential and exclusively undergraduate baccalaureate institution. At Small, the average ACT composite score for incoming first-year students is a 27, the average high school GPA is a 3.5, and the majority of students admitted are in the top quarter of their high school class. Also notable about Small is its diverse population of students, both in terms of national origin and race, and its reputation for being highly affordable as compared to its peer institutions.

Heidibeth serves as one of the senior student affairs officers at the college and plays a significant role in the three committees that attend to students of concern, crisis preparedness, and emergency response, respectively. The early warning system, which Heidibeth manages, attends to students of concern both in terms of risk for attrition and behavioral issues. More specifically, this committee is responsible for outreach and providing interventions for these students when matters come to their attention. Membership of this team is comprised of the directors of residential life and housing, student life, campus safety and security, multicultural programs, the academic support coordinator, and the three full-time, live-in professionals on campus.
Small College also has a crisis response team. This team is comprised of professionals “representing almost every area of the college functioning,” including but not limited to the directors of facilities operations, communications, residential life and housing, health services, campus safety and security, IT, risk management, a representative from the president’s office, and members of the faculty and student body. This group, which is chaired by Heidibeth, is specifically charged with planning and implementing drills associated with the emergency operations plan, which it took the lead in developing.

Additionally, Small has an emergency management team, which convenes to address critical incidents. According to Heidibeth, the membership of the emergency management team is fluid and “depending on the nature of the emergency there may be people from the crisis response team or other folks who would be around the table.” For instance, Heidibeth recalled a recent student death to which the emergency management team initially responded. For this particular incident, members of the team included Heidibeth, the chief student affairs officer, the dean of academic affairs, the president, the chaplain, the director of counseling services, the director of residential life and housing, the director of campus safety and security, and the communications director.

When asked how the emergency operations plan relates to students believed to be a harm to self and/or others, Heidibeth explained that there are several steps involved in addressing such incidents. Specifically, after the student is identified and if it seems appropriate, the student is referred to the counseling center for assessment. Then, if an imminent threat is determined, steps would be taken to get the student evaluated off-campus. When asked if parental notification was a part of this plan, Heidibeth explained that it is built into the protocol which exists for students who attempt suicide. Specifically, the protocol states very generally that in the event of a suicide
attempt that “the dean of students or designate would contact parents.” Still, Heidibeth noted that this policy is “more informal than formal” in that “there are also times when we don’t involve parents” such as when the student is older or if the contact would be more harmful than helpful. Small’s student handbook also addresses the institution’s approach to parental contact. Specifically, it states that parental contact might be made if “it is perceived necessary to protect the welfare of the student or others” or if a conduct or educational matter leads to ramifications for a student’s continued enrollment.

Mike: “As the college administrator, we only have a snapshot of that student. I have no idea what happened in the first 18 years of their life. So [parental contact is] a judgment call, but it has to be made.”

Mike is one of the senior administrators at Men’s College (“Men’s), a small private Catholic institution in the Northeast. Mike has worked in this type of institution for the better part of his approximately 25 year tenure in higher education, which was primarily in residence life, until he advanced to broader administrative roles. During the interview, Mike noted that the Catholic liberal arts institution has been “an important niche” for him because of the “strong and distinct mission[s]” offered by these institutions and the congruence between his values and those fostered within this institutional typology, such as “service and assisting in the common good.” When asked about his current role on campus, Mike noted that he is a direct report to the vice president for student affairs and that in this capacity, he is responsible for a number of functional areas, including residential life and housing, student activities, campus safety and security, student orientation programs, student conduct programs, and multicultural student services and programs. In this capacity, Mike also reports regularly to the board of trustees and serves as a member of the president’s cabinet. Additionally, Mike remarked that as the frontline
person for the student affairs division, more often than not, he makes calls to parents about students who are a potential harm to self and/or others.

Notable about Mike’s interview was the degree to which he credited his counseling and residence life backgrounds for his competence within the field. With respect to his counseling degree, Mike remarked, “I think over the years, I’ve really been able to call upon some of that training that I received in graduate school and I believe that I’m able to utilize that in my day-to-day work.” Mike referenced his residence life experience as integral to his ability to serve in a generalist capacity. Mike said:

I think [residential life] may be one of those areas where I really learned to cut my teeth in the field. Through that experience, I was able to really learn more about solid supervision . . . and it helped me understand and better connect with our counseling center staff on campus, our student activities staff, our dining services staff because it’s that experience that you get in housing where you need to be a strong connector with so many others on campus.

Mike’s interest in higher education was first piqued as an undergraduate resident assistant, after which he moved onto a graduate program in counseling while serving as a graduate hall director. Following the completion of his master’s degree and for five years thereafter, Mike gained increasing experience in a residential life program at a private Catholic university. Immediately following this experience, Mike moved onto another private Catholic institution where he oversaw all aspects of a residence life program which served approximately 2,000 residential students. Additionally, this position required him to oversee an extensive budget and take a leading role in the strategic planning for the department. Next, Mike took on what would be his first as a senior student affairs staff member with broad administrative
oversight over all student services, including: residential life and housing, health and counseling services, student activities programs, spiritual life, student conduct, to name a few. Also new to Mike in this senior staff position, were his responsibilities to the board of trustees and his role in coordinating the emergency response team on campus.

**Men’s College.** Men’s College is a small private Catholic liberal arts college that serves a male student population of approximately 2,000 students. At Men’s, the average ACT composite score for incoming first-year students is a 25, the average high school GPA is a 3.5, and the majority of students admitted are in the top quarter of their high school class. Located in the Northeast, Mike described Men’s as being located in a “farm field country setting on two-thousand acres.” Additionally, the town in which Men’s is located has a population of around 3,500 residents. Mike described Men’s mission as “provid[ing] an educational enterprise which helps students grow and develop both in the classroom and outside the classroom.”

According to Mike, Men’s crisis management team is an administrative body charged with the initial response to a variety of critical campus incidents such as significant issues related to property or facilities and those related to student safety such as a missing student or a death on campus. This crisis management team is composed of five primary members, including a representative from the president’s office, a member from the communication and marketing department, the director and assistant directors of campus safety and security, and a senior communications staff member. In describing this crisis response team, Mike noted: “although I’m not a member of that initial core team, more likely than not, I end up getting called in” once it is determined which campus stakeholders are necessary to address the issue. Although the campus safety team meets as needed when incidents arise, according to Mike, it also gathers once or twice a semester to verify that they are on “the same page with contact information and
[for] reviewing relevant topics to college campuses nationwide” in order to determine if the protocols in place are consistent with best practices.

For matters related to the gamut of “day-to-day student issues,” the institutional response is addressed by a student behavior team, which Mike described as being “fairly similar to what a number of other institutions have.” This committee is chaired by Mike and staffed with the director of campus safety and security, director of housing and residential life program, members of academic advising staff, an assistant dean of students, director of counseling services, and directors of disability services. Within the context of this committee, Mike described the counseling and disability staff members as playing “intake” roles in that they do “a lot of listening and some consulting . . . due to their roles and confidentiality.” This student behavior team meets on a biweekly basis, involves the assignment of student issues to committee members, the review of issues that came to light at previous meetings, as well as decisions about whether issues have been sufficiently resolved or should remain on the committee’s agenda for review.

When asked about the parental contact plan at Men’s College, Mike offered that it is not delineated explicitly within Men’s crisis management plan and that it is more of an “informal process” based closely on the tenants of FERPA. More specifically, there is not a codified policy which designates when parents will be contacted and instead, Men’s functions according to FERPA guidance. Mike noted, “If we believe that a student could have health concerns, hurts themselves or others, you know there’s a really clear health and safety exception there . . . we will lean on the side of getting in contact with parents.” Mike explained the absence of a codified policy with his belief that they have not received much “pushback” from students about their policy and the fact that parents often want to learn more information about their students.
Recognizing that many issues of concern emerge after hours, Mike noted that the institutional response could be different under such circumstances. For instance, often incidents emerge in the residence halls at night or over the weekend and in this case, information would emerge via residential life staff or campus security and safety. If an event such as this occurs, it is common for both Mike and the director of counseling services to play a “triage” role, making decisions about sending the student to the local hospital for assessment as well as making determinations about whether a student’s parents should be notified of the incident.

**Patricia: “I think on the one hand, we all want parents to be partners and yet in higher ed there is the risk that if you open that door at the wrong time, it may be a door you can’t close.”**

Patricia has been the senior student affairs officer at Women’s College (“Women’s”) for approximately five years. In this capacity, Patricia is responsible for a “broad portfolio,” including but not limited to housing and residential life, counseling and health services, disability support services, religious and spiritual life programs, multicultural services, career services, campus activities, and academic support services. Additionally, Patricia serves on the student behavior team which meets on a weekly basis about students of concern, and contributes to crisis management as a member of the group which attends to more serious incidents confronting the campus community. When asked about her role in contacting parents when a student is believed to be potential threat to themselves or others, Patricia remarked that she “makes calls [to parents] less frequently [than others on her staff] but is always a part of the discussion.” Further explaining this practice, Patricia noted that the goal is for the contact person to have “immediate knowledge of the student’s situation” and often there are other professionals in the position to have more firsthand knowledge about the issues at hand.
Prior to her tenure at Women’s, Patricia worked first as an academic and then in student affairs at another women’s college. More specifically, following the completion of her doctorate, Patricia spent nearly 20 years working as a faculty member before taking on a purely administrative function as one of the senior student affairs officers at the college. Patricia held her senior administrative role at this college for over 10 years during which time she handled the oversight of the student affairs division, chaired a number of on-campus committees, and served as a class dean and advisor.

Unique to Patricia’s professional experience is the fact that she has spent her entire career in the small private liberal arts college context, and specifically working with all female student populations. Through all of our interactions, it was clear that Patricia is a professional with a deep appreciation for the liberal arts and is someone who is markedly committed to advocacy for women and their development. Perhaps one of the most illustrative examples of her advocacy emerged during a conversation about Women’s commitment to involving students when contacting parents about issues of harm to self and/or others. Speaking of her directors’ ability to elicit student participation in this regard, Patricia remarked:

I can’t think of an instance when they have not been able to demonstrate to the student that it was in her best interest to let her parent know what was going on…in a sense to empower the student, to a degree, to be able to be a part of that communication. Patricia’s participation in this study allowed for a greater understanding of institutional culture and its impact on parental contact practices and policies.

**Women’s College.** Women’s College is a small private liberal arts institution for women that serves over 2,000 baccalaureate-seeking students. At Women’s the average ACT composite score for incoming first-year students is a 30, the average high school GPA is a 3.7, and the
majority of students admitted are in the top tenth of their high school class. Located in an affluent small town in the South, Women’s is a highly residential college that is attended by traditional-aged students from across the globe. Described by Patricia, as a place where “students set an extraordinarily high bar for what they deem success,” it is no surprise that the college is widely regarded for its academic excellence and traditions. In fact, these aspects of the college were discussed frequently throughout both of my conversations with Patricia.

Similar to other participant institutions within this study, Women’s has both a crisis management team, as well as a more regularly assembled committee that addresses students of concern. Unique to Women’s college is the fact that the crisis management team is coordinated by the chief of police, a professional who has a long tenure at the institution and who has worked at multiple colleges over the course of her career. The crisis management team is composed of “a series of different people representing all the major offices on campus” including representatives from facilities, dining, housing and residence life, publicity, faculty, student life, health and counseling. According to Patricia, as the coordinator of this team, the chief of police calls one to two training meetings per year so that its membership can practice their response to a variety of different types of crises that could arise on campus. Additionally, when a crisis occurs or an impending crisis comes to their attention such as a severe weather event that will be debilitating for the campus and/or the surrounding area, the committee is called to respond. In general, once the team is assembled, the police chief delegates tasks to the group and makes decisions about who needs to work together and the team is typically in regular contact throughout the crisis, depending on how long it lasts.

In contrast to the crisis management team that meets for training and on an as needed basis, Women’s has a student behavior team that meets every Friday morning to discuss students
of concern who have been brought to the attention of the committee by a faculty or staff member at the college and to serve as a threat assessment team. This team, which is coordinated by a member of the residential life and housing leadership team, is composed of the chief of police, the director of residential life and housing, the lead class dean, the director of health, the director of counseling, the disabilities coordinator, the dean of students, and the associate dean of students. At every meeting, a list of students of concern is discussed and decisions are made about what next steps should be taken to attend to these issues. At the following week’s meeting, the group goes through a check-in process to verify what has been done, “whether any concerns are outstanding, and whether the student will stay on the list until next week or whether whatever issues [they] have of concern have been met.” Additionally, if in the interim, there is an “immediate crisis” then the committee or “a subset of that committee” will meet “to make sure that all the resources are working in a coordinated way around the student.”

When asked about the parental contact policy at Women’s, Patricia explained that it is more of an informal policy in that it is not codified, and depending on the issue, a number of professionals might make the contact. More specifically, while it can be Patricia as the dean of students who makes the call, more often it is one of the directors that she oversees which includes the directors of the health and counseling centers, the director of residential life, or the associate dean of students. Important to note about this policy is the weight placed on the student being a part of the contact to their parents either by making the call herself, being a part of the phone call, or at minimum being aware of it. Emphasizing this point and the importance with which the administration views student participation in these conversations, Patricia noted, “I would say in the five years that I have been here, I can’t think of one where a student’s parent has been contacted without the student’s knowledge.” According to Patricia, student
participation is the preferred method for contact many reasons, including the fact that in this way the student is “taking responsibility” for her care and because it is consistent with the student culture at Women’s which values the “feel[ing] that they were the person that affected this excellence, this accomplishment, this sense of really being the best that they can be.”

**Prufrock: “As a rule, we try to involve parents in a conversation that is already going on.”**

Prufrock is the senior student affairs officer at Hill College (“Hill”). His first interview was most notable because of the precision of his language and his predisposition for storytelling. Prufrock conceptualizes his role at Hill as encompassing three categories. The first involves the “interpretation of policy” for and between college constituencies, including the board of trustees, senior staff, student affairs staff, and students. Prufrock described the second category as being a “broad managerial role” over a variety of functional areas typical to the small college portfolio. These areas include, but are not limited to: campus religious and spiritual programs, career services, health and counseling services, student conduct, multicultural services, athletics, housing and residential life, student activities, and student employment. Prufrock defined the third area of his work as the traditional dean of students role, describing it as “the interacting with students or student groups to help them reach some of their goals and objectives.” Noting that his dean of students responsibilities are what he enjoys most about his work, Prufrock offered that there is another side to this role. Prufrock said:

> The other side of that is dealing with folks who either are problems or have problems and how to manage those types of situations. So, it is much more hands on, direct interaction with phone calls with parents and meetings with students and conversations with therapists and physicians and police officers and that kind of stuff.
With almost 40 years of experience in higher education, Prufrock is the most seasoned of the participants in this study. He began working in higher education as a doctoral student at a four-year private research institution. Prufrock recalled, “After my first year of graduate studies, after which I had been ensconced in my fun, I decided that I should work somewhere, so I got a job in residence life as a housing officer.” Prufrock spent nearly a decade in university housing at this institution, taking on positions of increasing responsibility, all of which required him to work closely with students about personal and academic concerns and respond to student-related emergencies. Following the completion of this doctorate, Prufrock moved on to a senior student affairs positions at a private liberal arts institution where he took on more extensive responsibilities in student conduct, played a central role in crisis management as an on-call staff member, and took on comprehensive oversight for a number of student life areas and programs.

