

TUTOR SAFETY: AN ESSENTIAL COMPONENT OF NEW TUTOR TRAINING

Sarah Henderson
Mesa Community College
Mesa, Arizona

Most tutor training programs begin with a mandatory workshop or training session for new or prospective tutors, a training which addresses such topics as the role of a tutor and the Do's and Don'ts of conducting tutorials. Another essential topic this initial training should include is the need to tutor safely. Most tutoring sessions are productive and rewarding encounters for both student and tutor, but in any work situation, there is always the possibility not only of medical (or weather or similar) emergencies but also of threats to personal safety. It is not always clear if campus crime rates are increasing or decreasing (Woodhams, 1999). As Nichols (1995) has pointed out, however, "few campuses escape . . . criminal activity, in part due to . . . sweeping economic, social, and political factors that reflect the climate of the times" (p. 1). While incidents of school violence like the one that took place at Columbine High School are rare, tutors and students in college learning centers, unfortunately, are not immune from any possible emergency or threat of violence. Most tutor supervisors would wholeheartedly agree with Garmon (1999) when he says "students, faculty, and staff deserve to participate in a free, non-threatening, learner-centered college" (p. 1). Awareness of proper procedures can help prevent a tragedy.

The first step in planning for tutor safety involves an assessment of the learning center and campus safety policies. Hobson (1997) provides a "Self and Program Assessment Questionnaire" (p. 7) for writing [or learning] centers, which gives a starting point in developing the plan to prevent emergencies or respond appropriately when they do occur. Among the factors to consider, for example, are the physical layout of the center and

institutional policies for dealing with medical emergencies or disruptive behavior on the part of students or staff. It is essential to meet with the chief of campus security, the dean of students, the staff of the student health center and counseling department (if these services are provided on campus), and other key administrators to learn the recommended emergency and evacuation procedures and the codes of conduct and disciplinary policies for the campus. Often, these offices can provide brochures or pamphlets to use in training and to keep on hand in the center.

Since state and federal regulations can govern the appropriate response to emergencies and disruptive behavior (many states, for example, require that threats to self or others be reported immediately to the police or other authorities), it is important to know what formal policies already exist and how the center's policies can be consistent with those of the institution as a whole. Perhaps also the campus security chief can give suggestions on designing the physical layout of the center to prevent crime (including advice about where to put telephones and post emergency numbers) and agree to provide regular surveillance of the center during its hours of operation. Campus security staff and counselors often make excellent guest speakers for additional training workshops on safety and emergency procedures or on strategies (and referral skills) for dealing with students who exhibit emotional problems or disruptive behavior.

Once appropriate policies and procedures for handling emergencies have been developed, it is time to include the discussion of them in tutor training. It is important to strike the right tone in presenting these issues to new tutors. It is essential to emphasize the positive and rewarding nature of most tutoring encounters while increasing tutor awareness that problems may occur and that policies and procedures exist to guide their responses. It is

valuable to stress, without causing undue alarm, that emergencies can happen and to encourage tutors to seek help and notify the appropriate authorities once they suspect a problem situation may occur. Tutors need to feel that they can report a possible problem without fear of negative repercussions. It should always be clear who the appropriate supervisor is during any tutoring shift. Handouts that outline guidelines and appropriate procedures in clear and supportive language can provide a useful written resource for tutors to use and review. A sample handout is included at the end of this chapter.

The discussion of some possible emergency scenarios (including perhaps some which may have actually occurred on the campus) is a useful activity. These scenarios should include both possible medical emergencies (like a student having a heart attack or epileptic seizure during a tutoring session) and possible security issues (like a student verbally abusing a tutor or brandishing a weapon in the center). Tutors could discuss the scenarios or cases in small groups to review procedures and come up with response plans. After a whole group discussion of the small groups' conclusions, taking a few minutes for a walk through of the center showing where telephones are and emergency information posted can help tutors feel confident that they know where to go and what to do if trouble arises. Walking the fire or earthquake evacuation route ahead of time can help prevent confusion or panic in an actual emergency.

Since disruptive or threatening behavior often has some recognizable antecedents, it can be helpful as part of a training session to give examples of the body language, voice tones changes, or other indicators which suggest that a student may be losing control or becoming dangerous to heighten tutor awareness. Conducting role-plays can be a helpful way to teach tutors how to defuse a possible emergency. The role-plays should be as realistic

as possible. Again, the counseling staff is often an excellent source of expertise in helping tutors learn how to handle possible problems with ill, angry, or otherwise emotionally distressed students.

In order not to overwhelm new tutors, however, the tutor trainer needs to consider carefully how much information should be presented and when. For an initial tutor training with student tutors, for example, it may be advisable to address the possibility of emergencies and to concentrate on teaching basic emergency procedures and the importance of prompt reporting of problems. Training in preventing and defusing emergency situations may take place in follow-up workshops, perhaps sessions conducted in cooperation with security or counseling staff members. The needs of the tutors and the center should guide the choices and decisions made regarding training methods. The time available for training may also be a factor. Supervisory personnel should receive even more frequent refresher training in safety procedures. Repeating the basic training with each new group of tutors is essential as is regularly updating any brochures or handouts outlining emergency procedures. Careful research, regular communication among campus departments, preparation, training, and practice can make all the difference in helping students, tutors, staff, and faculty have a safe and rewarding experience in the learning center.

References

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