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In Attempt to Quell Violence, Don't Publicly Identify 'Mentally Disturbed'

By **Carla Poindexter**
UCF Forum columnist
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I am certainly not in a position to judge whether a student appears mentally disturbed or unstable in the sense that he or she might be a threat to society or to themselves. However, as a university-level educator who spends most of my working hours with young people in their late teens and early 20s, I have witnessed and experienced situations that were a cause for concern in which I felt compelled to act, intervene or respond in ways that we, as research professors, are often not trained to do. Although most of these situations have been resolved with a common-sense approach to the problem, every so often I have experienced a situation with a student that was more subtle and unpredictable.

My first attempt to resolve a problem with a student who appears to be exhibiting unusual behavior is to engage them in private conversation in an attempt to determine the nature of the problem. If the problem is outside my experience or comfort level and appears to be psychologically motivated, I try to guide the student towards university counseling. I use the word "guide" because it is not easy to suggest to students that they might need to seek counseling, especially if they do not perceive that their behavior is abnormal, or worse, if they perceive that others are at fault. If the situation suggests possible danger, I have immediately consulted a department advisor as soon as possible, moving the situation outside the classroom and educational environment. But this column is about situations that are not clear-cut and are more difficult to handle.

Several years ago I was teaching a young female student whose behavior went from vivacious and alert to sullen and dull over a period of a few short weeks. Although she attended class and was always punctual, her work had fallen in quality and her behavior appeared detached. There is a formal group discussion/critique component to my class structures that requires all students to participate in individual presentations. When it

was her turn to present her work, her behavior in front of the class evolved from restrained and academic to agitated and tearful. After a few moments she stopped talking and ran out of the room.

I immediately excused myself from the class to find her. But she was gone. She was not in the restroom or any other place I looked. My plan then was to take her aside to talk when she came to the next class, but she never came back. I found out later that she had an abusive boyfriend and that she died a few weeks later. There was no explanation from anyone, even her family.

I have questioned my responses to this young woman's behavior. It was a subtle evolution that although troublesome didn't appear extraordinary, especially in view of the academic and social pressures facing young people in all disciplines and from all walks of life today. Although I have retraced my actions and responses to my student, I concluded I could not have known.

I don't believe anyone – not a teacher or a counselor or a friend or even a parent – can truly predict the behavior of an individual, particularly not in the cases of individuals who have produced the horrific events that have culminated in the devastating tragedies we have experienced these past few years in this country.

There are no easy or simple answers.

But I fear that in our efforts to heal our national grief and subdue our anxieties, we may rush to find quick solutions to unanswerable questions about human behavior. As we grapple with the causes and motives of mass violence and self-destruction, some people, including the president of the NRA, suggest a national system be created to identify individuals who may be mentally disturbed and potential future offenders. However, if an identification system were ever generated, it could create serious unintended consequences and opposite outcomes.

New modern-day witch hunts could result from a system that attempts to predict and tally psychological behaviors. Imagine a time when educators are expected to be responsible for the role of watchdog. Pointing fingers and listing people as mentally disturbed could unleash undo suspicion and destruction of individual reputations such as what this nation experienced during the McCarthy era.

During the time when communication and sensitivity are essential, the concern of possibly labeling a student as mentally ill could lead an educator to silence and inaction rather than to open discussion and seeking professional help for the student's problems.

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