Prufrock’s next position allowed him to serve as the senior student affairs officer at a private research institution. In this role, he not only oversaw student affairs operations on two of the institution’s campuses, but gained experience overseeing a broader list of functional areas, including orientation programs, disability support services, and commuter and off-campus living programs, to name a few. Next, Prufrock returned to the small private liberal arts context where he served as the senior student affairs officer and oversaw all aspects of student life. Prufrock’s tenure in that role and this institution lasted nearly two decades. His position at Hill marks his third as the senior student affairs officer on campus. In addition, at three of the six institutions where Prufrock has served in administrative capacities, he has also worked as an adjunct instructor.

**Hill College.** Hill College is a small private liberal arts college in the Northeast. Located in a small college town of approximately 2,500 people, Hill is about 60 miles from the closest
major city. Classified by the Carnegie Foundation (n.d.) as a highly residential and exclusively undergraduate baccalaureate institution, Hill College is attended by approximately 1,600 students who hail from both national and international locations. At Hill, the average ACT composite score for incoming first-year students is a 30, the average high school GPA is a 3.9, and the majority of students admitted are in the top tenth of their high school class. When one arrives at the entrance of Hill, it is hard to decipher where the town ends and the college begins, which contributes to its reputation as a place that puts a premium on community. When I arrived on campus for the first interview, I was struck by the natural surroundings of the college and its medieval architecture, which made me feel as though I had entered a New England town in another time.

The crisis management team at Hill responds to the most serious of campus incidents, such as the presence of a dangerous person of interest on campus. This team’s membership is fluid; however, consistent members include the president, provost, dean of students, director of campus safety, and the director of public affairs. Other members who might also weigh in on serious incidents include representatives from public relations and members of the faculty. For incidents related to an imminent threat to self or others, it is more common for a student affairs staff to convene, including the office of the dean of students, health and counseling, housing and residential life, academic advising, campus safety, and others depending on the nature of the incident.

Hill College has a formal policy for parental notification without student consent. More specifically, information surrounding the conditions in which the college has a right to make contact is provided on the institutional website. For matters related to students’ academic and social standing at the college, contact with parents is designated as something that will happen.
For issues related to health and safety, however, the college has an informal policy that is not codified. Prufrock offered insight into how this aspect of the policy is operationalized:

“Generally it is to assess what is the need, what are we trying to accomplish, and is the contacting of the parents something that is helpful in accomplishing that goal?” This explanation provides some important context about Hill’s overarching view of students, namely, that they are independent adults with the ability to manage their own affairs.

**Themes**

Van Manen (1990) noted that themes serve as the “fasteners, foci, or threads around which the phenomenological description is facilitated” (p. 91). With this in mind, I describe how senior administrators experience the disturbed and/or disturbing student and make decisions about parental notification using the “lived-experience descriptions” (van Manen, 1990) of seven participants. More specifically, in this section, I provide a description of the phenomenon in its totality using themes that have been organized into three overarching categories: beliefs about involvement, experiencing the disturbed student, and the decision for contact. The category, beliefs about involvement, gives consideration to the foundational beliefs fostered by participants with respect to student autonomy and parental involvement. More specifically, this category involves two themes: balancing autonomy with parental involvement and evolving views. The next category, experiencing the disturbed student, focuses on what it is like to work with disturbed and disturbed/disturbing students and includes three themes: emotions, working with parents, and culture of expectation. The third and final category hones in on the criteria that participants identified as integral to the parental involvement decision, as well as those circumstances which might lead them to reconsider. This category includes the four themes: a
big decision, risk assessment, other factors, and mitigating circumstances. The aforementioned categories and themes are discussed in the remainder of this chapter.

**Beliefs about Involvement**

Participants spoke at length about how they have come to think about parental involvement when working with disturbed and disturbed/disturbing students. These conversations reflected participants’ interest in promoting student autonomy and their belief that parents can be helpful during critical incidents. Also apparent in many of these discussions was the notion that their views on parental involvement have evolved as they have become more seasoned professionals, interacted with other professionals in the field, made sense of student tragedy, and reflected on their own college experience.

**Balancing autonomy with parental involvement.** All participants articulated their beliefs about how to best involve parents when working with disturbed and disturbed/disturbing students. More specifically, participants shared their desire to give students the opportunity to solve their own problems, their belief that parents can be helpful during times of crisis, and varying levels of concern for student privacy.

**Solving their own problems.** A number of participants discussed their views of parental involvement through the lens of student development. For example, Patricia framed the question of whether to involve parents around its impact on student autonomy:

> So, there are times when I think you can involve parents and it will promote a student’s development and there are times when I think you can impede a student’s sense of autonomy and that sense of becoming one’s own self.

Patricia’s assessment of the parental involvement question was shared by a number of participants including Elizabeth. Elizabeth’s orientation in this regard was illustrated with her
decision to wait on contacting the parents of a student with borderline personality disorder, to allow her the opportunity to utilize college resources and change her own behavior. In explaining that decision, she commented:

My basic belief [is] that students need to have a fair go in solving their own stuff. And part of it is being resilient, knowing that they can have what might feel like a really awkward conversation with a complete stranger like me, and they can find a way out of that.

A high regard for student autonomy was also shared by Prufrock who expressed that, as much as possible, students should be active participants in their own care even when involving parents:

I think if we possibly can, and I think I’m in favor of contorting ourselves to do this . . . this is a mantra for me - how can we keep students at the center of the conversation? And, there are times when things are going off the rails and it’s just not going to work because the student can't even coherently put two sentences together. So, there are exceptions to that but more often than not that is possible. It may not be . . . it may take a lot of convincing or you may need to force the issue but I think that getting the student or keeping the student at the center of the conversation, even as you involve parents, is absolutely the way to go.

A number of participants emphasized the importance of allowing students to solve their own problems because of how it can impact their development and sense of autonomy. Patricia suggested that parental involvement can have disparate effects on students’ development, depending on the issue at hand. Both Elizabeth and Prufrock reported going to great lengths to protect students’ opportunity to work through challenging life events. For Elizabeth, this meant
allowing students as much time as possible even in the face of concern; for Prufrock this entailed structuring involvement so that the student remains central to the process of resolution.

**Beliefs about student privacy.** A number of participants also discussed how student privacy factored into their view of parental involvement. Although two participants felt strongly tied to legal expectations of student privacy, all participants agreed that if they perceived a threat to a student or the larger community, that they would “err on the side of caution” and make contact with parents.

**Student privacy as compelling.** Heidibeth and Elizabeth both stated that student privacy played a significant role in their thinking about involving parents when working with disturbed and/or disturbing students. In fact, Heidibeth identified the protection of student privacy as fundamental to her view of parental involvement, an orientation she connected to her 20-year tenure as a college counselor:

I think that my background and the number of years that I spent doing [counseling] work has instilled in me a very, very strong respect for student privacy and for considering how is family involvement going to be helpful or neutral or not helpful in any given situation.

And that’s not to say that my colleagues don’t respect student privacy, I just think it’s really been inculcated [in me] and [led me] to put a pretty high premium on that.

Elizabeth attributed her views about student privacy to her attention to law, which she noted, “really does matter” and her belief in student autonomy: “I'm one of those people who really cares a lot about FERPA and I really care a lot about not prematurely stepping on a student's opportunity to fix things for themselves.”

**Safety trumps privacy.** Although two participants stood out as having very strong feelings about student privacy, in general, participants agreed that, concerns about imminent
harm would always trump their beliefs about privacy. Elizabeth, a professional who characterizes herself as “a pretty strict FERPA person” explained this duality:

While I have this really strong belief in the importance of students solving their own problems, finding ways that they themselves can be resilient, I also know that parental notification many, many, many more times than not has been really helpful to the student and that’s what matters to me. And, if parental notification can help to keep [a student] from hurting himself and keep him alive, then I will notify the parent.

Heidibeth, another professional who believes that “protect[ing] student privacy” is a part of her job, also expressed her ultimate commitment to safety. This was evident in her explanation of how she uses FERPA waiver information during times of crisis, and particularly when students indicate that they do not want information shared with their parents. She said:

So, I do look to see what somebody’s status is and depending on the severity of the situation, if I see that someone is parental information withheld, I’d use that as one piece guiding my decision-making about whether do I go ahead and let their family know anyway. And really, a lot of it has to do with how imminently life threatening is a situation that we are dealing with.

Prufrock and Mike discussed their tendency to err on the side of contact by deconstructing the consequences of a FERPA claim. Prufrock discussed this in terms of how he believes that he could defend his educational judgment in court:

I would prefer to get wrapped on the knuckles for disclosure which I thought was in the best interest of the student than saying, ‘oh gee, the law prohibits me from saying anything to anyone.’ I’d rather be held at downs for disclosure rather than disclosing the information if I think it’s a serious enough matter, and that's a judgment call. And again,
I feel more confident in my own judgment than I did 20 years ago and I feel more comfortable because I’ve been in court rooms and I’ve had some great coaching from lawyers that convinced me that I should just do the best I can and that it isn't about perfection. It’s about dealing with the . . . playing the cards you are dealt, and sometimes you have a crappy hand, but how do you play it as well as you can? Because, at the end of the day, on the witness stand when you are able to say, ‘I did the best I could,’ if you can be credible in doing that, I think you're okay, you know?

Mike explained his comfort with erring on the side of contact by remarking on the unlikelihood of consequences:

I'm also not aware of any colleges that have ever been dinged on FERPA violations for getting into contact with parents in a mental health setting, and if we do its $27,500. And you know what, here's what I think is going to happen: if the student really gets upset that we called their parents, they're going to get upset with me, and their parent is going to get there saying, ‘I’m glad that you made the call.’

**Involving parents can be helpful.** All participants acknowledged that parents can be helpful when working with students experiencing acute mental health crises. Several participants explained this position by pointing out how parents can augment care. More specifically, Mike and Fred noted that involving parents can lead to a greater understanding of student backgrounds and allows parents to provide guidance about how to best work with their student. From Mike’s perspective, parental involvement can lead to a higher level of student support:

As the college administrator, we only have a snapshot of that student. I have no idea what has happened in their first 18 years of their life. So, it’s a judgment call, but it has
to be made. I think if the judgment call can be made [about] what’s in the best interest of
the health or safety of that individual and who [we] can we call upon to then provide a
better layer of support, that’s how we end up making the decision about calling parents.

To this point, Fred recounted how working with a set of parents led him to gather important
background information about a student’s health history and the familial dynamic:

When the parents came [to campus], the student was upset with the parents. It goes back
to years, years gone by. And you know, mom and dad were here and the daughter ran,
rav away, and so I got called in to help with an intervention and get the student back into
this building so that we could work with the student and the mother and the father and
those kinds of things. It was, in the end, we have a policy for leave of absence for health
reasons and we had to put that into place for the student. So, it was good to have parents
there because they were able to see her behaviors and understand what was going on and
offer guidance to us… and certainly a willingness to have the student go home with them
for more evaluation. So, that's not typical, that's probably more the extreme but it’s a
good lesson where families can be helpful.

Heidibeth has found parents to be especially helpful under these circumstances when they have a
close relationship with their student. For example, when a suicidal resident assistant disappeared
from campus and Heidibeth contacted her parents, it was the parents themselves who were able
to locate her. Heidibeth recounted:

The student wasn't responding to her [residence life supervisor] and we knew that the
student had a good relationship with parents and were really pretty concerned about her
well-being and the imminent threat. And so, I called her parents to let them know that
she had sent these [threatening] messages to friends, that there really was a pretty high
level of threat that was present in the messages, [and] that we had been trying to get in touch with her. [The student] wasn't responding to us, and we were looking for her and hadn't been able to find her and just wanted them to be aware. While I was on the phone with her mother, her father texted [the student] and she responded to her father's text message . . . and her father was able to find out where she was and it turns out she was sitting in her car just off-campus and she was willing to have a staff member come and meet with her.

Alex has found parental involvement helpful when they are active participants in the care plan. “Certainly, I think parents, once involved, can be advocates and support people for their student.” According to Alex, in one notable instance after an attempted suicide, a student was able to successfully complete her degree because of her parent’s advocacy and support. More specifically, this was possible because the mother moved to a hotel with her daughter for the remaining weeks of the semester. According to Alex, integral to the college’s “comfort with the plan” to allow the student to stay and continue her degree was her mother’s presence and participation.

[The student] was actually going to have a guardian staying with [her] there. She was actually going to be staying off-campus, and her mother was going to be staying with her. We had some assurance that we would actually have weekly meetings with the student and parent.

Patricia also commented that parental involvement can be particularly helpful for the care plan, and specifically the student’s adherence to it. In the case of one student who was exhibiting erratic behaviors, Patricia remarked that involving parents led to a great deal of support for the student as she got back on track:
[The parents] understood the importance of her then being more vigilant in seeking out help for herself. And not only seeking out help but following the recommendations that were given to her. She needed to do some things that she hadn’t been doing and her parents understood and they became highly supportive of her. So they were checking in to make sure that she was doing what she needed to do. The student graduated just recently.

**Evolving views.** Most participants noted that the way that they view involving parents has changed over the course of their careers. Generally, they attributed these changes to becoming more seasoned professionals, interactions with mentors and colleagues, working through student death, and for some participants, reflecting on their own college experience.

**Becoming more seasoned professionals.** For a number of participants, with experience has come a more positive view of working with parents. For example, earlier in her career Elizabeth was less prone to view parents as helpful; however, her experience has led her to believe that parents can be good partners.

I probably now view parents, and this may be a reflection of my own age, I probably view parents as more as partners than as pains in the ass. Earlier in my career, and it may have been about where I was, I experienced parents as being more willing to try to bully me or bully the college through me, to get the college to do what they wanted it to do. And I think that was a reflection of youth and relative inexperience compared to my age now and my level of experience now. So, now I tend to view them as more likely to be helpful partners.
Mike’s current view of involving parents is also qualitatively different that it was earlier in his career, as now involving parents is less about liability and more about their involvement in student care.

I think my perspective on helping parents and helping students has changed with my own wisdom and guidance over the years. Probably I was at that point of I need to call parents because I want to cover the bases. That's probably less important [now], it’s more about how do we put together a good care plan?

Several participants also noted that as a result of their experience, they have gained a greater level of comfort with involving parents. Prufrock attributed this comfort to the fact that when he has involved parents it has never been detrimental for the student.

I think I'm much more comfortable… picking up the phone and contacting parents than I was years ago, in part I think because I have seen the value of doing that over the years or have managed to negotiate situations where that has been challenging and it’s been okay. I've become less anxious about the risks of doing it because my experience suggests that even when contacting parents hasn’t been that helpful, that it has not been harmful.

Similarly, Fred’s experience has led him to believe that involving parents has a significant impact on individuals and the greater campus community. To this end he stated that parental involvement “helps us out tremendously and that student, helps our community have a sense of safety, it helps the student individually [and] mentally to get through whatever they need to resolve.”

**Interactions with other professionals.** Several participants also attributed their approach to parental involvement to the influence of mentors and colleagues who have demonstrated
“sound educational judgment.” For example, Prufrock connected his approach of involving parents to a colleague who he observed while in his first professional position:

Well, I’ve had some pretty good mentors, one guy in particular who I sort of imprinted on early in my career. And, I think he had a very direct and humane approach to student affairs and I watched him carefully and I saw him dealing directly with students, but also and this was at a place where there wasn’t as much parental involvement and engagement as a smaller place like [Hill], and yet I think he was very deliberate and very intentional in involving parents when that seemed important. That was very early in my career, and I think I took a lot of my cues from him.

