

Advocacy Group Offers Guidelines for Campuses in Dealing With Students With Mental-Health Issues

By [PAULA WASLEY](#)

The Bazelon Center for Mental Health Law released today a list of best practices for colleges and universities in dealing with students with mental-health problems. The guidelines emphasize encouraging such students to seek counseling early and protecting them against disciplinary action that might exacerbate mental-health conditions and dissuade other students from seeking help.

The center, in Washington, is an advocacy group for people with psychological disabilities. Its 10-page [model policy](#) recommends that colleges make accommodations for students who suffer from depression, anxiety, or other mental-health problems, such as allowing them to change roommates or rooms, withdraw from courses, or postpone class assignments or examinations without penalties.

It suggests guidelines for preserving the confidentiality of students who seek mental-health counseling and outlines procedures for putting students on voluntary or involuntary leaves of absence for mental-health reasons. The policy urges colleges and universities not to discipline students for suicide attempts, suicidal gestures, or self-injury, and recommends that higher-education institutions train administrators, faculty and staff members, and campus police officers to recognize the signs of mental illness and depression.

The document notes that young people may manifest symptoms of depression or other mental-health problems for the first time after going to college. It cites a 2006 study by the American College Health Association that found that 43.8 percent of nearly 95,000 college students surveyed had "felt so depressed it was difficult to function" during the past year, and 9.3 percent said they had seriously considered suicide within the past year.

"A lot of universities don't have a comprehensive plan, or they might have policies that treat students in a punitive way," said Karen A. Bower, a senior staff lawyer for the Bazelon Center. The model policy offers "an alternative that is nondiscriminatory," she said.

Adopting such policies, she said, can help institutions limit their liability under the Americans With Disabilities Act, which requires colleges to make "reasonable accommodations" for students with mental-health problems.

The policy recommendations were compiled with assistance from mental-health experts, higher-education administrators, counselors, and students, said Ms. Bower. The guidelines reflect concerns raised by the outcomes of two recent high-profile mental-health-related lawsuits against colleges that were handled by the Bazelon Center's lawyers.

Last year the center represented Jordan Nott, a George Washington University student who was suspended after he sought treatment for depression. The university reached a confidential settlement with Mr. Nott last fall ([*The Chronicle*](#), November 1, 2006).

The center also represented a former student of the City University of New York's Hunter College who was barred from her dormitory after she took an overdose of Tylenol and then admitted herself to the hospital. The college agreed to pay \$165,000 to settle the lawsuit brought by that former student ([*The Chronicle*](#), August 24, 2006).

While the guidelines were not created in response to last month's shooting rampage by a troubled student at Virginia Tech, Robert Bernstein, the executive director of the Bazelon Center, noted that the model policy's release was "particularly timely" for colleges dealing with students who might need counseling in the wake of the incident.