

## College Students Beyond September 11th

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*On Tuesday morning, September 11, 2001, as news of the attacks on the United States spread on campuses across the nation, college students began responding to this tragedy. Despite the conflicting views of college students and the various responses from each community, educators must be aware of college students' experiences and those reactions they are still experiencing. Thus far, little research has been done exploring the effects of September 11th, yet personal testimonies and sociological studies project the impact that these events will leave on college students.*

December 7, 1941 marked the end of innocence for the United States' "Greatest Generation" (Roosevelt, 1941). For another generation, November 22, 1963 (the day of President Kennedy's assassination) holds similar significance (Zinner & Williams, 1999). Unfortunately today's college students have joined the previous generations and now have a date of their own to hold in infamy: September 11, 2001. As the world continues to come to grips with this tragedy, college students are experiencing a unique process of grieving and recovery, learning to live in the aftermath of the violent attacks made on the U.S. As the reality of this disaster sinks in, the developmental level of students impacts the ways in which they are coping with this tragedy. Prior to September 11th, today's college students, like many American citizens had not experienced a situation crisis for decades. Karl Slaikeu (1990) states that a situational life crisis is one that has a sudden onset, contains a certain amount of surprise, is of emergency quality, maintains potential impact on entire communities, and includes danger. Because of their violent, calculated nature, studies have shown that crises resulting from negligence or intended harm often cause more long-term psychological damages than natural disasters (Slaikeu, 1990).

In addition, terrorist or war-like emergencies tend to be more psychologically damaging because of the inherent threat to one's national identity and way of life (Slaikeu, 1990). Incidents involving mass trauma and death are likely to lead to prolonged post-traumatic stress conditions (Sitterle, 1999). Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), a grief reaction, takes on different forms in each individual and is impacted by a multitude of factors. September 11th encompassed many of these factors, such as calculated intent to harm, a threat to a nation's way of life, and the continued exposure to this tragedy in

the media in the months following. Thus, these factors are likely to contribute to the student response to the events of September 11th.

### **Contributors and Responses to the Impact of September 11th**

Based on the distinct experiences of the college lifestyle, college students have unique needs following the attacks of September 11th. Some responses to the impacts of disasters are emotional numbing, shock, disbelief, flashbacks, intrusive thoughts, sadness, loss of concentration, fears of going crazy, survivor guilt, loss of security and trust, and minimization of the catastrophic incident (Wainrib & Block, 1998). Some consequences for these reactions are anger, irritability, increased substance abuse, social withdrawal, and sleep disturbance (1998). While these reactions are normal responses to tragedy, they must be continually observed to ensure students are recovering in a healthy manner.

In addition to the aforementioned factors that impact crisis response, Dunkel-Schetter (1990) offers a few stress factors that are specific to college students. First, college students inherently wrestle with pre-existing stressors as a result of concerns of academics, personal and social lives, finances, sexuality, and concerns at home (1990). In addition to the physical ramifications such stress levels create, pre-existing stressors also put students at great risk for vulnerability when faced with crises (Wainrib & Bloch, 1998).

As a result of their typically high stress levels and undeveloped coping skills, college students often deal with stressful situations by adopting self-destructive behaviors. Research shows that college students often cope with stress by abusing drugs and alcohol (Brown, 1990), acting out in violence (i.e. dating violence, hate crimes, physical assault) (Sorenson et al., 1990), and in drastic situations, suicide (Pruett, 1990).

For most individuals, the events of September 11th were a complete shock, and the disbelief continued for weeks, and for some it continues today. Research on past acts of terrorism suggest that students are struggling to cope with these events due to a lack of warning and because of the ongoing threats of terrorism following September 11th (Wainrib & Bloch, 1998). Students' physical and emotional proximity to the events of September 11th may demonstrate differing impacts (Wainrib & Bloch, 1998). Those students who live near or have friends and family in close proximity of Pennsylvania,

Washington, D.C., and New York City may naturally feel more vulnerable. Wainrib and Bloch (1998) cited another predictor of crisis response: the status of the family. Stress is intensified when a student is separated from his or her family, fears for the safety of his or her family, or experiences panic trying to locate them. The college experience celebrates the opportunity for students to begin separating from their parents. However, following September 11th, separation anxiety, especially for those students with family near the areas of attack, holds a lasting impact on the students' ability to cope with the tragedy.

### **Developmental Effect on Crisis Response**

Developmentally, college students are in a state of great transition, experiencing various conflicts and life crises, which impact their coping skills (Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998). According to Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito (1998) Chickering's theory of student development includes seven vectors, or topical areas, that a college student will experience may help in understanding how students cope with the events of September 11th.