For Fred, the impact of mentorship was a solid understanding of how to best approach parents when their student is in crisis. When asked what he specifically learned from this professional, Fred explained:

Totally being gentle and caring, asking good, open-ended questions, using good listening skills, you know don't come at it with, ‘here's the facts ma’am, and this is what we're going to do.’ It’s, ‘your son is safe. Here's the story, help me understand what could be a next step.’ Right, so instead of going at it from a disciplinary [perspective or] the rules book, use your counseling background and you'll get much further with families if you are attentive with their needs as well. So, that was the number one thing. I think she really had a big influence on me.

Several other participants also remarked that they have gained insight into involving parents from colleagues. For instance, Heidibeth noted that the experience of working through specific incidents with her supervisor has been impactful for her thinking on parental involvement:
I would definitely say that my current vice president even moreso than prior division leaders that I have worked with has helped shape that. I think because he and I have had very specific conversations about different situations and whether the parents have been involved and how has that been or if they have not been involved yet if they should be, should we initiate that. I think he definitely believes that more often than not involving parents when there is that kind of threat is often helpful or at the very least is a way to cover ourselves especially since we are dealing with a very traditionally-aged student population.

Elizabeth also attributed a great deal of influence on her thinking to the colleagues she has met through professional associations, and specifically as she assessed what she would define as a health and safety emergency. To this end, Elizabeth remarked:

Mental health and parental notification always come up [during professional meetings]. And so those discussions have really helped me figure out where I want to be on that spectrum. And, for health and safety things, yeah it’s really helped me clarify my thinking about what do I consider to be a health and safety emergency, you know, what's just a worrisome situation, what's really an emergent type of situation.

**Making sense of student tragedy.** Participants also connected their views of parental involvement to how they have made sense of student death. More specifically, they talked about how high profile legal cases and their first-hand experiences of student death have affected their views on involving parents.

**High profile cases.** A number of participants remarked that their understanding of relevant case law has contributed to their views about parental contact for matters involving severe mental health issues. To this point, Patricia offered: “I think knowing what prompted the
law and the case law that led to that law has been really important for understanding my own thinking.” The majority of participants identified the MIT case as being most reflective of the complexities involved with working with mentally ill students, specifically noting the issues of confidentiality and the need for parental contact decisions to be “more thoroughly vetted.”

Reflecting on what he learned from the MIT case, Mike said:

> How do I call our counseling center and director and try to find a way to communicate as clearly as I can knowing that there are strong guidelines with confidentiality to then say, is this something that we need to be concerned about right now? So, I have to have my own kind of short call list to connect with people sometimes in the middle of the night.

When I have looked at these cases, I have also thought about silos, so you know what, here's an incident that's happening inside the residence halls and we can't let anyone else know about this. Or here's an incident that campus security is kind of documenting but they're not either sharing it with others so it’s like part of the good thing about having a student support team is you're putting hopefully all the right folks that are around the table to try to help sort out one of these more complicated cases.

Participants also offered that their reading of the MIT case has led to their consideration of parental involvement earlier in the process. For example, Patricia stated:

> I probably am more likely to put the bar a little lower about when we even discuss whether parents should be contacted. So in that way [the MIT case] probably lowered the bar a little bit in saying, is this a case that parents should be contacted?

Elizabeth connected a similar take-away to her reading of the MIT case:

> At the end of the day, I'd rather explain to a kid why I called their parents than explain to a parent why I didn't call them and now we are having the conversation about where are
they going to pick up the body. I've told you, I'm worried about did I notify parents prematurely. What's the worst possible thing that can happen if I notify parents prematurely? The kid can be really angry but alive.

Heidibeth’s discussion of, the MIT case revealed her perception of unfair expectations for parental involvement.

[Elizabeth Shin] was not somebody who came to college and for the first time experienced mental health crisis. So her parents were very or should have been…aware of the fact that she had some pretty significant mental health issues. So I think one of my reactions to some of those really high profile incidents is a little bit cynical in that I think that after the fact you want to know. We want to be able to point the blame in some way. We can't blame Elizabeth…Elizabeth is now dead. So, we're going to blame MIT and we're going to blame the psychologist at MIT that they did not contact parents. If only they had done that, this young woman would not have died.

Patricia expressed a similar sense of frustration: “while I appreciate the notion of confidentiality of health and medical records, I know the institution is going to be held liable for when we don’t act and we don’t intervene.”

Experiencing student death. Some participants referenced their experiences with student death as being impactful for their thinking about parental involvement when working with disturbed and/or disturbing students. Remarking on the emotional nature of this type of experience, Elizabeth said: “In the wake of those instances, you tend think about – did we miss something? Were we not aggressive enough? Were we not welcoming enough? Were we not present enough?” With this in mind, Elizabeth also pointed out how student death has changed
her view of parental involvement. Specifically, student death has led her to acknowledge the lethality of mental illness and reduced her hesitation to involve parents.

I think I have a real first-hand understanding and knowledge of how lethal depression can be and so that’s different from…you read about it in the student newspaper. It’s really different when you’re dealing with a person who you knew who ended their life and they suffered from depression. So I think that knowing that it can be lethal is a helpful piece of knowledge so that it prevents from under-reacting. I try hard not to overreact and it keeps me from underreacting because I know how serious it can be. And the second one was notification… Yeah, while I have this really strong belief in the importance of students solving their own problems, finding ways that they themselves can be resilient, I also know that parental notification many, many, many more times than not has been really helpful to the student and that’s what matters to me. And, if parental notification can help to keep from hurting himself and keep him alive then I will notify the parent.

Reflecting on two student deaths that occurred at the beginning of his tenure as the senior student affairs officer at Bricks, Fred noted that the impact of such an event is two-fold. The first is a constant “awareness” of what transpired. To this end, Fred remarked that the memory of these students “is still there for a lot of people” on campus. The second is the recognition of the critical nature of parental involvement for students struggling with mental health issues:

When you live it, it’s different than when you just read it . . . what you should and shouldn't do. And for me, the partnering with parents becomes primary in the safety of the community and the safety of individuals.

**Reflections on college.** Several participants also cited their own college experience as being impactful for the ways in which they think about parental involvement during critical
incidents of this nature. As a college graduate in the early seventies, Patricia remarked that her experience was highly impactful in terms of her belief in the importance of student autonomy and the idea that parents should be regarded as partners. To this end, Patricia stated:

If I look back, I would say, I think most of it was really the right thing to do . . . making 18-22 year olds responsible for the decisions they make and giving them the tools to make those decisions and giving them the space to make errors, it taught them how to make errors and to learn from mistakes. So, I think that was all the right thing. I think it may have swung a little bit too far in that I think we also took out the sense of permission-giving that had been used before, which I think was a good thing but also partnership, and I think that was a swing too far that parents weren't the students partners much less the institutions’ partners but they were these kind of people who were holding students back from making really cool and interesting decisions. So, they couldn’t be partners because they couldn’t understand this world the students were inheriting. I think we are coming back; I’d like to think we're coming back, to thinking about parents as partners, not necessarily permission-givers but partners to students. I think that's something that was lost in the late ‘60s and early ‘70s. So, I think the time I went to college impacted me pretty significantly about how I think about parents and students.

For Heidibeth, reflections on her own college experience allowed her to recognize that times have changed and that the current climate requires parental involvement at times:

The thing that I’m most aware of is how much the landscape has changed. I think for a number of years, my own experience shaped my beliefs and my practices in having a very strong anti-in loco parentis kind of attitude or approach to my work and I would say in the last 5, 6 years, even before I switched roles. I mean certainly switching roles has
made me rethink that, that I would say there have also been campus incidents within the past 10 years that have made me have to stop and think about, alright, are there times when it really is necessary to involve parents or involve them earlier, differently because there are things in the world that are really different and expectations are very different? Different legal [issues] pushed us to be involving parents more so. I think the main thing is that I'm very aware of the fact that it is a very different environment than it is than when I was in college.

Elizabeth also acknowledged that her undergraduate experience likely played a role in the way that she thinks about the balancing of student autonomy with the involvement of parents. More specifically, she noted that she wants the learning, sense of independence and resiliency that she experienced for her own students.

And, I think that the way that I experienced my undergraduate time as being a time of learning a lot about my own independence, my own sense of responsibility, and that's still in my mind, that's one of the archetypes of what a good undergraduate experience does, it helps people get the hang of that stuff. Recognize they're in charge of their lives now, not their parents, recognize they're responsible and that's almost always a really good thing. Recognize that there are consequences that for most people are almost always good or dealing with learning. And, that the hard and difficult and challenging things that happen as an undergraduate are things you can recover from. They really help you develop a sense of resilience. So that’s how I experienced much of my undergraduate time, and so that probably is something I project onto what I hope will happen with our students here.
Experiencing the Disturbed and Disturbed/Disturbing Student

Throughout my interviews with participants, they noted aspects of their work with disturbed and disturbed/disturbing students that are critical to one’s understanding of the phenomenon. Amongst these attributes were the emotions they felt as they dealt with student incidents and ultimately made a decision about whether or not to make parental contact, what it is like to work with parents during high-stakes times in their students’ lives, the cultural expectations with which they are confronted as they seek to provide the best care possible for students with severe mental health issues, and the role that other students play in the provision of care.

**Emotions.** As participants described their experience of the disturbed student, their emotions emerged as a salient aspect of the phenomenon. Notable amongst these emotions was the fact that many participants found themselves feeling both anxiety and confidence as they worked with this population of students.

**Concern.** Many participants described feeling anxious or concern as they worked through incidents involving disturbed students. They cited a variety of reasons for this concern, all of which related to the possibility of harm. For Prufrock, this concern had to do with his belief that a student could no longer be kept safe on campus. This sentiment emerged as he described working with a student who, after being charged with sexual assault, became depressed and was found to be “self-medicating” with alcohol and possibly drugs. Explaining his thought-process at the time, Prufrock said:

This was somebody who was simply not in touch with reality at all. It was his state of mind and the kind of control that we don’t have here, I think, over one’s daily existence that caused me to worry. What’s this guy going to do? And I don’t know that he could
realistically continue to be a student with all the distractions that he was causing anyway. But . . . the greater concern was, is this guy safe? Can’t guarantee that he’s safe anywhere, but certainly the chances of his remaining safe and sane are perhaps enhanced if he is in a controlled, restricted, familiar environment.

For Elizabeth, feelings of concern arose when she recognized that a “worrisome situation” could escalate into an emergency:

One of the reasons I was so worried is that [the student] was really destructive to her friends, so the worry was that she would alienate everyone and become really isolated and then the mental health stuff would have a different manifestation, be more urgent, she would be in worse shape and the consequences for the community would be much more.

I worried that all of that would happen, which is why I wanted to intervene.

Of all participants, Heidibeth provided the most visceral account of working with a disturbed student. More specifically, she described how anxious she felt as she made the decision to call the parents of a suicidal student who was missing from campus:

I’d say a heightened sense of anxiety. Again, not knowing how [the parents] were going to respond . . . [a] high level of emotional arousal, in general, about the incident itself. I was nervous about what was happening with her and about what felt to me like a situation in which there was a higher than typical likelihood that we could have a student death.

And then not knowing how [the parents] were going to respond. So, mild trepidation about, so what is the reaction from the family going to be?

For all participants, the most pressing worry was that harm was a foreseeable outcome for the student. Prufrock and Heidibeth were most concerned about the physical harm that could come
to the student, while Elizabeth expressed concern that a mental health issue left unchecked could be exacerbated and more significantly impact the student and the greater community.

**Confidence.** Another emotion that all participants shared as they recounted their experiences with disturbed students was a sense of confidence. More specifically, they articulated confidence in their ability to make decisions about parental involvement. Alex attributed his confidence in this regard to his experience and ability to consult with colleagues:

> I’d say, unfortunately, through a lot of practice would be one [way I have gained confidence]. I mean, I’ve been on call for the last 8 or 9 years and have had a number of scenarios where I needed to do that. I’d say certainly through training, both in judicial affairs and in some of the things that we’ve done as an on-call staff. So, and I think again, what also helps is a lot of vetting with colleagues and with legal counsel.

Mike emphasized his experience within the small school environment and his practice interfacing with parents, as being most impactful for his confidence in bringing parents into the conversation when working with disturbed students:

> I don’t want you to hear that from a cocky standpoint. It’s like, I’ve been doing the work for a while now. I feel pretty confident in my position, I feel like I have a good feel for working at these small institutions. I [also] think I’ve had a fair amount of contact with parents at parent orientation and family weekend, and little sibs gatherings, athletic events, and commencement where if I call home and say, ‘this is Mike, I’m the dean of students,’ I think probably a lot of parents know who I am because they’ve seen me which sometimes, I think, helps.
For Heidibeth, consultation with colleagues was critical to her sense of confidence:

In isolation, no [I am not confident], because often they are very nuanced, challenging situations. So, if I just was off there on my own needing to make . . . I mean, I could make the decisions. I think it would be much harder. But, the reality is that I don’t have to make the decisions in a vacuum, you know, so I’m able to consult with colleagues kind of moving in both directions, both with colleagues who are more frontline in their work and have more direct experience with the student or what’s going on. I can consult with the director of counseling or other professionals. I can consult with my supervisor so that we can really look at the situation as broadly as possible.

In general, participants articulated a strong sense of confidence in their ability to work with disturbed students. Most participants attached this sentiment to the years they have spent working closely with this population of students and the colleagues with whom they have ability to consult during times of duress. For Mike, this confidence also emerged as a byproduct of his understanding of the small school environment and the fact that, on his campus, he is a familiar face for parents.

**Working with parents.** Another very salient aspect of the phenomenon for participants was their experience working with parents during these situations. Notable themes associated with this aspect of phenomenon included experiencing parents who are not helpful, and relatedly, educating parents about mental illness and how to support their students as they attend to it.

**Parents who are not helpful.** Although most participants agreed that parents can be very supportive of their children as they grapple with these types of conditions, also notable were the encounters they had with parents who they deemed “not helpful.” Participants described unhelpful parents in a number of ways, including being disengaged from the process as well as
those parents who were unable to appreciate the seriousness of the incident involving their student. For instance, Heidibeth shared an example of an encounter with a parent who was dismissive of her call home after her student had attempted suicide on two separate occasions:

There are some parents that have just been, kind of to me, shockingly disconnected. We had a situation a couple of years ago when a student made two suicide attempts within a matter of weeks and her mother was just so amazingly nonchalant about the whole thing. It was incredible. Her mother lived . . . a 6-8 hour drive away. If my daughter had made two suicide attempts within that short period of time, I’d be in my car! She never came. [It was] kind of shocking to me.

Patricia also discussed contacting parents who were initially unhelpful because they could not appreciate the risks associated with their daughter’s erratic behavior. Speaking of these parents’ reaction to her contact, Patricia said:

They were a little disbelieving that their student would do that. And I think what they wanted to say [was] she wouldn’t intentionally hurt anybody, she wouldn’t intentionally hurt herself. And, we agreed that she would not intentionally, but she became so agitated that there were times when she would do something that she could accidentally hurt somebody. And it took a little bit for them to understand. They eventually came to campus. They came up and met with me and the director of counseling at the same time. And I would say, not uncommon for parents, one parent fully understood what was the risk and the other person didn’t.

