

Constructing a Structured Environment in Which to Engage
Distressed and Distressing Students

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Abstract

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The last position an institution of higher education wants to take in the presence of a distressed or distressing student is to simply respond. Instead, the institution should first construct a structured environment in which to engage each particular student. When faced with a demanding task or situation, the eventual outcome reflects three initial elements, 1) aptitude, 2) preparation, and 3) state of mind. States of mind come in pairs, with each half of the pair having the capacity to dismantle the existence of the other. In the context of any given situation, one half of this two-sided pair renders its bearer more functional, and the other half renders him or her less functional. This is true whether the demanding situation is a test, a cross-Atlantic flight, or working with a student showing signs of distress. The focus of this paper has been on four pairs of competing mind-states that govern environments that might be created in interacting with distressed or distressing students. The personnel at institutions of higher education are likely to achieve more consistent and favorable outcomes when they become deliberate about cultivating certain states of mind before they interact with students in distress. Four such pairs of mind-states are explored: 1) being committed to doing one's best versus being committed to getting done, 2) being oriented towards engagement versus being oriented towards building barriers to exposure, 3) focusing on what is most important versus focusing on what is most relevant, and 4) being in-charge of a specified domain versus being not in-charge.

¹This document represents the accumulated observations of a clinical psychologist who has been a consultant in many of the more difficult situations at a large midwestern university over a 23 year period. The opinions and recommendations that appear in this document represent the personal views of the author. They do not necessarily represent the views or the official position of the University of Illinois.

Constructing a Structured Environment in Which to Engage
Distressed and Distressing Students

Paul Joffe, Ph.D.

Constructing a Structured Environment in Which to Engage Students Around Complaints
and Grievances

Ms. Krindall,² 51 year-old female residing in an off-campus apartment, had no official affiliation with the university. One day about 15 years ago, she walked into the offices of the university's Tenant Union, which on occasion provides pro bono services to members of the community, to lodge a complaint against her landlord. The rubber seal on her refrigerator had become twisted and no longer performed adequately. The staff member wrote a letter to her landlord requesting that he address the problem.

The Tenant Union's intervention failed to bring the desired response and Ms. Krindall's refrigerator continued to perform inadequately. In addition, Ms. Krindall was unsatisfied with how her complaint was handled by the Tenant Union. The Tenant Union heard her complaint and found it to be without merit. Unsatisfied with its response, Ms. Krindall contacted the Office of the University Ombudsman, the Office of the Dean of Students, the Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs, and a half dozen other university offices. After a year of persistent petitioning and despite the fact that Ms. Krindall's status did not afford her access to any of the university's formal grievance channels, the university decided to commission a special task force to hear her grievance. A panel was chosen, hearings were held, information was gathered and a "white paper" was issued, which once again found her complaint to be without merit. After a short respite, Ms. Krindall resumed her former pattern of engaging anyone and everyone who might respond to her complaint. Two years later, a second task force was commissioned and the process was repeated. The findings of the second white paper mirrored the first. After a short break, Ms. Krindall resumed her pattern of serial petitioning. After three years, the file containing her letters and the university's responses and findings measured in excess of two inches thick and was growing at a rate of a letter a week. To everyone involved in the process, Ms. Krindall's capacity to persist extended as far as the eye could see and with no apparent end in sight.

The reader, upon hearing about this story about Ms. Krindall and her refrigerator, might focus on Ms. Krindall and ask several questions. What would possess someone to spend so much time and energy on something as inconsequential as a rubber seal? Didn't

²Names and identifying circumstances that appear in case illustrations have been changed to protect privacy.

she have better things to do? The reader might want to retain the services of a mental health professional to better understand Ms. Krindall and her underlying motivation.

Alternatively, the reader might choose to focus, not on Ms. Krindall, but on the institution. What would possess an institution to spend so much of its precious time and resources on a complaint for which there was no applicable grievance channel? And why after one deliberative body had found her complaint to be without merit, would the institution commission a subsequent one to review the same material? If the services of a psychological consultant were to be retained, they might be best aimed at understanding the university and how it had become stuck in the process of responding to Ms. Krindall.