A student's first stage of development according to Chickering is developing competence, which is characterized by a student who is working on physical, emotional, and interpersonal skills (Evans et al., 1998). College students generally have less advanced coping skills, which develop as a result of life experiences (Brown, 1990). As a result, they may resort to self-destructive behaviors, such as substance abuse and self-abuse, to deal with the crisis of September 11th. Also, students may begin to question their competence when they find they cannot cope with the loss of security they have experienced (Roy, 1986).

As students begin to recognize and accept their emotions, they enter stage two, managing emotions, during which they learn to express and control their emotions (Evans et al., 1998). In an unprecedented tragedy such as September 11th, many students are experiencing new and more extreme emotions than ever before. Some students find their old coping mechanisms do not work anymore and feel they are out of control from the intensity of their emotions. Following this stage, students move into the next stage, *moving through autonomy toward interdependence*. In this stage they begin understanding their emotions as individual experiences, they begin to function more

independently, and they begin to gain an "awareness of their interconnectedness with others" (Evans et al., 1998, p. 39). While discovering this new sense of autonomy, a student's grieving process becomes more complicated when he or she loses a sense of security such as separated from the protection of home and family on September 11th. Next, students move towards *developing mature interpersonal relationships* in which they are developing the ability to have mature, close relationships and an appreciation and tolerance for difference (Evans et al., 1998). After September 11th, students in this stage may withdraw emotionally from new relationships in fear of future loss. Also, having developed a greater sense of selflessness, students can better empathize with the experiences of others, whether or not they themselves were directly impacted by the attacks (Roy, 1986). The *establishing identity* stage builds from all the previous stages in Chickering's theory. Developing an identity encompasses a renewed comfort with oneself, self-acceptance, and self-esteem (Evans, et al., 1998). Post-September 11th, it seems natural that students have begun to fear threats that question the stability of their lifestyle and have begun to evaluate the ethics of their culture's response to the attacks. In later stages of their development, students are settling into career paths, solidifying their interests, and making strong life commitments as they enter the stage of *developing purpose* (Evans et al., 1998). As a result of the events of September 11th, students may begin to doubt the commitments they have made and abandon their purpose for one that gives back to society (Roy, 1986). Following September 11th, the media contributed to the idolization of the heroic service professions and, as a result, students may reevaluate their contributions to the greater society (Roy). Chickering's final vector, *developing integrity*, culminates his theory by describing a student who creates a balance of one's own interests with the interests of others, develops his or her own core values while respecting the beliefs of others, and begins to balance his or her own self interests with his or her view of social responsibility (Evans, et al., 1998). As a result of September 11th, students may begin to struggle as they develop their personal value system apart from their friends and families. Students may also start to question their beliefs about terrorism and a society at war versus one at peace, and search for how that fits into their political, religious, and personal beliefs. While it may still be too early to observe the effects of September 11th on student development according to

Chickering's theory, tragedies of the past suggest experiences college students will likely experience.

### **Lessons from Oklahoma City**

As student affairs professionals, it is important to recognize where students are developmentally in order to best meet their needs in coping with tragedy. To begin to prescribe a method for working with college students beyond September 11th, it may be useful to look at a past national tragedy, the national response, and the methods of healing. In 1995, Oklahoma City witnessed one of the worst terrorist attacks on the U.S. with the bombing of a nine-story government building, the death of 168 citizens, and the injuring of another 700 (Sitterle & Gurwitch, 1999). The experiences of those affected by the bombing in Oklahoma City were different from those of September 11th. However, lessons can be learned from the coping and healing of the Oklahoma City crisis and can help understand how to best help students.

People affected in the Oklahoma City attacks reported severe and long-term emotional impacts as a result of ongoing exposure to the crisis (i.e. smells, sights, sounds) and a great threat to the safety of oneself or one's family (Sitterle & Gurwitch, 1999). Further research may uncover the speculation that those students who personally witnessed the attacks on September 11th and those who had friends and loved ones involved in the events may undergo a lengthier recovery period.

Research from Oklahoma City referred to many of the crisis response factors discussed earlier in this article. The length of exposure to the tragedy prolonged the psychological effects of those in crisis (Sitterle & Gurwitch, 1999). In Oklahoma City, the recovery efforts continued for two weeks. After the attacks of September 11th, it took almost a full year to complete the clean up in Pennsylvania, Washington, D.C., and New York City. Thus, it is important for helping professionals to consider the potentially damaging implications of the extensive coverage the events received from the media.