Alex explained his take on unhelpful parents as well as suggested that the ongoing nature of mental illness often leads to this less than ideal parental response:
I'll say that my experience has probably been 50-50 in terms of the call to the parent being helpful or that call not being helpful because often for the parents it isn’t a new experience. We’ve had students who have been struggling with mental health issues prior to enrolling at Dillon and oftentimes the parent doesn't have the same perspective as us, right? This is something they have navigated before, the student was highly successful in high school, has been successful to that point at Dillon and scenarios where a student who ingested pills, admitted he was attempting to take his own life, we called the parents and they weren't even planning to come to the college. Their hope was that the student could resume classes and we literally had to really strongly encourage them to get to the campus that day or the next day.

A number of participants seemed to agree with Alex’s assessment that parents who they find not helpful tend to be so because of the toll of dealing with a child with a mental illness over an extended period of time. To this point, Fred noted: “I think it’s real for a lot of families that are tired from the last 15 years of struggling with issues of depression [that] they don’t want to keep handling it . . . they hope that somehow it will go away.”

**Teaching parents how to be involved.** Several participants also discussed the fact that involving parents can lead them to play an educative role with parents about mental health and how to be involved with their distressed student.

For instance, when Elizabeth called the parents of a first-year student who was “really, really mentally ill” and the parents reacted by blaming the student, Elizabeth felt that she should educate them about mental illness. Elizabeth explained:

In that case, they were surprised; they didn’t really want to take it in. They did a lot of initially sort of blaming her: ‘she’s lazy . . . she’s not working hard enough.’ And in that
role, you know, I never pile on when parents are going after their own kid. I’m not going
to be part of that. So, I would say, ‘it may look like that, but in my experience, this is
how mental health happens. It’s not unusual that mental health issues would emerge in
this environment because it’s transitional, because of her age.’ So, there’s a chance to do
some sort of peer-to-peer layperson education stuff that is often helpful.

Fred also offered an example of how he helped a set of parents who were struggling to
communicate with their disturbed student:

I sat with [the student] alone for a while because she was so angry with her parents.
Again, it goes back to family history because there was a sibling who also had similar
issues and she didn’t appreciate how the family had handled that scenario. And, she
didn’t want to be handled like the scenario with the sister. So, these were the memories
that she divulged to me. And then, find a way to invite the parents back into the room to
have that conversation. That happened, and then to have a sense of safety that I can step
myself out while the parents and the student can talk about what are the next steps. Now,
parents know that the student is not going to stay here acting this way, so we’ve got to
figure out a plan. I often say this: parents know their son or daughter much better than I
do. My job sometimes in these scenarios is to help parents understand the parameters but
then allow them to be the parent that they need to be in a situation that can be difficult.

**Culture of expectation.** Another theme that emerged as prevalent throughout all
interviews was that as participants negotiate the disturbed student, that they have a high level of
awareness about the culture of expectation on their respective campus, and particularly with
respect to students and their parents.
**Student expectations.** All participants agreed that students on their respective campuses do not expect parental contact to be made because “they are adults now and get to make their own decisions.” However, many participants offered a more nuanced understanding of this aspect of the experience. Namely, that student expectations are often a byproduct of student culture. For instance, Prufrock noted that Hill students expect that parents will not be involved in what transpires at the college, in general:

I think the culture here is the college will take care of us. We can take risks and the college will take care of us. We can do stupid things, we can do dangerous things, and the college will keep us safe. And they’re not going to tell our parents. I think that’s what students would likely say, more than not here, so sometimes it is quite a surprise and sometimes quite an unpleasant surprise to hear some of us saying, ‘we think we need to involve your parents in this conversation.’

Alex suggested that the culture at Dillon that encourages students to be regarded as fellow “educators” contributes to the belief that they will have some control over the process to involve parents. To this end, Alex said:

I think first and foremost our students have the expectation that they are going to be treated like adults, that they will have some voice in that process, which I think has, of course, really informed the philosophy we have about having the student initiate contact with the parents.

Additionally, Patricia offered that her students’ expectation that parents will “rarely be involved” at Women’s is a manifestation of the larger messaging by the college. To this point, Patricia commented:
Students set an extraordinarily high bar for what they deem success and I think that is part of the reason that parents have been held at arm’s length. Here, it is important for students to feel that they were the person that affected this excellence, this accomplishment, this sense of really being the best that they can be. And, I think that it has always been a tradition at Women’s.

Many participants agreed that student expectations about parental involvement are reflective of the overarching relationship established between their institution and students. For Prufrock, this relationship was defined by the care provided by the college, while for Alex and Patricia this relationship was expressed in terms of students’ role in decisions about their interests.

**Parental expectations.** Participants also overwhelmingly agreed that when a severe mental health issue arises for a student that their population of parents wants to know; and as Mike noted, “they want to know as much as possible right away.” Speaking of the expectations of parents from her institution specifically, Heidibeth remarked:

I think they expect more contact than they get, at least from a college like us. If I was working at [a large public university], I don’t know that I would tell you that parents had that same expectation, but at a small, residential college they expect from us a lot.

Many participants also remarked that there seemed to be a cultural component to not only parents’ expectations for contact but also the amount of care that will be provided by the college. To this end, Prufrock suggested that parental expectations seem to be a byproduct of the “culture of care” that is fostered in the small college environment. Prufrock remarked:

I think across the board, that probably . . . again, that might be unfair to some larger institutions, and I don't want to paint them as callous or uncaring . . . [But,] I think that generally there is a greater expectation [for contact] at this kind of environment because
in part that's what we sell: ‘Come to a small place where everyone will know your name.’

I don't think we try to say: ‘where we will take care of you,’ but I think that's what people hear.

Alex also noted his experience that sometimes parents foster unreasonable expectations associated with the care that will be provided to their child in this environment:

We have even had questions posed [to our counseling center] like ‘can you somehow manage my son or daughter's prescriptions,’ because and literally because they are afraid that that person might misuse their prescription. And no, we can't do that, even if we had enough staff members who could do that, it’s not appropriate. And again, I think it gets to the expectations that parents might have of an institution and perhaps it’s connected to the private liberal arts, how much they are paying in tuition. You know, what paying fifty-thousand dollars a year means in terms of the expectations that you have of our campus.

Several participants suggested that this “culture of care” is moreso tied to the institution. For example, reflecting on the differences between her past institution and Women’s, Patricia noted:

I think because both schools are small private colleges that parents have expectations that they will be in the loop. One of the things we know is the benefit of the small private world is that people know a lot about their students and they step in pretty quickly. So, I think parents have the expectation that they will be involved to some degree. I think the messaging is different about when and how that involvement happens, so at the previous school it was much clearer, it was a clearer statement that we will involve you as partners and that was the language that was almost used. That language is not part of Women’s . . . that you would be a partner here with your student.
Speaking of how her prior institution treated parents more as constituents than partners and its effect on parental expectations, Elizabeth stated:

Well that was where the only two set of parents that I've ever talked to have said . . . well one, 'we're tired of dealing with her, she's your problem.' We also had another kid whose mother was mentally ill and the dad was a faculty member at another institution . . . he was an archaeologist and he wanted to go on a dig so he stopped returning phone calls. So, we had this kid who was in desperate straits, desperate straits. And then expectations about how much the college [should be responsible for] . . . Like contacting me and telling me there was a problem was not enough, [they also told me] you have to fix the problem. There was a real strong vein of that at [my former institution] and when I was [at my former institution] there wasn't a strong belief that we need to talk directly, candidly to parents from the beginning about what they can expect and what they can't expect. It’s fundamentally different here at Peaceful.

**Student peers as partners.** Another theme that was significant for several participants as they experienced working with the disturbed and disturbed/disturbing student on their respective campuses was their acknowledgement of the role that student peers play in the provision of care. For example, Fred told the story of how the information provided by a group of students about their roommate ultimately allowed him to meaningfully approach the disturbed student about her behavior.

One of things that I’ve learned is to listen to peers and what peers are telling you. And, peers want to be protected so you are getting into really tough situations. This scenario was less so because they had lived it enough, they were tired of it. I asked them, ‘do I have your permission to say to X student, here's what I understand has been happening
inside of the house in the last week. Can you describe to me why that is? Why might your roommates tell me this?’ And try to open up the door for that kind of dialogue.

For Alex, the importance of peers for the provision of care emerged as he told the story of a how a student for whom he served as an advisor e-mailed him to alert him that her friend had attempted suicide. This was important because he learned of the incident sooner as a result of the student’s contact:

So, you know, I was mostly just glad that the student was not in danger and glad that the student had actually shown some good judgment and that the student had a friend who was there to provide support and that I had a relationship with that student's friend. Because, again I was actually the class dean for both those students and had interacted with them before and I think that's what led the student to have some comfort in emailing me. So I actually found about it first as the student reached out to me as the class dean not realizing that I was also on call.

For Patricia, student peers have been important for her confidence in this area of her work because she believes that they would provide feedback if she ever made a mistake:

I think the other place [where I gain confidence] is probably from students themselves. So, students don't exactly go out and say, ‘can you believe they called my parents.’ But they do confide in close friends and other people and I’ve never had a situation in which contacting the parents has become what I would call a student-issue. And we all know when students have a situation, students start lobbying for their friends and advocating for their friends, which I think is part of that friendship and I've never had huge pushback from students about, ‘Oh, that was awful that you contacted her parents, it turned out terribly, here's what you did.’ So, I think also a little bit of that feedback from students
sort of indirectly. I've never asked about it. It’s also never led to a situation that students felt that they or their friends had really been harmed by it.

The Decision for Contact

As participants discussed the decision-making process associated with the involvement of parents, they noted several components as critical to their evaluation. Integral to participants’ description in this regard was their acknowledgement that the decision is significant in that it often involves a great deal of deliberation and nuance. In terms of how the decision is actually made, participants identified key criteria in the process, including their assessment of risk, consultation with colleagues, hospitalization, and their perception that on-campus resources have been exhausted. Additionally, participants discussed circumstances that might compel them to reconsider parental contact such as complicated familial relationships and timing.

A big decision. Despite the fact that all participants expressed confidence in their ability to make parental contact decisions, a number of them also described this aspect of their role as being “difficult” and characterized the involvement of parents as a “big decision.” For Prufrock, this sentiment emerged as he described the amount of rumination that goes into this often ambiguous decision:

I can’t not take these things home with me is the problem. You know, I sort of live with these things as they’re happening. So, I think what runs through my head, I think there are two things. One is all about me; the other is all about the student. I think the one about the student is ‘what’s the best thing to do in order to safeguard somebody’s health and safety.’ I think the second one is, ‘am I doing the right thing’ because almost always there are various options, you could do this or you could do that. I second guess myself.
While Heidibeth also found the decision to be challenging, for her the challenge lies less in the decision for contact and more in the implications of an unhelpful parent for students’ well-being:

And occasionally the question of should we involve the parent, should we not involve the parent, and if so at what point and in what way, in and of itself is a kind of a challenging decision to make. But even then, we've had one ongoing situation with a student now where I've really vacillated about, do I call her mother if I see signs that problematic behavior is escalating again? Do I involve her mother? Would that be helpful? And, I've really wrestled with that. But again, that's not really the hardest part about it. The hardest part is watching this situation as this student deteriorates. Like if I thought her mother would be helpful, I probably would have called a while ago. So it’s the situation itself that feels more stressful not the parental contact per se.

For Elizabeth, the decision was especially weighty because of the implications of policy. That is, at Peaceful, more than likely if parents are involved, the student will be going home. To this point, Elizabeth said:

And at the end of the day, it’s a significant responsibility whether a kid stays or goes, and again for us parental notification almost always goes with a kid leaving, you know almost always. That's the biggest decision a college ever makes, does a kid stay or go?

**Risk assessment.** As participants shared their stories of making the parental contact decision and their work with disturbed students in general, two broad areas of consideration emerged as encompassing the decision to make contact with parents: the assessment of a legitimate threat to health or safety, and questions surrounding the student’s ability to continue as a student on campus. Elizabeth captured this paradigm as she discussed how she generally makes decisions about parental contact:
First of all is the bottom-line issue for me, and many like me probably, is student safety. [If] I am calling, the question I’m asking [is] am I calling because of the student’s well-being or safety rather than [because] this student just is an irritation and it would be great for all of us if she weren’t here. The second category, so one is the health and well-being and safety and the other category is the student able to function as a student here? If the student is not going to class, they are MIA in a lot of ways, we don’t know enough to know they’re in trouble or not but we do know that they are not functioning as a student, that is another set of reasons that I would be looking to make a decision about making a call.

These considerations were clear throughout participants’ discussions about their respective decisions to involve parents. For example, when Fred made the decision to contact parents about a student who was not in control and throwing objects at her roommates, he attributed that decision to his belief that the student could injure her roommates, as well as, his suspicion that she was not effectively managing her mental illness. Fred offered:

What [her roommates] described as physical violence and [her] history. So, the counseling center had history with this student in terms of knowing some history about depression, suicide ideation, [and] part of that history was medications. The counseling center felt like if the student was acting this way, then more likely they had taken themselves off their medications.

These considerations also became clear as Patricia explained her reasoning for contacting the parents of a student who she described as having anger management issues, a secondary struggle to a mental health condition. In this case, she too was compelled to contact parents because of the risk of harm and her struggle to function as a student:
Not only was she, I think, a risk to herself and to other people, again not intentionally, but we were concerned about what would happen unintentionally. And also, she wasn't succeeding at all academically. She was jeopardizing her ability to graduate from the institution and to finishing her degree in the way that she really wanted to finish that degree. So, we were seeing that she wasn't moving forward with any of her goals and she was jeopardizing the well-being of others.

Prufrock also honed in on these considerations as he described his decision to call the parents of a student who he described as having a psychotic break and determined to be a potential harm to himself. Prufrock said:

It started off, we were getting some signals from his roommates that something was amiss. He was talking incoherently, he was behaving strangely and when [the counselor] and I intervened, we had a conversation and he was in class and it was clear that conversation was extremely incoherent . . . very paranoid and disconnected. And, at that point at least, I mean, I guess at that point he was a vulnerable adult...somebody who could not take care of himself. So we took him to the hospital and called parents. And, he ended up going home and getting psychiatric treatment for a while, but he was not a threat to others. I think we were concerned about harm that might come to him.

**Other factors.** Participants shared a number of other factors that they find to be salient to their decisions about involving parents. Amongst these compelling factors are: consultation with colleagues, hospitalization, and the determination that on-campus interventions are no longer sufficient for the student’s continued care.

**Consultation with colleagues.** For most participants, consultation with other professionals and specifically their counseling center staff was significant for their parental
involvement decisions. For instance, Prufrock identified the counseling center staff as critical to his decisions about contact because of their professional capacity to assess the imminence of threat:

I think we rely a great deal on the folks in our counseling center. Sometimes the folks in campus safety are involved, but I think by-and-large when it comes to issues of imminent threat to self or others, I tend to rely on the professionals that we have in the counseling center to make that kind of call.