As part of my duties over the last 23 years, I have served as a psychological consultant at-large to a large midwestern university. Many of the situations I have been asked to participate in have involved students who might best be described as distressed and distressing. While I take an interest in understanding each of the students in these situations, I take a keener interest in understanding the personnel, the unit and the institutional culture that comprise the university's interactions with each of these students. My "client" in these consultations is never the student, but always the unit that is responding to the student.

What was my assessment of Ms. Krindall? I never met with Ms. Krindall and it is my practice to not meet with students in the context of these consultations. Where appropriate, such students are referred to other staff of the Counseling Center. My client is the unit and the personnel responding to the student. Without having met with Ms. Krindall, I would hazard to guess that she was suffering from a personality disorder and using her grievance as an outlet to express this personality disorder. The university was inadvertently serving as that outlet. (I would argue that institutions of higher education are the most willing of all modern public and private institutions to engage with people around their personality disorders.)

What was my assessment of the university? It was my assessment that the staff involved in responding to her petition were committed to doing their best to understand her complaint, listen to her concerns and render as fair and as reasonable a judgment as was humanly possible. This commitment to doing their best was simultaneously their greatest strength and their greatest weakness. There is nothing wrong with being committed to doing one's best, at least at times and for moments. But as is the case with anything we do, these staff members had become stuck doing their absolute best.

To be fair to the staff involved, they had help in this regard. Ms. Krindall herself, was likely stuck in doing her best and unable to get done and find closure. There was a contagion effect between Ms. Krindall and the staff involved that kept her grievance alive year after year. In addition, the institution lacked any staff, policy or procedure that would create a counter-contagion in the direction of getting done and remaining done.

When I suggested to the staff involved that they were committed to doing their best, they nodded in agreement and asked with a small measure of pride, "What else is there?" When I asked them if they could see any problems that might arise or complications that might occur as a result of this single-minded pursuit of doing their best, they looked at one another and said, "No." When I suggested that being so focused on doing their best, might make it hard to actually get done, they couldn't fathom what I was saying.

So I stopped talking and I started listening. Most of all, I listened for clues to their logic. How did they imagine this grievance would come to a close? As I listened to the underlying logic of the process, getting done with a grievance was not something they actively did, but something that happened on its own. It was their job to investigate and deliberate. It was only after they had exhausted all opportunities to do their best and only after they had proven to Ms. Krindall's satisfaction that they had overturned every stone, interviewed every potential witness, deliberated every conceivable angle, would they arrive at a shining moment. At this shining moment, Ms. Krindall would finally realize that they had done their best and their deliberated judgment was in fact the best and most fair judgment that could be rendered and at that precise moment, she would say, "enough," and the grievance would come to a close and they could all move on to more profitable pursuits.

That moment hadn't yet arrived. I politely posed for them that they had been at this process for three years and still had not reached a conclusion. I posed for them the possibility that Ms. Krindall might lack the personality structures necessary to ever be done. I posed for them the possibility that Ms. Krindall's agenda was not fairness but to keep this grievance alive as long as possible. I asked them if Ms. Krindall lacked the capacity or desire to bring closure, did they have the capacity or desire to do so, absent her participation? I suggested that while the grievance structures existed for members of the community to access, they belong to the university to use or not use as it saw fit. And when it came to the all-important decision about when to bring a grievance proceeding to an end, Ms. Krindall was welcome to her feelings and opinions, but the decision ultimately belonged to the university.

As I listened to the logic surrounding the process, what kept going through my mind was, "If only mental life were so simple, we wouldn't need mental health professionals." Unfortunately, or fortunately for my continued employment, nothing happens in isolation. The commitment to doing one's best appears to be structurally counterweighted by the equally essential commitment to getting and remaining done. When a person becomes biased towards one side of this two-sided structure, he or she becomes unbiased towards the other. Specifically, when a person becomes stuck in a commitment to doing their absolute best, they annihilate any chance of getting done and staying done.