The final lesson learned from Oklahoma City is the importance of utilizing the first year anniversary as an opportunity for remembering. For the community of Oklahoma City, it was a day of erecting memorials, revisiting emotions of loss and helplessness, and at the same time, taking a very crucial step in the healing process (Sitterle & Gurwitch, 1999). The strength of emotions throughout the first anniversary of September 11th and

the memories brought back served as a reminder of how difficult it was to forget the crisis that occurred a year ago. The value of memorial events are immeasurable in allowing one to mourn a crisis, though the healing process will be different for every individual, in every individual crisis. Later, this article will discuss several events organized to commemorate the first anniversary of September 11th. Many of these events, typically coordinated by professionals in student affairs, offer insight as to how to meet the needs of students in crisis.

### **The Start of Research**

Though little in-depth research has been done in the past year regarding the actual impact of the events of September 11, 2001 on college students, articles and testimonials have begun to surface. Personal experiences cannot predict a generation's response, but they can project a glimpse into the future for what the long-term implications of September 11th will be on college students.

*The Chronicle of Higher Education* devoted an issue on September 6, 2002 to the impact of September 11th on individuals and campus communities. The Chronicle showed how the impact of September 11th varied according to the students' experiences. Student reactions varied from no direct response to a desire or decision to leave school. A counselor from Manhattan Community College reported that as a result of September 11th, over 2,500 students withdrew from the school during the 2001-2002 academic year (Farrell, 2002). The counselor relayed that her students and colleagues continue to speak of the events of September 11th as a method of coping and processing their emotions about the events (2002). This extreme example illustrates the profound impact the events of September 11th had on those in close proximity to the attacks and the importance of having outlets for students to process their emotions. Another experience students have undergone involves the conflict of supporting or challenging the U.S. response to the terrorist attacks (Lowery, 2002). A student columnist from Minnesota experienced this when he wrote an article criticizing the U.S. policy on terrorism. In response, the writer received many heated replies condemning him for not supporting the U.S. (Lowery). As discussed earlier, college students are working on developing their own views and may not yet be able to understand how to handle conflicts surrounding issues about which they feel passionately.

Another serious issue affecting some students since September 11th is the increased hostility and prejudice experienced by international students from their host institutions (Morgan, 2002). The scrutiny by which international students are now being monitored creates an unwelcoming environment, and students report fearing for their safety. Some international students left the U.S. immediately after September 11th for their own protection (2002). Others remain in the U.S. but report instances of bigotry and hatred and often consider leaving (Del Castillo, 2002).

International students may begin feeling even more unwelcome when the United States Immigration and Naturalization Service starts their tracking system of all international students and faculty (Arnone, 2002). In a few short months, in over 74,000 institutions nationwide, the Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS) plans to initiate its program to track international students and faculty who are accepted into U.S. institutions. The plan intends to monitor international students and faculty as they arrive and leave the U.S. and what they do while they are here (2002). Instituting the SEVIS program promises both financial and time intensive challenges for institutions. It is important that student affairs professionals realize that American students are not alone in their struggles surrounding September 11th. Students of all nationalities felt the impact of the violent attacks of September 11th and continue to feel its reverberations (2002).

Many college students are feeling the painful effects of September 11th. At the same time, there are students across the country using this tragedy as an opportunity to commemorate those lost, and to help others heal. At the University of California, Santa Cruz, a dance company performed *Ragesties*, several numbers inspired by poems written about September 11th (Tully, 2002). This performance allowed those involved, as well as the audience members, to join together in an artistic expression of emotions (2002).

The University of Delaware (UD) art gallery organized the *Blue Sky Project*, along with university museums nationwide, for the one-year anniversary of September 11th (Thomas, 2002). UD distributed blue postcards on which students were invited to share their thoughts and emotions. The postcards will be displayed on September 11, 2003. The Blue Sky Project was inspired by many who noticed the remarkably blue sky on

September 11, 2001. Also at UD, there were performances of the play, *Ethan's People* (2002), a one-act play by a Delaware playwright. The university connected this play to the anniversary of September 11th because the play concerns the realities of tragedy and loss (2002). While many students are struggling with strong emotions surrounding September 11th, fortunately, they are also finding avenues to express their emotions and support one another.

### **Conclusion**

In researching the college student response to September 11th, it is clear how much research still needs to be done in order to best meet the needs of today's college students. Having just witnessed history in the making, there has been little research conducted thus far on the impact of September 11, 2001 on college students. The projections of student response to September 11th are based solely on personal testimonies, historical lessons learned, adolescent crisis response, and the developmental theories of college students. It is too early to predict the impact the tragedy will have on today's college students, but additional time and research is needed to understand the effects of September 11th on college students as well as how student affairs professionals can best meet their needs.

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