For Patricia, the contribution of counselors has been the perspective they provide on the balancing of safety with development:

I think the counselors, wherever I’ve been, my counseling staff have been really important in thinking about connecting with parents because I think connecting with parents not only involves the student’s well-being but involves the development of the student. So there are times when I think you can involve parents and it will promote a student’s development and there are times when I think you can impede a student's sense of autonomy and that sense of becoming one's own self. So I think their view of kind of the developmental journey of students has been really important for me.

Heidibeth, a trained counselor herself, remarked that it is her own background that has compelled her to use her counseling center staff as a sounding board for these types of student matters:

I may also call them just to consult with the director of counseling even though I have that background but in some ways because I have that background. One of the things I’ve learned is when you're dealing with a situation like this, that it is [a] pretty emotional type of thing and easy to be scared by the possibilities of what's happening, that being able to consult with somebody else that brings a different perspective can be incredibly
helpful. So, there are a lot of times when I will consult with the director of counseling and talk with her about this is what I’m thinking about doing. Does this sound good? Am I missing something? Would you be approaching this some other way?

Fred’s recognition of the importance of the counseling center staff for his management of these types of situations became clear as he explained how he brought the former director of counseling into a more administrative role on his staff:

So, we have a lot of practice between counseling center and dean of students’ staff. A piece of this too is that . . . one of the associate deans here used to be the director of the counseling center, so I rely a lot on [her] to help me through a lot of these tough scenarios. She has all the training, the background, and she supervises the counseling center, so she has a great rapport with the staff there. So, there's a good sense of trust about how to handle these tough scenarios. And we were intentional in putting [her] in this associate dean role because of the nature of the questions you are asking here, the nature of the situations, the complexity of it all and the volume of it.

**Hospitalization.** For some participants, a notable aspect of the decision to contact parents was whether or not the student was hospitalized. For example, Fred remarked that the hospitalization of a student is a non-negotiable when making decisions about contact, even if there is reason to believe that the student’s relationship with the parent is strained. To this point, Fred offered:

I will work with the student or someone will work with the student to acknowledge the negative relationship there but find a way to figure out who is it that we could call, is it mom or dad? You know, or is it maybe a grandma lives in the house and they have a trusting relationship with grandma, and grandma can help us understand how to grease
the wheels behind the scenes there. But, if someone is hospitalized, parents are being
called. If someone is really, really feeling it could be a threat of harm to self, parents will
know.

During Heidibeth’s interview, she also identified admission to the hospital as a critical factor in
her analysis about contact because it indicates a continued threat to safety:

Now, if you had an 18 year old, first year student who made a serious, intentionally lethal
attempt and particularly one that resulted in them being admitted to a hospital, in that
case, I almost certainly am going to contact the parents. So, the situations where I
wouldn’t, it’s more likely that the student wasn’t admitted. They may have been taken to
the hospital for evaluation and then immediately released.

Exhaustion of resources. A number of participants also shared that compelling for their
contact decision was their determination that institutional resources were no longer appropriate
for the student’s care. To this point, Patricia noted that her decision to contact the parents of a
disturbed student was impacted by the fact that the student’s condition was not improving with
on-campus resources:

I think there were a couple of things. That we had done as much intervention as we could
do on campus, and there was relatively little change that we were seeing from the student.
She would say she would do things and then in a very short period of time she would go
to her old way of behaving.

Elizabeth recounted a similar story about a student who was not only being monitored by the
college’s early alert group but had been working closely with several of her colleagues on
campus. Despite these efforts, the student’s condition was not improving, so Elizabeth made the
decision to contact parents:
So there was a student who showed up as a result of this [early alert] process and she had been attended to by two or three of my colleagues and finally got to the level where if you feel like a kid is particularly unresponsive then I will get involved [to make a determination about parental contact]. So, she came in to meet with me and she was just a mess.

For Fred, this theme emerged as he discussed contacting the parents of a student who was determined to be a harm to others as a result of her violent and erratic behavior. As he recounted the particulars of this incident, he noted that although there were complications surrounding contact, there also comes a point when a college campus is no longer suitable for the disturbed and disturbed/disturbing student. To this end, Fred remarked:

Granted the student wanted to be mad at the parents and me. We understand there could be history there, but you know, we're not a therapeutic community and when someone is acting out and threatening others, and throwing things in the room, and being unstable.

During her interview, Elizabeth also acknowledged the limitations of the resources available on the college campus for disturbed and disturbed/disturbing students:

So, I'm really clear about what a college can and can't do. We can't keep people alive, typically. What we can do is try [to] identify people, try to get them help, and get them where they need to be, and often that's not on campus. We're a college, not a psych unit.

Participants very readily recognized that there are inherent limitations to the college campus for the care of disturbed students and that this reality is often what leads to parental contact under these circumstances, and even when a complicated relationship exists between students and their families.
Mitigating circumstances. Many participants also discussed factors that have led them to reconsider contacting the parents of disturbed and disturbed/disturbing students. Amongst these mitigating factors were complicated familial relationships and timing.

Complicated familial relationships. For a number of participants, the fact that a student may have a strained familial relationship played a notable role in their decision to make contact. For example, Prufrock reflected on a couple of instances at his prior institution when his knowledge of complicated familial relationships led him not to call the disturbed students’ parents because he did not believe that it would be helpful for them:

I can think of one at another institution, and I sort of alluded to it earlier. It was a case of . . . there are actually a couple that I can think of, both of them involving psychological issues that the student had. And in both cases the family dynamics were a contributing factor to the student’s psychological distress. And I was hearing that not only, even not principally, from the student. I was hearing that from folks who were saying he or she was a mess and were playing themselves out in the past five or six years in the family and the family was part of the problem. In [those] two cases it was the family situations that were just difficult and at least in one case somehow as we were working our way through this thing, there was some involvement and I think it was the student who involved her family not us. Because, again, we had come to the conclusion that it would just not be helpful.

Heidibeth remarked that a dysfunctional familial relationship could sway her not to contact parents after a suicide attempt, if the attempt was determined not to be serious:
So, if an attempt was not a particularly serious or lethal attempt, and I had reason to believe that relationship with the parent was strained or problematic or in some way contributing to the student’s psychological distress, I would not contact the parent.

Mike also acknowledged that knowing about a student’s problematic parental relationship could impact his decision about contact. However for him, this information would not impact his decision to make the call. Instead, it might lead him to contact a family member other than the student’s parents.

I would think there could be times . . . if there was a residential student and our faculty resident who lived on the floor, if I was able to get in contact with him and he said, ‘look Mike, Billy's in a strained relationship with his parents right now and I think calling the parents would be less helpful.’ And I would probably need to take that into consideration but oftentimes I don't think we have that background information, but I would say that that might be an example where if I'm in the midst of trying to sort this out and if the counseling center staff members says I've got a release from the student and the student is not in a good space with their parents or that residential life staff member says something's not going right at home, that's when I might pause but then say: well, who else can we call then? You know, is there a sibling? Is there someone else in the area? I think the best work that we can do as student affairs people is to offer layers of support and say ‘who else can we help hold you up during this time because you aren't going through this alone, you know, and our staff on campus we're going to walk with you during this point in time but oftentimes it’s those family and friends outside of here who are going to help you and what can we do to help facilitate that contact?’
Timing. For several participants, timing represented a mitigating factor in their decision to contact parents. This theme emerged in two ways; the first involved participants’ determination that although a student was in distress, that they wanted to allow the student more time to attend to the problem on their own before involving parents, the second related to the fact that, at times, participants did not have knowledge of a critical incident until after the point of danger had passed.

Giving the student enough chances to correct the problem. A number of participants recounted stories about “borderline cases” or times when they perceived enough risk that parents could legitimately have been called, but when they felt that there were more interventions that could be done on campus for the disturbed student. For instance, when recounting an experience with a student who she believed posed a significant risk of emotional harm for her peers, Elizabeth explained her feelings surrounding the decision not to contact parents as follows:

With her . . . because of her personality, I was really irritated that any of us had to spend time talking to her about this, and many of us had spent repeated time talking to her about this. And feeling really sure because I had given her such clear information about what she needed to do to have a great experience at Peaceful and to not do that at the expense of other people, that if we got to the point of either student conduct charges or contacting her parents, that it was entirely defensible because we had gone through a thorough process of giving her enough chances to correct it. So, I was feeling a high level of confidence that this was the right path. It was an incremental path. We really hoped she would get the hang of it. And if she wasn't, we were fully confident that we had given her a reasonable amount of slack and that she was going to do what she was going to do with it.
For Patricia, this theme emerged as she explained her decision not to contact the parents of a student with an eating disorder who she described as having a body weight that was “significant in terms of loss” and behavior that was “incredibly disruptive to the residence hall.” In this instance, Patricia explained her decision not to contact parents because she believed the student was cognizant of the risks associated with her condition and had taken steps to fix the issue on her own. To this end, Patricia explained:

And [the student] knew that she was reaching kind of that precipice and she acknowledged that and said ‘I know I need to change.’ And so she said, ‘can you just work with me for a little bit?’ And since she was willing to take some proactive steps and recognize, I think where she was, that allowed us to allow her to be on campus without contacting parents.

The danger is passed. For several participants, time also emerged as a mitigating factor in terms of when they discovered that a critical incident had occurred. More specifically, several participants noted that by the time they understood that an incident had transpired the danger had already passed and they no longer felt that they could legitimately contact parents due to a health or safety emergency. For example, Heidibeth recounted an incident during which a student expressed thoughts of suicide and was hospitalized, however he was discharged before Heidibeth could gather enough information to make the call to parents. Although she met with the student after the fact, Heidibeth did not feel that she could alert parents to what had transpired because the danger had already passed. Heidibeth explained:

You know, so and by the time I met with him there was no longer a situation of any imminent danger and now I'm in front of a student who is saying, I don't want you to tell my family, I don't want them to know that this happened and it’s one thing if I have
reason to believe that somebody is in imminent danger, unless I have compelling reason not to, I will inform their family. But now the danger is passed and the student is sitting in front of me saying don't tell them. Okay, I’m not going to tell them.

For Alex, this type of scenario has occurred when a student attempted suicide, was taken to the hospital by a friend, and he has found out about the incident once the student is back on campus. Speaking of the challenges surrounding parental contact under such circumstances, Alex remarked:

You know, I think this is what raises the concern around . . . if we don't contact the parent in the moment, that in consulting with our legal counsel, if the moment of danger has passed, so if that person has come back to campus, it’s been a day or two and it may no longer be the case that at least legally we can argue that that person is a danger to themselves or to other people. Which is why we are so interested and needing to know as something is happening and making a decision in that moment about whether or not to contact a parent because, again, at least in my experience in consulting with legal counsel on our campus the time factor can change that decision as to whether or not the person presents a danger.

**Summary**

In this chapter, I provided a description of the experience of senior student affairs administrators as they work with disturbed and disturbed/disturbing students and make decisions about parental involvement on their behalf. This description involved three broad categories of themes, including: beliefs about involvement, experiencing the disturbed student, and the decision for contact. Participants’ beliefs about parental involvement illustrated an interest in student autonomy, the view that parents can be impactful for distressed students, and revealed
that these understandings have been informed by participants’ time in the field and encounters with parents and colleagues. Participants’ experience of the disturbed and disturbed/disturbing student is one that involves emotion, at times working with parents who are unhelpful, the navigation of expectations that are informed by culture, working closely with students who bear witness to troubling behaviors of their peers. Finally, the decision-making process associated with involving parents was experienced by some participants as significant and by most as distinct in that it involves a number of considerations such as the assessment of risk, consultation, hospitalization, and an understanding that the college campus is limited in the care that it can provide disturbed and disturbed/disturbing students. Additionally, complicated familial relationships and timing emerged as factors that might mitigate participants’ assessment that contact is appropriate. In the following chapter, the significance of these findings and their implications for practice and future research are discussed.
CHAPTER V. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The objective of this study was to understand how senior student affairs administrators experience the decision to involve parents when working with students perceived to be a threat to self and/or others. In this chapter, a summary of the findings will be presented and then discussed through the lens of relevant literature. Additionally, implications of the findings for practice and future research will be considered. The chapter will conclude with an overview of the limitations of the study.

Summary of Findings

Seven senior student affairs administrators from small private liberal arts colleges/universities participated in this study. Data collection included two semi-structured interviews that were audio recorded and transcribed. Following transcription, I coded the data in three separate stages. First, I reviewed each transcript and wrote a statement about what each interview contributed to my understanding of the phenomenon. Second, I examined each transcript for revealing phrases about the experience. Third, I studied each interview line-by-line and determined what each section seemed to suggest about the phenomenon of interest. Through this process, an extensive list of themes emerged which I discussed with my peer reviewer. More specifically, my peer reviewer and I examined my interpretations, considered how these themes answered the research questions, and then discussed how these themes might fit into categories. Three broad categories of themes emerged through this process: beliefs about involvement, experiencing the disturbed and disturbed/disturbing student, and the decision for contact. A summary of the three categories of themes is provided in the next section.
Beliefs about Involvement

As explained in the previous chapter, participants discussed having clear positions on parental involvement. More specifically, across the board, they expressed the belief that, whenever possible, students should have the opportunity to attend to their own problems before involving parents. For many participants, this idea was framed as an important developmental task during which students are able to gain a better sense of self and develop greater resiliency. Also provocative for a couple of participants in this regard was their commitment to student privacy law, although the idea that an imminent threat would always take precedence over a commitment to law was the more widely held position. Connected to the idea that safety trumps privacy was the belief that the law allows administrators to act on their professional judgment during critical incidents without consequences. Finally, all participants overwhelmingly agreed that parents are often great partners during these types of incidents. For many, this partnership was identified as critical for decision-making because of the context that parents are able to provide with respect to both health history and familial dynamics.

Participants also spoke about how their views on parental involvement have changed over the course of their careers. They attributed these changes to a number of factors such as increased professional experience, the influence of mentors and colleagues, and having to make sense of student tragedy. For participants, increased professional experience led to the view that parents are more often helpful than problematic, and with this realization also came increased comfort with contacting parents about these matters. Participants who credited mentors and colleagues with impacting their view of parental involvement noted learning about when and how to involve parents, as well as how to define an emergency. Participants also discussed how reflecting on past student tragedies has compelled them to reconsider parental involvement and
to consider it earlier. Finally, several participants acknowledged that their own college experience played a role in how they think about involving parents and their belief that student autonomy is important. However, these participants also noted having come to recognize that today’s students face different challenges and therefore they must look to parents as partners.

**Experiencing the Disturbed and Disturbed/Disturbing Student**

Participants described the experience of working with disturbed and disturbed/disturbing students as being emotional, involving a great deal of work with parents, being driven by culture, and involving student peers. For many participants their experience with disturbed and disturbed/disturbing students evoked concerns about harm coming to the student. However, most participants also noted feeling a sense of confidence in their ability to make parental contact decisions, a sentiment they attributed to the frequency with which they dealt with such matters, their ability to work with parents, and the opportunity to consult with colleagues. Although most participants pointed to their work with parents as critical to the care that they provide to disturbed and disturbed/disturbing students, encountering unhelpful parents was also a notable aspect of this phenomenon for them. According to participants, unhelpful parents are often dismissive of their concerns and of the severity of the student’s condition. However, participants also offered that, in many cases, parents have been dealing with these conditions for some time and they are worn out. A related theme was the need to educate parents who participants deemed to be unhelpful because of their lack of knowledge about mental illness. Furthermore, parents sometimes had a strained relationship with their student due to years of struggle with the same issues and this hampered their ability to be helpful.

