Q&A: Director of TAMT discusses concerning behavior and the threat assessment process

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As a graduate student at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Jessie Semmann trained in forensic mental health services and worked in a state prison. Much of her focus was on violence risk assessment and targeted violence in K-12 schools.

"During that time is when I realized that my true passion was really in the space of threat assessment and threat management," says Semmann, who became director of threat assessment and management in August.

"This position is truly a dream career for me. This is what I've always wanted to do and it's very exciting to be in a place that is so excited about threat assessment and threat management, and at a campus that's really hungry to know more about it and how we can help keep our campus safe."

Semmann obtained her doctorate in clinical psychology with a formal emphasis in forensic psychology. After receiving her degree, she worked as an inpatient psychologist at Carl T. Hayden Veterans' Administration Medical Center in Phoenix, and later worked with a police and public safety psychology agency.

In her role at the University, Semmann oversees the Threat Assessment and Management Team, a multidisciplinary group that reviews reports about concerning behaviors, considers approaches to managing concerning behavior, and provides guidance to students, faculty and staff on how to address and prevent violent and disruptive behavior.

In this Q&A, Semmann explains the role TAMT plays and how members of the campus community can help ensure the University is a safe place to work, learn and grow.

What is threat assessment?

Threat assessment teams are somewhat confusingly named because we don't just deal with threats. We are in the business of understanding whether someone has made a threat or if someone poses a threat. At the University, TAMT historically has functioned as more of a crisis response team, and that's what we want to move away from. Police handle crisis response. TAMT is supposed to be engaging in problem-solving in certain types of situations before they become crises.

The work we do is behavioral threat assessment, which is an area that's still very mysterious to many people. Generally speaking, there are two types of violence: affective and targeted. When we're talking about a violent act like a fistfight, where someone has acted impulsively, that is often affective violence. When the violence is planned and intentional, that's called targeted violence. It's often motivated by a grievance. So, threat assessment is all about preventing targeted violence. And the way we do that is by looking at a variety of factors that we know are associated with a likelihood that somebody is on a pathway to violence. We want to identify folks who might be on that pathway and intervene appropriately to get them off of that pathway.

Who is on TAMT?

We are a multidisciplinary team, which is a best practice for behavioral threat assessment. Our team has two full-time TAMT staff members, including myself as a subject matter expert, and a case coordinator who manages day-to-day TAMT activities. Then we also have people from Human Resources, the Dean of Students office and the University of Arizona Police Department. We also have representation from the faculty, Counseling and Psych Services and our Phoenix campus. We meet weekly to discuss cases that have been brought to our attention and we design management plans where appropriate.

What process does TAMT follow?

First, we discuss whether an issue reported to us is a TAMT issue and whether it's something we can help with. If it's not, we loop in relevant partners, such as HR or the Dean of Students office, and connect folks to where they should be reporting their concern. If we determine that something is a TAMT issue, we try to figure out what the apparent grievance is and what the motivation is for the disruptive behaviors that have been reported. From there, we might design a plan for management that we can communicate back to the people or unit that has the concern.

Our goal is safety. So, with everything that we do, our approach is to help the person of concern obtain resources so that they don't see violence as the way to resolve the issue.

What are examples of concerning behaviors that should be reported to TAMT?
If there’s actually an emergency situation and you believe that you or someone else is in imminent danger, you should contact the police as TAMT is not an emergency service.

For situations that are not emergencies, you can submit a report to TAMT. As far as what kinds of things to report, I like to tell people that if it makes the hair on the back of your neck stand up, it’s probably something that should be reported to us. That might be a social media post that made you uncomfortable or freaked out. Or it could be harassing electronic communications or comments that indicate a preoccupation with violence.

There does not have to be a direct threat in order to submit a report to our team.

What happens after a report is received?

It really depends on the specifics of the behavior. So, if a direct threat has been made, like if someone says their co-worker has been threatened but the co-worker doesn’t know about it, TAMT and UAPD will notify that person. Then we will do our assessment. We may have someone talk to the person whose behavior is concerning to get a sense of what’s happening. We may loop in another office at the University depending on the context. Essentially, we loop in people we believe are necessary for the management of the situation.

In other cases, we might reach out to the person who made the report to get more information.

TAMT is not a 24/7 service. We don’t have somebody monitoring the reports that come in every hour of every day. But we will always respond within a certain amount of time. The worst-case scenario is that we tell you there’s not much we can do right now, but at least you’ve reported it so that if another report comes in on that person, we have a record.

What are the privacy considerations involved in TAMT’s work?

We of course have to abide by privacy laws and regulations, and so sometimes that does limit what we’re able to share. However, if it’s a safety matter, the appropriate people will be notified. TAMT also works very closely with UAPD in situations warranting an emergency response.

What is most important for faculty and staff to know about TAMT and how to report concerns?

A core part of our mission is making sure that members of our campus community understand the importance of reporting anything that could be seen as disruptive. We can’t prevent violence if concerning behaviors are not reported. The way to do that is to go to the TAMT website [2] and select the “report a concern” button. The website also has videos that explain TAMT and a form to request a TAMT training presentation. Those presentations are available to members of the campus community and cover topics such as workplace violence prevention, de-escalation skills and education about TAMT’s mission.

Do you have any major initiatives coming up?

One of the goals I set for my first year is to offer training for members of the campus community. We need everyone to have some level of problem-solving and de-escalation skills as well as conflict resolution skills.

I’d also like the training to be specific to a person’s role on campus, whether they are a student, staff member, front-line employee or instructor. So, for example, students should know the basics about TAMT, behavioral threat assessment, what to report, how to report, de-escalation of disruptive behavior, things like that. The deepest training would be for instructors and people in customer-service types of roles – those people in areas that tend to generate more disruptive behavior reports.

In my perfect world, at least part of the training would be in person, with perhaps role-playing scenarios led by somebody from my team. I know most people hate role-playing scenarios. But like a lot of psychologists, I love them.

Visit the Office of Public Safety [3] website to connect to safety training, building emergency plans, mental health and wellness resources and more.

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