I run into this same subtle but vexing problem when I work with students with test anxiety. They too are stuck in a mind-state that commits them to doing their best. To them, being done, is not a psychological state of mind but something that happens inadvertently when the clock says their time is up. A test-anxious student has no use for being done. He or she has no conception of it. Even if a state of "doneness" could be conceived, it would be the last thing he or she would want, because in being done, all efforts to do his or her best would be brought to a premature and lasting close. Those committed to doing their best are enamored with opportunities and second chances. Being done is the enemy of the best. For a test-anxious student, being done will occur on its own good time, when he or she got an A on the exam, graduated, or landed in the next phase of his or her life.

Because the test-anxious student is so focused on doing the absolute best, he or she is never done with anything related to the test. He or she studies until the last possible moment. He or she is not done with tests that have occurred in the past. He or she is not done with Problem # 1 before going on to Problem # 2. With so much left undone, his or her mind becomes cluttered, then overwhelmed and ultimately, he or she ceases to function at the peak of his or her potential.

Institutions of higher education, like the test-anxious students in their midst, are culturally biased towards doing their best. This commitment is referred to as "excellence": or a "commitment to excellence." There is nothing wrong with being centered in the mind-state that commits one to doing one's very best, as long as it is something one does and does not cross over into an occupation, as long as it is a mind-state one occupies some of the time and not all of the time, and as long as this mind-state is occasionally interrupted by the equally powerful, but less glorified mind-state that commits us to wrapping things up.

Actually, the more I pondered the problem, the more I sensed the presence of a second structure and a second structural balance. People could either be busy engaging or they could be busy building barriers to exposure. Being in a stance of engagement could refer to discussing, dialoguing and negotiating. Being in a stance of building barriers to exposure, could refer to saying, "No," constructing boundaries or making the decision not to respond. As a culture, the university prized continued engagement above everything else. It seems that the solution to all problems is more discussion, more dialogue or other words, more and more varied forms of engagement. I wondered if a little time spent constructing barricades, might not go a long way with certain students who were distressed or distressing.

My refrigerator consultation was my first exposure to university grievance proceedings. I was a naive outsider to this culture and I couldn't say if this were an isolated instance or part of a larger problem. I became curious. The usefulness of my advice led to further invitations to consult. I dug into the grievance procedures of the university and the

proceedings that surrounded them. What I uncovered surprised me. There was more than ample support for excellence and engagement, but not much room for closure and barriers to continuation. Some grievance procedures were written without formal provisions for ending. Those procedures that did specify an end point, often didn't have those end points enforced. What happened with Ms. Krindall was not uncommon. Essentially, a student could grieve anything and persist as long as he or she could find a single person on campus willing to reciprocate. Somehow it had become forgotten that the university's grievance proceedings existed to serve the university's values and objectives. Instead, it seemed as if the grievance culture had been handed over to grievants to invoke in the manner and duration of their choosing.

It seemed to me that we were missing something. I sensed a psychological gap in our collective administrative psyche. I felt a desperate need for a new concept to fill that gap. I had an inkling that the concept I needed involved the creation of a new "status." When it came to filing a grievance, a student could either be "in status" or "out of status." When they were "in status," they could grieve, and when they were "out of status," the administrative structure would tip and they would lose the privilege to grieve.

With my colleagues on the gradually evolving Coordinated Campus Response Team, we imagined a state of administrative existence we termed, "exhausted all routes of appeal." It specified that students could grieve a university action such as a tuition refund or an assigned grade. The university would entertain their petition, investigate, deliberate and render a judgment. If the student didn't agree with the judgment, he or she could appeal to a second body, where the process would be repeated. Depending on the type of grievance, there might be the possibility of a second appeal. But at the end of this appeal process, the student would swiftly and suddenly arrive at a state of administrative existence in which the university was done engaging with them. They lost the privilege to continue their grievance.