Participants also described their experience with these students, from the perspective of environmental expectations. More specifically, participants widely reported that students do not
expect that parents will be contacted, while parents almost always want to know what is happening with their student and as expeditiously as possible. Another cultural component to this theme was the idea that parents often have unrealistic expectations about what the college will or is able to do for their student. Participants attributed this theme both to the cultural environment of the small private liberal arts college and to the culture of the institution itself. Finally, several participants suggested that student peers play an integral role in their work with disturbed and disturbed/disturbing students, particularly in so far as providing information about the student’s condition.

The Decision for Contact

Although participants widely reported feeling confident as they made the decision to contact parents, many of them also acknowledged that this was an important decision and one that can be difficult to make. This was particularly true when participants felt that contact would likely lead to the student’s separation from the institution. The actual decision to contact parents involved a number of different criteria, the most fundamental of which was the assessment of imminent risk and the determination that the student could not continue functioning at the institution. Several other criteria also emerged as critical to the decision-making process. Amongst these criteria was consultation with colleagues, most notably campus mental health professionals, who provided important assessment. Hospitalization was also highlighted as an important component of the decision as this factor may lead participants to contact parent even when administrators have knowledge of complicated familial dynamics. Finally, participants’ determination that institutional resources have been exhausted was identified as a compelling factor for contact as most participants recognized that their institutions were limited in the care they could provide to disturbed and disturbed/disturbing students.
As participants discussed their decision making processes, factors that could mitigate their feeling that parents should be contacted also emerged. Amongst these factors was their knowledge that the familial relationship contributed to the student’s distress as well as the notion of timing. The timing theme emerged from participant interviews in two different ways. The first was participants’ perception that students should have more time to address the issue without parental involvement because they had not yet exhausted on-campus resources and/or were cognizant of the risks of their condition. The second aspect of this theme was the idea that by the time participants received information about a critical incident, the danger had already passed and participants did not feel that they could lawfully make contact under the auspices of the health and safety emergency exception of FERPA.

**Discussion**

This section begins with a brief discussion of some of the essential elements that emerged through participants’ interviews. Next, the most significant findings are discussed with respect to how senior student affairs administrators in the small private liberal arts college described their experiences with disturbed and disturbed/disturbing students. Also highlighted are the triggers that participants identified as leading to the decision to involve parents in their students’ care and the mitigating factors that could dissuade them.

As I interviewed participants about their experiences with disturbed and disturbed/disturbing students and the question of parental involvement, some element emerged as important to the experience and the decision process. This work involves a great deal of complexity, which was revealed when participants were asked to deconstruct specific incidents and describe the parental notification policies and practices that they utilized during these human crises. More specifically, these descriptions suggested that these decisions have a situational
component that makes it extremely difficult to have a concrete policy that is followed in exactly the same way each time an incident occurs. Adding to this complexity, many participants acknowledged an intuitive aspect to their decision-making. That is, when they discussed the confidence with which they approached these matters, they also talked about trusting their gut in this decision. The instinctual approach to the process along with the broad policies and practices that generally guided participants’ decisions ultimately seemed to afford these professionals with the room to make decisions that were in the best interest of individual students.

The notion that SSAOs approached these situations from the standpoint of care was also highly prevalent throughout their interviews. This impression was confirmed not only by their emotional affect as they discussed the critical incidents which had occurred on their campuses, but the fact that liability concerns and the interests of their respective institutions were far less provocative for their decision-making processes than was their desire to provide the best care possible for the student. To this end, parental involvement was viewed as a way to augment the care provided when a student was in crisis.

These aspects provide important insight into the non-tangibles associated with senior administrators’ experience with disturbed and disturbed/disturbing students and the decision to call students’ parents during critical incidents. Namely, they suggest that this decision not only involves the evaluation of an incident for particular criteria, but is also influenced by the experience of the administrator making the decision.

**Parental Involvement**

As previously discussed, a unique component of the contemporary college experience is the level of parental involvement that often infiltrates it (Carney-Hall, 2008; Howe & Strauss, 2003). As a result of this trend, researchers (Carney-Hall, 2008; Cullaty, 2011; Taub, 2006)
continue to examine the implications of parental involvement for student development, and particularly as it relates to cultivating autonomy or “becoming one’s own person and taking increasing responsibility for self-support” (Chickering & Reisser, 1993, p. 115). This is the case because the development of autonomy is a critical task for emerging adults and consequently an important college outcome. Moreover, without the opportunity to take responsibility for their own lives while at college, questions remain about how successful an individual will be with more complex tasks after college. The notion of how to balance an environment of challenge with healthy support was a provocative theme throughout this study.

**Balancing developmental challenge with involvement.** In one notable study, Cullaty (2011) interviewed a group of traditional-age undergraduates who reported varying levels of parental involvement. Amongst the study’s results was the idea that “supportive involvement played an important role in the autonomy development process,” while parental intrusion “appears to hinder students’ feelings of autonomy” (Cullaty, 2011, p. 435). In the scope of Cullaty’s study, supportive involvement was defined as providing support to students as they cope with challenge, while intrusion related to parents’ attempts to intervene when they did not agree with their student’s decisions.

Although Cullaty’s (2011) study did not explicitly address parental involvement as it relates to mental health, instead focusing more generally on “academic, career, and personal matters,” (p. 429) the current study offers a similar conclusion about the need to balance developmental challenge with involvement. More specifically, for participants in this study, the protection of student autonomy was a significant matter of concern, despite the fact that parental involvement was widely regarded as helpful when attending to disturbed and disturbed/disturbing students. Participants generally attributed this belief to the idea that there is
developmental benefit to being given the opportunity to attend to one’s own issues and to participate in their remediation when parents are involved. While it is unsurprising that student autonomy was a point of concern given the nature of involvement on college campuses in general, the fact that participants were willing to forego contacting parents about mental health conditions in order to give students more time to address them was notable. This is so because the alternative (i.e., making contact) would certainly have been justified and less taxing on institutional resources. Additionally, it would have been understandable because of the population of students with whom they work, that is, traditional age college students living on a residential college campus. This finding suggests that practitioners not only have a high regard for developmental processes but seek to “tease out normal developmental issues that college students experience from major mental illness” (Dunkle & Presley, 2009, p. 271) in order to encourage student autonomy. The ability to make and appreciate this distinction seemed to be a critical aspect of participants’ decisions to involve parents.

**Not all parental involvement is helpful.** Another finding offered by Cullaty (2011) that is highly relevant to the current study is the idea that not all parental involvement produces positive results. In the current study, when participants described the experience of working with disturbed and disturbed/disturbing students, many recalled encountering unhelpful parents. In fact, the unhelpful parent was such a salient aspect of the phenomenon that participants’ beliefs that a parent might not be helpful could impact their decision to engage in parental contact, when otherwise it would be a likely intervention. In this study, unhelpful parents were described in a number of ways, including being disengaged from the process, downplaying the seriousness of the concern, or lacking the skills to support their struggling student. This finding is important to note to the extent that it is a common experience for professionals working with disturbed and
disturbed/disturbing students. It is also an important consideration because SSAOs must think about the role of parents as they assess incidents and make decisions about appropriate interventions for care.

Another interesting finding related to the idea of the unhelpful parent was participants’ explanations for the unhelpfulness. While Elizabeth and Patricia described interactions with parents who they deemed unhelpful based on their inability to appreciate the seriousness of an incident or mental illness in general, another participant suggested that the unhelpfulness stemmed from being “tired from the last 15 years of struggling with issues.” These explanations have practical implications for the ways in which we approach parents during these types of scenarios. More specifically, this information suggests that determining the reasons for unhelpfulness may allow practitioners to facilitate healthy assistance from family members through the provision of education and support to the parent. This idea will be discussed further in the implications section.

**Culture of Expectation**

Hirt (2006) noted that practitioners in the small private liberal arts setting interact more often with parents than practitioners at almost any other type of institution. Additionally, she remarked that parents in this environment foster a high level of “entitlement” with respect to involvement and the amount of care that will be provided to their students. Similarly, in the current study, participants noted that parents at their colleges not only have the expectation that they will be “kept in the loop” but that their student will be taken care of by the institution. To this end Prufrock offered,
In part it’s what we sell. Come to a small place where everyone will know your name. I don’t think we try to say where we will take care of you, but I think that’s what people hear.

Participants also suggested that these expectations seem to be attached to the monetary investment associated with attending this type of institution, and are susceptible to organizational culture, which plays a significant role in expectation development. The consistency between the literature and the findings of this study are not surprising but rather supportive of what is known about this particular institutional type and organizational culture, in general. More specifically, the students who attend small private liberal arts colleges typically come from “very well-off families and backgrounds” (Hirt, 2006, p. 33) and in choosing to attend these institutions, students and their parents are selecting a particular type experience, one defined by “substantive relationships” (Oblander, 2006, p. 36) between students and faculty and staff, one that promises a “holistic approach” (Hirt, 2006, p. 33) to their development, and one that often leads to expectations that students should not struggle (Hirt 2006). The notion that organizational culture also plays a role in expectation development is also not surprising “because culture is bound to a context” (Kuh & Whitt, 1988, p. 13). Participants’ accounts of their professional experiences also supported this aspect of the literature, as Patricia explained that at her previous institution “it was a clearer statement that we will involve you as parents,” while at Women’s the notion that parents are partners with their student is simply not articulated or culturally consistent given the emphasis on the women at the college effectuating their success independently. This finding has significant implications for the ways in which practitioners attend to parental expectations on the small private liberal arts college campus because while certain expectations might go hand-in-hand with the experience promoted by the institutional type, it seems that institutional leaders
can exert some control over the extent to which the organizational culture contributes to unreasonable expectations. This idea will be elaborated upon further in the implications for practice section of this chapter.

**Learning on the Job**

In their chapter related to how new student affairs professionals experience crisis management on their respective campuses, Zdziarski and Watkins (2009) suggested that professionals learn to manage campus crisis on the job. To this end, they remarked:

Day to day crises make up the majority of the work of student affairs professionals and, in particular, new professionals who are on the front line. Understanding how to manage small incidents prepares a student affairs professional to manage day-to-day crises and the large scale incidents that, sadly, often make national news. (pp. 173-174)

In particular, Zdziarski and Watkins noted that student affairs professionals often address critical incidents, such as mental health issues, that are “narrowly focused on one or more individuals, a living unit, a student organization, or an academic department . . . [and that] tend to be manageable by existing resources on many campuses” (Zdziarski et al., 2007, p. 37). In the current study, the notion of learning how to manage crisis on the job seemed to be a part of a number of themes that emerged, and specifically with respect to how participants view parental involvement, make decisions about contact during critical incidents involving mental health, and how they feel as they make these decisions. For instance, a number of participants discussed that earlier in their careers, they regarded parents as more of a nuisance than helpful partners but that as they gained greater experience with involving parents in these types of situations, they came to believe that parents can be helpful and even bring a higher level of safety to the larger campus.
A number of participants also noted that their views on parental involvement and their understanding of how to communicate with parents about these issues were highly influenced by their work with mentors and colleagues who, in their estimation, had “sound educational judgment.” Participants also attributed their learning in this regard to making sense of high profile cases, specifically noting that they have grown to believe that parental contact decisions need to be “more thoroughly vetted,” and have led to their consideration of parental involvement earlier in the sequence of events during incidents of this nature. Relatedly, some participants also noted the impact of having experienced the death of a disturbed or disturbed/disturbing student on their own campus for their understanding of the lethality of mental illness. Finally, while several participants noted feeling anxious as they grappled with the decision to involve parents because of their sense that harm could come to the student, they also remarked that with experience has come a sense of confidence in their ability to make decisions about contact. Participants seemed to attribute this level of confidence to on-the-job training. More specifically, Alex noted that his confidence comes from his experience as one of the on-call professionals and his work in judicial affairs; Mike remarked that his experience interfacing with parents during campus events led to a greater confidence in initiating contact with parents about their struggling students; and Heidibeth offered that her experience making sense of these incidents with colleagues has played a role in her increased confidence.

There are a number of reasons that crisis management is learned on the job and two of them seem particularly applicable here. First is the idea that, while crisis management teams and emergency protocols are “the standard of care,” the reality is that “practices and cultures across [institutions of higher education] vary greatly” which results in “operational differences” (Eels & Rockland-Miller, 2011, p. 12) and necessitates time on the job to make sense of the nuance on
any given campus. Another explanation is the fact that campus crisis management is a complex but practical skill-set that cannot be replicated in the graduate school classroom but rather must be cultivated through incremental professional experiences (Zdziarski & Watkins, 2009). What seems to be most important about this finding is the idea that these professionals would not be as adept at crisis management had they not gained experience as they moved through the professional ranks and for many of them, been provided opportunities to interact about such matters with mentors and colleagues who took the time to share how they conceptualize critical incidents of this nature and interact with parents about them. This finding has significant implications for the way that professionals in our field are provided with opportunities to become skilled crisis managers and will be discussed further in the section dedicated to implications for practice.

Recognition of Campus Mental Health Services

The growing frequency and severity of mental health issues on the college campus is well-documented in the literature (Dunkle & Presley, 2009; Kadison & DiGeronimo, 2004; Kitzrow, 2003; Wyatt & Oswalt, 2013). Understandably, along with this phenomenon has come an “increase in demand for counseling services” (Kitzrow, 2003, p. 168) and recognition of the expertise offered by campus mental health providers (Watkins, Hunt, & Eisenberg, 2011).

The importance of counseling center staff was also prevalent in the current study wherein participants’ described the input of counselors as critical to the decision-making processes that they employ as they consider parental involvement under these circumstances. More specifically, participants noted that they look to counselors to make determinations about threat, for an alternative perspective that is not only concerned with safety but highly invested in development, and more generally to help them navigate situations that entail a great deal of
complexity. While all participants in this study are well-seasoned professionals, many of whom spent years on the front lines working with students facing crisis, their recognition of mental health professionals’ expertise and desire to bring them into the conversation is important to note. This is the case because their reason for doing so seems to suggest that they have learned quite a bit from past campus tragedies both in the broader higher education landscape and those that have occurred on their own campuses. More specifically, participants’ statements centered on one of the fundamental takeaways from the MIT case; that is, when faced with a situation involving imminent threat, as much as possible, decisions about parental contact should be extensively vetted with professionals across campus in order to make the most informed decision possible. Relatedly, the experience of a student death was also provocative for the ways in which participants handled these situations and specifically the professionals with whom they should consult when faced with a severely mentally ill student. In this way, participants illustrated not only the impact of past tragedy on their experience of mentally ill students on campus but their willingness to apply lessons learned to their own practice which is a critical task in their development as adept crisis managers, and particularly as they prepare themselves to face the next crisis (Zdziarski et al., 2007).

**The Decision for Contact**

One aim of this study was to gain insight into normative practices for making the decision to contact parents when working with disturbed and disturbed/disturbing students. To date, although there is much discussion about the competing philosophies that guide parental contact decisions, such as an orientation towards parental involvement versus student privacy or vice-versa, and general considerations such as: “How old is the student? Is the student a resident or commuter? How serious is the crisis? Is it possible contacting parents could do more harm
than good?” (Dickstein & Christensen, 2008, p. 232), little substantive information exists on how
senior administrators actually go about making such decisions. This gap in literature could likely
be explained by the fact that human crises involve a great deal of complexity and the legal
constructs that guide such decisions (e.g., FERPA) are discretionary by design. An additional
obstacle to a clear body of research in this regard is the fact that while there are common areas of
consideration for this decision, every institution handles this process and crisis management in
general somewhat differently (Baker, 2005; Zdziarski & Watkins, 2009). To attend to this
deficit, the key factors identified by participants in the current study for the decision to contact
parents within the small private liberal arts context are presented and analyzed.

