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## Crisis management focus of teleconference

By *Jeff Samoray, OU Web Writer*

A panel of experts spoke via a teleconference on Nov. 12 on methods university administrators can use to effectively prepare for a wide variety of crises and disasters. The teleconference, sponsored by the **Advising Resource Center, Division of Student Affairs**, Dean of Students Office, **Graham Health and Counseling Center** and Risk Management, was broadcast from the University of Vermont and shown in the Oakland Center Lake Michigan Room.

The panel of experts included Gail Pakalns, Seton Hall University's director of counseling; Anna Satterfield, employee assistance manager at Texas A&M; and Eddie Knowles, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute's vice president for student life.

The experts began the teleconference by making a distinction made between a crisis and a disaster. A crisis is a single incident that affects one individual or a single group on a campus. A disaster is an incident that touches every member of the campus.

All three administrators related their experiences dealing with crises on their respective campuses within the past few years – a fire at a Seton Hall dormitory killed two students; a traditional bonfire held before a football game at Texas A&M collapsed, killing 12 students and injuring 27 others; and a graduate student from Rensselaer drowned while exploring a cave as a member of a student organization.

In developing a crisis plan, the panelists emphasized the importance of delivering a quick, caring response to the university community, of being flexible when solutions to problems aren't readily apparent, and providing support services to faculty and staff as well as students.

Speaking from an administrative viewpoint, Knowles outlined the necessary components a university should incorporate into its crisis plan.

"There should be a clear organizational response – the president of the institution has a role to play by conveying a response to the campus community," Knowles said. "The administration should also define a leadership path, establish a clear communication plan, establish flexible policies and procedures, ensure that there is financial support to manage the crisis, document the crisis to provide lessons for learning, and be able to improvise and be creative when solutions are not apparent."

Discussing more recent, national events, Pakalns addressed the pressures that her office felt after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks.

"We dealt with those individuals who were most directly affected – those who lost family members and friends and those indirectly affected who may have had a friend who suffered a loss," Pakalns said. "Following September 11, there was an increase in business in general. The atmosphere surrounding this event created a need for counseling in much larger numbers. You can never say 'thank you' enough to your staff after dealing with such an event."

Satterfield spoke of her university's efforts to provide support to its faculty and staff members following a crisis. "Faculty and staff need extra support during a crisis because it's difficult to balance a professional role with the grief and loss that they experience," Satterfield said.

"Faculty may need extra support if a student lost during the crisis was in one of their classes. Some signs that could indicate that a faculty member is under extra stress are an angry tone in their voice, coming close to tears, reporting of family problems or teaching by rote. Faculty and staff always have a role during a crisis and support services should always be built into the crisis plan."

Beth DeVerna, tutor coordinator at OU's Academic Skills Center, said she was interested in the teleconference because of her counseling background.

"I wondered how other institutions used their counseling staffs," DeVerna said. "I also noted the importance of improvisation when dealing with a crisis and being flexible enough to do what is right. I think it's also important that staff members are thanked afterwards. We were all shook up by the events on September 11, and it helps to feel appreciated."

For more information on the teleconference, see the program description on the [University of Vermont Continuing Education Web site](#).

**SUMMARY**

A panel of experts spoke via a teleconference carried at OU on methods university administrators can use to effectively prepare for a wide variety of crises and disasters.

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