It was not just a matter of being done but of remaining done. In arriving at the "exhausted all routes of appeal designation," the university remained done in perpetuity. On practical grounds, this meant that no one would talk with the student about their grievance, except to state briefly that the university was done with it. This included not just the grievance officer, but the grievance officer's secretary; not just the ombudsman, but the ombudsman's secretary; not just the chancellor, but the chancellor's administrative assistant. The student had other options of course. He or she could retain a private attorney, contact their congressman or contact a member of the media, but all these options were situated external to the university.

At the time of its implementation, this was a radical concept. It created a precise and impenetrable barrier to further engagement. We could continue talking with this student about everything else. He or she could submit a new petition about a different

matter. What had changed was that the university wouldn't talk to this student about this particular issue, except to say that we were not willing to talk about it. As years passed, I found that we had to be careful how much time we spent talking about not talking about it, because with some individuals the amount of time we spent talking about not talking about it, accumulated to a degree that we had become re-engaged.

Not talking to someone who wanted to talk and having that occur campus-wide and in perpetuity, was revolutionary in light of prevailing practice. It challenged the mindset of engage, engage and engage. I sold it on six separate grounds. First, there were individuals like Ms. Krindall, who would become stuck, if we gave them the opportunity. Second, the quality of justice obtained after three years of deliberation was not superior to the justice obtained after one month. Third, our time and resources could be better spent. Fourth, the larger objective of the university's grievance proceedings was not truth, perfection or harmony, but to provide grievants with a reasonable opportunity to resolve conflicts internally. Fifth, the longer we spent with grievants and the longer we allowed them to become attached to hopeful expectations, the greater our surface area of exposed contact and the greater our exposure to eventual litigation and/or violence. Sixth, it was not fair to the grievant to participate in a process that we could reasonably anticipate would not lead to a more favorable outcome.

This new administrative status of having "exhausted all routes of appeal" was approved and I wrote a memo outlining its implementation in the context of face-to-face, written and phone communications. Secretarial staff, who had been schooled in the art of engagement, initially found it difficult to cut off conversations mid-sentence and place such an obvious roadblock to further discussion. More than one felt as if he or she were failing at his or her job. Most painful of all was the need to occasionally hang up on a caller who wouldn't respond to polite requests to disengage. We went back to the official grievance channels and made sure that each contained provisions for mandatory completion. We withdrew from the business of fashioning, as we had for Ms. Krindall, ad hoc grievance channels for issues and individuals that otherwise lacked them.

Implementing this new status might seem like a simple undertaking. After all, what could be more straightforward than being done and creating barriers to further communication. There were at least two complicating factors. First, mind-states are contagious creatures and as we have seen in the case of Ms. Krindall, a grievant who is stuck in a mind-state of doing his or her best can invite others to join in with seemingly fresh information, related charges and unplumbed perspectives. Second, in order to be and remain done, required not only that the hearing office to tip over to the mind-states of being done and creating barriers to future communication, but the staff of the unit hierarchically above and below to tip over simultaneously. Complexities arise at an institution with 12,000 employees organized into hundreds of compartmentalized units. For example:

Mr. Lyle continued to contact university offices months after his grievance process was over. An investigation revealed that several offices were still taking his calls. In one office, a receptionist would listen passively as he talked bitterly about the institution's mistreatment of him. Out of a combination of politeness and professional training, she neither encouraged nor agreed with his perception of events, but instead patiently sympathized with how he must feel. These calls lasted an average of 30 minutes once or twice a week.

After the Coordinated Campus Response Team learned about these calls, the receptionist was instructed by her supervisor to say, "Mr. Lyle, it is my understanding that your business with this office is concluded and that if you want to talk to anyone at the university about this or any other matter, I'm to direct you to Ms. Williams."