**Key considerations.** As previously mentioned, participants in this study identified a
number of key factors in their decision to contact the parents of disturbed and
disturbed/disturbing students. Unsurprisingly, preeminent amongst these factors was what
several participants described as the “bottom-line issue,” which is the safety of the student and/or
peers and whether the student could conceivably remain on campus as a fully-functioning
student.

Consultation with counseling center staff was also a critical factor for contact as these
practitioners are recognized as having the skill set to assess risk and provide important feedback
about students’ care plans. However, interestingly, several participants were very explicit about
that fact that they regard counselors’ feedback as just one amongst many pieces of the puzzle.
Fred’s explanation of this position was particularly interesting as he paralleled the feedback that
he receives from counselors to that which he receives from legal counsel; that is, specialized
knowledge that certainly informs but does not make his decision in this regard. This view of
consultation is likely indicative of the fact that despite the importance of consultation, senior
student affairs officers are very clear about the fact that, ultimately, outcomes of parental contact decisions are their responsibility, for better or for worse.

Hospitalization also proved to be a compelling factor for contact for many participants as they noted that having been admitted almost always leads to parental contact because it is a clear indication of a legitimate threat to safety. An interesting distinction that Heidibeth made in this regard was that the amount of time the student spends at the hospital can impact her decision for contact. More specifically, Heidibeth noted that she views a student being admitted into the hospital as a different sort of event than a student being assessed and immediately released, the latter of which she viewed as an indication that danger no longer exists. In contrast, Fred offered that if a student is sent to the hospital, a parent will be contacted no matter what. Although Fred did not elaborate extensively on this position, it seems likely that his position is based in the desire to establishing consistent practices because, as Prufrock noted when describing a decision not to contact parents about a student of concern, when it is “normal and natural and . . . customary to make the contact,” you must be prepared to provide reasons for such a decision.

Acknowledging the inherent limitations of the college campus for severely mentally ill students was also a significant finding as participants discussed their decisions about contact. More specifically, participants consistently discussed the fact that there comes a point when campus resources are clearly no longer appropriate for the student because of a lack of improvement in the student’s behavior or condition and/or because there are no interventions left to try. This finding is important to note because while the majority of participants discussed the desire to give students the opportunity to work through their conditions without parental involvement whenever possible, this is a pretty clear acknowledgement that this cannot always happen.
Mitigating circumstances. Participants also discussed a number of factors that could compel them to rethink contact even if they have concerns about the student’s mental health. For instance, all participants remarked that a complicated familial relationship would cause them to pause and reconsider contacting parents if they felt that the relationship could exacerbate the issue, and particularly if there is a history of abuse (Pavela, 2006). Participants also universally agreed that this type of complication would compel them to consider an alternative family member as a point of contact. However, interestingly, Fred and Elizabeth also remarked that even under circumstances of abuse, if the student’s condition is dire enough, that the students’ parents would be contacted regardless. This finding can likely be attributed to the fact that FERPA has explicitly designated parents as a point of contact under these circumstances and parents have come to expect that contact will be made under these conditions. In his discussion about parental notification as it relates to student suicide attempt, Baker (2005) offered another conceivable explanation for such a course of action, by pointing out what he called “a dilemma” to student affairs professionals: “Students contemplating suicide may blame their condition on their parents. Yet it is the parents who often possess the most knowledge about the student’s medical and behavioral history” (p. 513). Another possible explanation for such a decision is the fact that uncertainty remains about whether a court will rule that a special relationship exists between administrators and students that would require a duty of care to protect them from harm (Gray, 2007).

Time represented the second and final mitigating factor and is a theme which appeared in this study in two distinct ways. As previously mentioned the first aspect of this theme refers to the fact that often administrators gain knowledge of critical incidents after the point of danger has passed and as a result they do not feel that they can justifiably involve parents. The second
aspect relates to participants’ assessment that a disturbed or disturbed/disturbing student has not had sufficient time to attend to the issue on his/her own and are reluctant to involve parents. It has been well-established through the current study and the accompanying analysis that, as much as possible, participants were generally concerned with allowing students to have the opportunity to attend to their own affairs, including mental health challenges. The first aspect of this theme, however, is quite significant because it is one of few times that participants explicitly referred to FERPA language as they explained their reasons not to pursue parental contact and more importantly the only time that they articulated feeling as though their decision was significantly constrained by legal expectations. Although several participants noted having experienced the phenomenon of discovering that a critical incident, such as a suicide attempt, had occurred once the student was already stabilized, Alex offered the perspective that likely is the linchpin for this this type of event. That is, despite the fact that imminent danger has passed in the legal sense, a “significant incident” has still occurred that would lead many educators to believe that contact should still be made. This is an important consideration because it reveals a likely point of conflict as administrators mull over the parental contact decision under these circumstances. That is, how do administrators lawfully involve parents as the student makes sense of the emotional ramifications of an incident like a suicide attempt? The implications of this question for practice will be discussed in the next section.

**Implications for Practice**

The purpose of this study was to provide a description of how senior student affairs professionals experience disturbed and disturbed/disturbing students and to make sense of how these professionals ultimately make the decision to involve parents in their care. The findings
were suggestive of a number of practical implications for student affairs professionals as they attend to these students’ conditions. These implications will be discussed here.

**Educating Parents about Involvement**

Participants in this study agreed that parental involvement can be a critical intervention when a student is believed to be a potential harm to self and/or others as a result of a mental health issue. However, they also indicated a high level of awareness about student autonomy and that there are times when parents are not helpful for a variety of reasons. Additionally, the findings of this study suggest that parents’ ability to support their students, whether they are at a developmental crossroads or experiencing a mental health crisis (Dunkle & Presley, 2009), necessitates some education from college and university administrators who can provide important information about parents’ role in the college experience. More specifically, practitioners would be well-served to inform parents of the institutional philosophy for parental involvement, requirements of student privacy law, how to appropriately support their student, and be prepared to educate them on the mental health issues that confront today’s college students. For many institutions, information of this nature is provided during orientation sessions or a summer mailing in order to “set limits on the roles parents play in the lives of their children” (Flanagan, 2006, p. 76). However, providing clear expectations for parental involvement is critical for student success (Daniel et al., 2001). More specifically, as increasing numbers of students arrive on campus with mental health issues both diagnosed and undiagnosed and of increasing severity, more substantive information about the college’s expectations for parental involvement, what it means to be supportive, and the nature of mental illness will become even more critical for both the provision of care and campus safety.
Training Staff

The idea that student affairs professionals learn how to manage critical incidents on the job is not a surprising finding, as this competency area goes “well beyond the basic skills often taught in graduate programs” (Burkard, Cole, Ott, & Stoflett, 2005, p. 298) and “learning from experience is a learning approach that has been developed to advance educational processes in campus crisis management” (Dunkle, 2007, p. 205). Still, this finding has important implications for practice, and specifically with respect to the training and professional development opportunities provided for less experienced professionals in “high student contact positions” (Burkard et al., 2005) who have aspirations for more senior roles.

In the current study, participants discussed that they learned how to work with disturbed and disturbed/disturbing students, as well as how to involve parents largely on the job. In her work on crisis training, Wilson (2007) suggested a number of training activities that crisis management teams may adopt to hone their skills in this area of practice and that would be particularly useful for lower level professionals who are working with difficult students on the front lines every day. One training activity that is highly consistent with the findings of this study is the debriefing incidents, which allows participants to “facilitate an assessment to determine which systems worked well and which did not” (p. 201). Although less tenured professionals are not typically a part of crisis management teams, all “student affairs professionals deal with critical incidents on a daily basis,” (Zdziarski & Watkins, 2009, p. 178) which allows for regular opportunities to debrief incident response with a supervisor or a more senior staff member. This type of exchange would not only allow less seasoned professionals to gain feedback about their decisions and how to distinguish a mental health emergency from a developmental issue, but would allow lower-level professionals to fine-tune their approach to
disturbed and disturbed/disturbing students and their parents, specifically. Wilson further remarked that an institution’s training regimen might involve sending upper-level administrators to pursue professional development opportunities related to crisis management with the expectation that they will share what they have learned with others on campus upon their return. Given the impact of colleagues and mentors on how participants in this study learned to work with disturbed and disturbed/disturbing students and assess the option of contacting parents, this too might be an area worth developing both in the interest of training aspiring senior staff and gauging the extent to which professionals understand “institutional expectations” for their practice (Zdziarski & Watkins, 2009).

Acknowledging Mental Health Services on Campus

Participants in this study consistently placed a high level of importance on consultation with counseling center staff when working with disturbed and disturbed/disturbing students. This finding suggests that administrators recognize the value in a more community-based approach to crisis management, as well as establishing a high level of reliance on counseling professionals’ expertise. Although collaboration is an important precondition for maintaining a safe and healthy campus, the increased reliance on campus mental health professionals makes it highly important for senior administrators to understand and support this class of professionals. More specifically, as senior administrators continue to ask counselors to participate in crisis management decisions, they must understand the constraints of confidentiality law and the ethical standards that can prohibit counselors from sharing mental health information with them (Eels & Rockland-Miller, 2011, p. 11). Also imperative for senior administrators is that they appreciate the importance of confidentiality for the counseling relationship (Eels & Rockland-Miller, 2011; Remley & Herlihy, 2010). Additionally, SSAOs must look for ways to support the
mental health professionals on their campuses. This can be achieved by recognizing the need for continued training for counselors in order “to increase their competency for handling these more complex cases,” preparing for the possibility that increased demand for services will require the allocation of increasing resources (Watkins et al., 2011, p. 332), and encouraging a culture of shared responsibility for this issue across campus (Kitzrow, 2003). Encouraging a culture of shared responsibility can be achieved in a number of ways, including supporting the counseling center staff in “an active outreach campaign to educate administrators, faculty, and staff” about conditions that typically afflict the college student population, how to recognize symptoms of these conditions, and the process for referral (Kitzrow, 2003, p. 175). An important byproduct of such a campaign is also the establishment of “collaborative relationships with the staffs of multiple departments on campus before an incident takes place” which allows for a more comprehensive response to critical incidents and students of concern (Dickstein & Christensen, 208, p. 226).

**Implications for Future Research**

The purpose of this study was to describe how senior student affairs administrators experience the decision to involve parents when working with disturbed and disturbed/disturbing students. While voluminous research exists with respect to parental involvement in general, very little research about involving parents when a student is believed to be a threat to self and/or others has been produced. Much of what the current study offers to this body of research is confirmatory; however, the findings of this study are also suggestive of areas in which future research could contribute to this area of knowledge.

First, investigate how student affairs professionals make decisions about “borderline cases” in particular. One of the more provocative findings that emerged from this study was that
there are certain mitigating factors that come into play that cause administrators to reconsider making contact with parents, when otherwise contact would be a certainty. A number of participants in this study referred to these incidents as “borderline cases,” because the associated parental involvement decisions are murkier propositions. One notable example of this was when participants recounted discovering that a critical incident had occurred after the danger had already passed. This finding is important to consider not only because a number of participants articulated that this information would be valuable for their practice, but because much of the administrative anxiety surrounding this type of decision relates to the ramifications of non-disclosure.

Second, use survey research to gain a different picture of the phenomenon and acquire more generalizable data about parental involvement decisions about disturbed and disturbed/disturbing students. Denzin and Lincoln (2000) remarked that qualitative research “stress[es] the socially constructed nature of reality” while quantitative research “emphasiz[es] the measurement and analysis of causal relationships between variables” (p. 8). For this study, data were collected through interviews with seven senior student affairs officers from seven small private liberal arts colleges/universities. Although these participants were purposefully sampled based on particular criteria (i.e., title, institution type, years of experience), a more representative picture of the phenomenon might be acquired through survey research through which “numerical descriptions” of the phenomenon would be produced from a larger sample of participants (Fowler, 2009, p. 1). This approach to research would create additional understandings of the scope of the problem.

Third, expand the study to other institution types. In the current study, only administrators from small private liberal arts colleges were invited to participate. Just as
institutional type is known to make a difference in student affairs work and the relationships that professionals have with constituents (Hirt, 2006), so too might their decision-making processes/experiences with respect to parental notification during critical incidents. Future research might consider how senior student affairs officers at institutions with different institutional characteristics including size, control, enrollment, religious affiliation compare to one another in this regard. For example, administrators on very large campuses may not know a particular student in danger and so it may be more difficult to create an accurate picture and assess the situation. In this way, much larger campuses do not sell the same product that small private campuses do. Understanding these differences stands to be very important for our understanding of crisis management on a broader scale.

Fourth, examine how student affairs staff members are trained to attend to human crisis as it relates to mental health. As previously discussed, to some degree, all participants in this study spoke about how they have come to understand and respond to human crises related to mental health issues (e.g., experience, mentorship, interactions with colleagues). As the population of students with mental health issues grows, so does the importance of this skill-set for contemporary student affairs work. For this reason, a solid understanding of how administrators gain this knowledge and competence is an important area for future research. The importance of this information lies in our ability to draw from it for the purposes of best practices.

**Limitations of this Study**

As is the case for all research endeavors, there were limitations which undoubtedly impacted the current study. Most notable amongst these limitations were particular
methodological conditions which may have colored the findings. More specifically, limitations of this study included participant selection, data collection, and feedback from participants.

**Participant Selection**

Participants in the current study were selected based upon certain predetermined criteria (i.e., professional title, institution type, and years of experience) and more specifically through snowball sampling. Still, every effort was made to find participants from a variety of institutions within the broader institutional context of the small private liberal arts college. Despite efforts to pursue a diverse sample of participants, constraints such as distance and availability made it difficult to pursue a truly diverse sample. For example, one subsection of institutions that I hoped to include within the context of the larger institutional type was the pervasively religious institution or one with a prevalent religious tradition with a notable impact on institutional culture. My inability to secure participation from this institutional type represents a limitation in my study, particularly as it relates to my study of how culture may impact parental notification decisions.

**Data Collection**

Another limitation of this study has to do with the manner in which data were collected. Originally, the agreement with participants was that they would participate in one face-to-face interview and a second, follow-up interview via Skype or phone. As a result of inclement weather, distance, and participant availability, only three of the seven initial interviews were conducted in person, while the remaining four interviews were completed via Skype. Although the Human Subject Review Board (HSRB) approved this change because the Skype video function was used, valuable contextual information was likely lost because I could not be on campus, such as the ability to describe my experience of institutional surroundings and take
detailed notes about my observations of participants in their work environments. The extent to which the absence of these accounts impacted the phenomenological description represents a limitation in this study.

**Credibility**

An important consideration for this study’s design was the amount of time that participants, as senior student affairs officers, could reasonably be expected to allocate to the needs of the study. Although participants were incredibly supportive of this research, the nature of their work made it difficult for them to contribute an extensive amount of time to data analysis, beyond the agreed upon interviews. As a result, while participants discussed initial findings with me during their second interviews and were willing to answer follow up questions as they arose, all participants declined the opportunity to review my final analysis and conclusions. This review would have been valuable to my study because participants would have been able to comment on the authenticity of my findings and conclusions. Had this feedback been provided, my findings may have more credibility.

