

NaBITA Position Statement on Pima Community College, Jared Loughner and the Arizona Shootings

The Tyranny of the “Do Mores” -- For Immediate Release -- January 17th, 2011

The National Behavioral Intervention Team Association (NaBITA) (www.nabita.org) is the leading national association for school and college behavioral intervention teams (BITs), with more than 500 active members. On behalf of NaBITA’s members, advisory board and officers, we extend our sympathies and thoughts to the victims, families and survivors of the Arizona shootings.

Last week, former Pima Community College student Jared Loughner committed a violent attack on public officials and private citizens. We now know a litany of strange and threatening behaviors preceded his attack, and led to his suspension from Pima prior to the shootings. Some have offered the notion that being separated from Pima was a “final straw” that drove Loughner to his extreme act. If so, why wasn’t his wrath directed specifically at Pima? Loughner’s disturbed and violent mind drove him to commit the murders, not the actions of Pima. Most students who suffer from mental illness are not violent, but this one was.

Pima is facing the tyranny of the “Do Mores” who come out of the woodwork after acts like these to point fingers and suggest that everyone needed to do more. Commentators have piled on Pima all week. NaBITA’s official position is that Pima was competent, responsible and effective in its interventions. Hindsight always provides a chance to reconsider, but based on what we know so far of what Pima knew and did at the time, its actions were reasonable and appropriate under the circumstances.

The process of “what if’ing” is now on in earnest on every show and in print. What if Pima had reached out to the parents? It did. What if Pima had referred Loughner to its campus counselors? Like most community colleges, Pima does not have a comprehensive mental health service. What if Pima had encouraged Loughner into counseling externally? It did. Should the police have been involved? They were. Pima has a sworn campus police department. And, they determined that his behaviors were erratic, aberrant and potentially threatening. Frankly, so are the behaviors of many college students, given the mental health crisis on college campuses. We can respond with discipline, and that is what Pima did. Pima held Loughner accountable for disrupting campus activities, as it should have. It didn’t just suspend him, it made his reinstatement conditional on clearance from a mental health professional. It gave Loughner more than a gentle push in a life-saving direction, but it was Loughner who opted not to grasp the lifeline that was there for the asking.

Now, the “do mores” say Pima should have referred Loughner to the courts, to the local mental health agencies, or to the local police. Given Arizona’s relatively liberal involuntary assessment laws, it’s possible this action could have drawn Loughner into therapy, treatment or hospitalization. That’s possible, but when Seung-Hui Cho was involuntarily hospitalized prior to his shootings at Virginia Tech, the mental health facilities had him back on campus within 24 hours, and Cho’s threats were arguably more specific and acute than what we know of Loughner’s so far.

The “do mores” always see their preferred solution as a panacea, but it’s just optimistic guesswork. Maybe those additional referrals by Pima would have made a difference to Loughner, but they were available to him and his parents irrespective of Pima’s actions. Loughner was resistant to them, and he would have been resistant to treatment even if mandated. When he was released (and he would have been), perhaps it would have been the involuntary hospitalization that triggered his ultimate loss of control. The “do mores” speculation always prophesies a better outcome, but how would you cure the delusions and reality contact deficits Loughner was exhibiting? That might require long-term treatment and expensive medications. Was Loughner eligible? Was he amenable? Was he capable of making decisions in his own best interests? What if Loughner benefited from the treatment and meds, but then one day went off his meds, as college students

frequently do? What if that triggered his violence? What if his frustrations with the mental health treatment he received caused him to develop a more elaborate plan of attack with more weapons and a larger kill zone? The assumptions that mental health and law enforcement intervention immediately upon Loughner's suspension would have made a difference here are hopeful conjecture at best.

Are you tired of these what if's yet? We are. The *New York Times* ran a story on Friday, January 14th, which contained two quotes worth noting. First, it quoted Virginia Tech's threat assessment expert Dr. Gene Deisinger in an article with the loaded title, "College Policy on Troubled Students Raises Questions." Deisinger, speaking in general terms about the dismissal of a disruptive student, said, "We should never treat that as a panacea that increases our safety." While it is true that dismissal (which is not what Pima did, by the way) is no panacea, this quote leaves the impression that separating a student is not a useful tool. NaBITA believes that suspension is a useful and appropriate tool. It is more useful when coupled with additional modalities, but those whose coping skills are eroding need boundaries from their campus administrators, and clear consequences for failing to adhere to campus expectations. And, Deisinger's comments miss the point that suspension from Pima was effective at protecting that community, because Loughner did not open fire there.

The *Times* then quoted another expert, Deisinger's colleague Marissa Randazzo. If a school expels a threatening student, she said, "you are now adding to the person's losses, even if you're within your legal rights to do so ... At the same time, you're losing your own ability to keep an eye on their behavior or have a positive effect," she said. NaBITA disagrees. Pima's job was to protect its students, employees and facilities first, and Loughner second, if it could. Pima did its job. To suggest that Pima is supposed to be able to protect the rest of society as well places a burden on college campuses that they are not capable of upholding.

To suggest that students like Loughner should not be separated implies that Pima should not have followed its own policies, which call for suspension of repeatedly disruptive students. It implies that it is the job of a college or university to monitor them to ensure that they do not take their own lives or the lives of other members of the college community. Colleges are not in-patient treatment facilities. To retain a student like Loughner places unreasonable burdens on the faculty members who are required to teach him, on his fellow students who cannot pursue their educations free of his outbursts, and strains the resources of the college that could be allocated to the success of many students by centering them on the constant crises of one. That's unfair and untenable for most community colleges, and many four-year colleges. The quotes assume that all colleges and universities have the resources that Virginia Tech can now throw at students in distress, and these approaches are undoubtedly ideal. Yet, no other college or university can bring to bear on these concerns the resources that Virginia Tech now can.

NaBITA represents a diverse constituency of public, private, two-year and four-year institutions, and our responsibility is to help frame responsible national public discourse on the role of schools, colleges and universities in balancing the rights and needs of the individual with the safety of the campus and larger communities. We believe that Pima got that balance right. Sometimes, though, getting it right doesn't prevent the attack. Pointing fingers won't either. Ultimately, Loughner and other violent actors are responsible for their own acts. If Loughner had been fired from McDonald's, no one would be asserting that McDonald's should have prevented its former employee's subsequent violent actions. Loughner was stopped by law enforcement on the morning of the shootings. Should the officer have picked up on the impending violence? What could or should Pima have seen last October that a trained police officer could not detect on the morning of the shootings?

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