**Conclusion**

Across the board, as participants talked about their decision to contact parents, they spoke about FERPA far less than I expected they would. I believe this was the case because they were generally more concerned about meeting the spirit of the law or the idea that, as adults, students are owed a level of privacy and autonomy within the scope of the student experience. Moreover, this autonomy should not be breached unless there is a significant reason to do so. Participants also seemed to have a very clear understanding of the discretionary power that the law affords them in their practice and that ultimately the revision of the law was meant to allow them to make these murky decisions about student safety with relative ease.
Participants were also very cognizant of the benefits that partnering with parents affords them as they manage disturbed and disturbed/disturbing students. However at the same time, they expressed an awareness of the unique attributes of the contemporary parent-child relationship that can be problematic for student growth. In this way, participants seemed to take on an arbiter role, managing each instance of student crisis by weighing the necessary conditions for student growth with the imperative of student and community safety.

The purpose of this study was to understand how senior student affairs administrators experience parental involvement decisions when working with students perceived to be a threat to self and/or others as a result of a mental health issue. Although participants generally acknowledged that parental involvement decisions of this nature are weighty decisions involving feelings of anxiety, they also expressed a sense of confidence in their ability to make sense of these often complex situations as a result of the experiences they have had along the way. Important components of this experience, contextually-speaking, were parental expectations that participants described as being a consequence of and encouraged by the culture of the environment. With prior experience and institutional culture as the backdrop for these decisions, participants’ descriptions revealed that few of these decisions are straightforward and they require a significant understanding of not only risk management, but also of student development and mental illness. Also present in participants’ descriptions was a human component or the sense that their actions are inspired by genuine care for students. While the time spent assessing students’ behavior is critically important to this decision-making process, equally compelling is the time spent being present with them. Balancing their humanness with the necessity of informed and well-vetted decisions seems to be the ultimate task for professionals in these positions.
REFERENCES


*Jain v. Iowa*, 617 N. W.2d 293 (Iowa 2000).


Nondiscrimination on the Basis of Handicap in Programs or Activities Receiving Federal Financial Assistance, 34 C.F.R. §104.11 (2010).


Dear Professional,

To fulfill the dissertation requirement of the Higher Education Administration doctoral program at Bowling Green State University (BGSU), I am conducting a research study about the experience of senior student affairs administrators considering parental contact when faced with a student believed to pose a threat to self or others. Currently there are no published studies on how student affairs professionals use parental notification under these conditions. [Name of gatekeeper] has recommended you as a senior student affairs professional with the responsibility of making such decisions, and I am requesting your participation in this study. Your participation in this study is voluntary and will help fill this gap in knowledge.

As a participant in this study, your involvement will consist of participation in two recorded interviews lasting approximately one hour each. The first interview will take place in person at your home institution or a location of your choosing. The second interview will take place during data analysis through an online video format (e.g., Skype, Google chat) or via phone. Prior to the second interview, you will be provided a copy of the transcript from your first interview and will be asked to provide corrections and/or feedback. In the second interview, you will be asked to review my interpretations of the data collected during the first interview. The total time expected on your part for your participation in this study will be approximately 4 hours. This includes the two interviews, your review of the transcripts and findings, and any email exchanges.

Your participation is completely voluntary. You are free to withdraw at any time. During any interview, you may decide to skip a question, or discontinue participation at any time without penalty or explanation. Information you provide will remain confidential and your identity will not be revealed. Each participant will create a pseudonym and personal identifiers will be removed from all transcripts. Quotations from the interviews using a pseudonym will be used when reporting the results. A list of pseudonyms and real names will be kept separate in a password-protected computer and will only be accessible by the primary investigator. Each interview will be recorded digitally and transcribed. The audio files and transcription files of the actual interviews will be kept in a password protected computer until the completion of the study at which point these files will be destroyed. All associated hard-copy documents will be kept in a locked filing cabinet. Only the dissertation chair may review redacted transcripts.

The anticipated risks to you are no greater than those normally encountered in daily life. Individual participants may benefit from participation in this study because they will have the opportunity to reflect on their ability to effectively manage acute crises on their campuses.

If you have any questions or comments about this study, you may contact me, Holly M. Asimou, at 419-372-9623 or hasimou@bgsu.edu or Dr. Maureen E. Wilson, my dissertation advisor, at 419-372-7321 or mewilso@bgsu.edu. You may also contact the Chair, Human Subjects Review Board, Bowling Green State University, (419) 372-7716 (hsrb@bgsu.edu), if any problems or concerns arise during the course of the study. Thank you for your time.

If you are willing to participate in this study, please contact me at 419-372-9623. At that point, we can discuss any questions you may have and confirm your availability for the study.

Thank you for your consideration,

Holly M. Asimou, M.S.
Doctoral Candidate, Higher Education Administration
Bowling Green State University
Phone: 419.372.9623
E-mail: hasimou@bgsu.edu
APPENDIX B

Recruitment Email – General Email

Dear Professional,

To fulfill the dissertation requirement of the Higher Education Administration doctoral program at Bowling Green State University (BGSU), I am conducting a research study about the experience of senior student affairs administrators considering parental contact when faced with a student believed to pose a threat to self or others. Currently there are no published studies on how student affairs professionals use parental notification under these conditions. I am contacting you because you currently hold a senior student affairs position at your institution which is typically charged with making such decisions. If parental notification decisions of this type do not fall within your purview, please forward this message to the professional on campus that handles this type of communication.

As a participant in this study, your involvement will consist of participation in two recorded interviews lasting approximately one hour each. The first interview will take place in person at your home institution or a location of your choosing. The second interview will take place during data analysis through an online video format (e.g., Skype, Google chat) or via phone. Prior to the second interview, you will be provided a copy of the transcript from your first interview and will be asked to provide corrections and/or feedback. In the second interview, you will be asked to review my interpretations of the data collected during the first interview. The total time expected on your part for your participation in this study will be approximately 4 hours. This includes the two interviews, your review of the transcripts and findings, and any email exchanges.

Your participation is completely voluntary. You are free to withdraw at any time. During any interview, you may decide to skip a question, or discontinue participation at any time without penalty or explanation. Information you provide will remain confidential and your identity and that of your institution will not be revealed. Each participant will create a pseudonym and personal identifiers will be removed from all transcripts. Quotations from the interviews using a pseudonym will be used when reporting the results. A list of pseudonyms and real names will be kept separate in a password-protected computer and will only be accessible by the primary investigator. Each interview will be recorded digitally and transcribed. The audio files and transcription files of the actual interviews will be kept in a password protected computer until the completion of the study at which point these files will be destroyed. All associated hard-copy documents will be kept in a locked filing cabinet. Only the dissertation chair may review redacted transcripts.

The anticipated risks to you are no greater than those normally encountered in daily life. Individual participants may benefit from participation in this study because they will have the opportunity to reflect on their ability to effectively manage acute crises on their campuses.

If you have any questions or comments about this study, you may contact me, Holly M. Asimou, at 419-372-9623 or hasimou@bgsu.edu or Dr. Maureen E. Wilson, my dissertation advisor, at 419-372-7321 or mewilso@bgsu.edu. You may also contact the Chair, Human Subjects Review Board, Bowling Green State University, (419) 372-7716 (hsrb@bgsu.edu), if any problems or concerns arise during the course of the study. Thank you for your time.

If you are willing to participate in this study, please contact me at 419-372-9623. At that point, we can discuss any questions you may have and confirm your availability for the study.

Thank you for your consideration,

Holly M. Asimou, M.S.
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Phone: 440.935.6092
E-mail: hasimou@bgsu.edu
APPENDIX C

Consent Form

THE EXPERIENCE OF SENIOR STUDENT AFFAIRS ADMINISTRATORS MAKING PARENTAL NOTIFICATION DECISIONS ABOUT STUDENTS BELIEVED TO POSE A THREAT OF HARM TO SELF AND/OR OTHERS

You are invited to participate in a research study on parental notification. As part of my work on a doctorate in Higher Education Administration in the Department of Higher Education and Student Affairs at Bowling Green State University (BGSU), I am conducting research on parental notification decisions about students believed to pose a threat to themselves and/or others.

Purpose of the Study
The purpose of this study is to understand how student affairs administrators make decisions to involve parents when working with students perceived to be a threat to self and/or others. It is expected that a better understanding of how student affairs colleagues approach this decision might lead to greater understanding of typical practices for parental contact during critical incidents of this kind, as well as alleviate some of the apprehension surrounding parental notification as an intervention for health and safety emergencies. This study will specifically focus on the decision-making process associated with contacting parents during an acute mental health crisis.

Procedure
Participants must have at least three years of experience in their current position or as a senior-level practitioner with crisis management responsibilities. As a participant in this study, your involvement will consist of participation in two recorded interviews lasting approximately one hour each. The first interview will take place in person at your home institution or a location of your choosing. The second interview will take place during data analysis through an online video format (e.g., Skype, Google chat) or via phone. Prior to the second interview, you will be provided a copy of the transcript from your first interview and will be asked to provide corrections and/or feedback. In the second interview, you will be asked to review my interpretations of the data collected during the first interview. The total time expected on your part for your participation in this study will be approximately 4 hours. This includes the two interviews, your review of the transcripts and findings, and any email exchanges.

Voluntary Nature of Study
Your participation is completely voluntary. You are free to withdraw at any time. During any interview, you may decide to skip a question, or discontinue participation at any time without penalty or explanation. Deciding to participate or not will not affect any relationship you may have with BGSU.

Confidentiality Protection
Information you provide will remain confidential. Your identity and the name of your institution will not be revealed. Each participant will create a pseudonym and personal identifiers (including the name of your campus) will be removed from all transcripts. Quotations from the interviews using a pseudonym will be used when reporting the results. Your institutional affiliation will be protected in the reporting of the findings with the use of minimal description. A list of pseudonyms and real names (e.g., names of campuses and participants) will be kept separate in a password-protected computer and will only be accessible by the primary investigator. Each interview will be recorded digitally and transcribed. The audio files and transcription files of the actual interviews will be kept in a password protected computer until the completion of the study at which point these files will be destroyed. All associated hard-copy documents will be kept in a locked filing cabinet. Only the dissertation chair may review redacted transcripts.

Risks/Benefits
The anticipated risks to you are no greater than those normally encountered in daily life. Individual participants may benefit from participation in this study because they will have the opportunity to reflect on their ability to effectively manage acute crises on their campuses.
Contact Information
If you have any questions or comments about this study, you may contact me, Holly M. Asimou, at 419-372-9623 or hasimou@bgsu.edu or Dr. Maureen E. Wilson, my dissertation advisor, at 419-372-7321 or mewilso@bgsu.edu. You may also contact the Chair, Human Subjects Review Board, Bowling Green State University, (419) 372-7716 (hsrb@bgsu.edu), if any problems or concerns arise during the course of the study. Thank you for your time.

Signing this consent form indicates that you have read the form and consent to participate in the study. You will be given a copy of the signed consent form for your records.

_________________________________           __________________
Participant Signature         Date

_____________________________________
Participant Name – Print
APPENDIX D

Interview Protocol

1. Please tell me about your professional background.

2. Please tell me about your current role on campus.

3. Do you have a crisis management plan?

4. Does your campus have a formal or informal policy for contacting the parents of students when they are believed to be a threat to self or others?
   - If yes, what is the policy?
   - Who is involved in operationalizing this policy?
   - Did you have a role in creating the policy?
   - If not, how do you handle those cases?
   - Who else is typically involved in these types of cases?

5. Please tell me about a memorable incident that led you to contact parents about a student believed to be a threat to self or others.
   - How did the parents respond?
   - How did the student respond?
   - What factors were most salient as you made the decision to contact the student’s parents?
   - Who was involved in the decision?
   - What factors were most challenging as you made this decision?
   - What were you feeling as you made these decisions?

6. Please tell me about a memorable incident that did not lead to parental contact about a student believed to be a threat to self or others.
   - What factors were most salient as you made the decision not to contact the student’s parents?
   - Who was involved in the decision?
   - What factors were most challenging as you made this decision?
   - What were you feeling as you made these decisions?

7. How have your past experiences with this type of parental contact affected the way you currently view parental notification?
8. Thinking about the continuum of your career, have your views about parental notification changed over time? If yes, why and how?

What role have other professionals played in shaping your views and/or practices of parental notification?

9. What do you think is the role of a college/university when a student exhibits behaviors that could be a harm to self or others?

10. What do you think the role of a parent should be when their college-aged student exhibits behaviors that could be a harm to self or others?

11. What do you think parents expect from the college regarding parental contact?

12. What do you think students expect from the college regarding parental contact?

13. What do you think that faculty and staff expect from the college in the way of parental contact?

14. What do you think that our postsecondary system expects in the way of parental contact?

15. What is it like to be the senior administrator charged with this type of decision?

16. Have you ever worked at an institution other than a small, private liberal arts college? If yes, how would you compare the parental notification experience in both of those settings?

17. How does your experience with parental notification here compare to other institutions where you have worked?

18. When did you graduate from college? How do you think that your experience as a college student has influenced the way that you view parental notification?

19. How have some of the high-profile cases related to college student mental illness/parental contact (e.g., Virginia Tech) affected the way that you view parental contact?

20. Do you feel confident in your ability to make decisions about parental contact when faced with a student who is perceived to be a harm to self or others? If yes, how have you developed this confidence?

21. Do you want to share anything else to help me understand how student affairs administrators make decisions to involve parents when working with students perceived to be a threat to self and/or others?
DATE: December 4, 2012
TO: Holly Asimou
FROM: Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board
PROJECT TITLE: [388829-2] The Experience of Senior Student Affairs Administrators Making Parental Notification Decisions about Disturbed and/or Disturbing Students
SUBMISSION TYPE: Revision
ACTION: APPROVED
APPROVAL DATE: December 4, 2012
EXPIRATION DATE: November 27, 2013
REVIEW TYPE: Expedited Review
REVIEW CATEGORY: Expedited review category # 7

Thank you for your submission of Revision materials for this project. The Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board has APPROVED your submission. This approval is based on an appropriate risk/benefit ratio and a project design wherein the risks have been minimized. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission.

The final approved version of the consent document(s) is available as a published Board Document in the Review Details page. You must use the approved version of the consent document when obtaining consent from participants. Informed consent must continue throughout the project via a dialogue between the researcher and research participant. Federal regulations require that each participant receives a copy of the consent document.

Please note that you are responsible to conduct the study as approved by the HSRB. If you seek to make any changes in your project activities or procedures, those modifications must be approved by this committee prior to initiation. Please use the modification request form for this procedure.

You have been approved to enroll 10 participants. If you wish to enroll additional participants you must seek approval from the HSRB.

All UNANTICIPATED PROBLEMS involving risks to subjects or others and SERIOUS and UNEXPECTED adverse events must be reported promptly to this office. All NON-COMPLIANCE issues or COMPLAINTS regarding this project must also be reported promptly to this office.

This approval expires on November 27, 2013. You will receive a continuing review notice before your project expires. If you wish to continue your work after the expiration date, your documentation for continuing review must be received with sufficient time for review and continued approval before the expiration date.

Good luck with your work. If you have any questions, please contact the Office of Research Compliance at 419-372-7716 or hsr@bgsu.edu. Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence regarding this project.