If Mr. Lyle persisted in talking, she was instructed to say, "Mr. Lyle, I cannot talk to you about this matter further. I apologize, but if you do not stop, I will have to hang up my phone. . . . Mr. Lyle, I am now hanging up my phone." She was instructed to spend no more than 60 seconds on the phone with Mr. Lyle in the first call and no more than 10 seconds in calls after that. These instructions contradicted 20 years of training and practice and were understandably hard for her to carry out.

The status of "exhausted all routes of appeal" was added to the administrative psyche of the institution. Staff became skillful at constructing polite but effective barriers to further engagement. The quality of the institution's overall engagement did not suffer as a result. When it came to initiating grievances, the university became more deliberate about when and with whom it engaged, and once engaged, it became more precise in its interactions. Rather than simply placing itself in a role of responding to student complaints, the University created a deliberate administrative environment and invited students into this environment. After a few short weeks of encountering a coordinated campus disengagement from further discussions regarding her refrigerator, Ms. Krindall stopped calling and dropping in. In a matter of months, numerous other long-term and open-ended grievances arrived at an unceremonious close. Looking back, the grievance culture of today barely resembles that of 15 years ago, when Ms. Krindall first walked into the Tenant Union.

Constructing a Structured Psychological Environment in Which to Focus on Distressed and Distressing Students

Several years ago I was invited to participate in an emergency staffing of an employee. The employee in question, Ms. Ward, had worked at the university for 20 years in a secretarial position. For most of her tenure, Ms. Ward had a history of apparent mental health problems, including incoherence and severe mood swings. She arrived to work late and when she did arrive, she accomplished a third of the work of her colleagues. The work

she was able to accomplish was so prone to errors, that it had to be repeated by another staff member. Each time one of her various supervisors had tried to focus on her lateness or performance problems, she would respond with a pattern of emotional incoherence, one part anxiety, one part anger. Whenever a supervisor would schedule a formal meeting, she would insist on having her six foot six boyfriend join them. Together Ms. Ward and her boyfriend would accuse the supervisor of harassing her. Over the years, a series of supervisors had gradually retreated from supervising Ms. Ward and assumed the role of keeping her calm and from disrupting other more productive staff members working in the same crowded office.

Six months before this particular staffing, her immediate supervisor of the previous five years, retired. Her new supervisor was uncomfortable leaving these problems unaddressed. She had been making the first tentative steps towards documenting the problem. Predictably, this made Ms. Ward more upset and this, in turn, was disruptive to the unit as a whole.

The staffing, which included Ms. Ward's immediate supervisor, her supervisor's two supervisors and the College's human resource representative, had an implicit agenda--to have me, the psychologist, formally diagnosis Ms. Ward's mental health condition. The first thirty minutes of the staffing were occupied with stories and impressions that would help me arrive at this assessment. But beyond that, the clinical diagnosis was to serve as the foundation for what they really wanted--a prediction of Ms. Ward's capacity to be violent. It was uncovered in the staffing that their worst fear was that Ms. Ward or her boyfriend would come to work and shoot them.

Over the years of my clinical practice, I have found that one of the most fundamental things that all people do is "focus." When it comes to focusing, I have found that people have the capacity to focus in one of two completely different and competing ways. A person can either be engrossed with what is truly important and only peripherally aware of what is relevant. Or a person can be comfortably preoccupied with what is relevant and only distantly attuned to what is important.

This is a critical distinction to make when working with someone who has a fear of flying. Most people who are afraid to fly are consumed at the time of flight with what is most important. And what is always the single most important thing to consider as one steps onto a plane is the question of what is this plane going to do next? Is it going to perform according to specification or is an engine going to explode or is a wing going to fall off?

In contrast with a person who is flight-anxious, the person who is flight-secure, approaches air travel with a diametrically opposed frame of mind. He is she is preoccupied with what is most relevant. While being aware that airplanes can and do crash, that awareness is tucked away as a distant fact, far away in the background. What lies in the

mental cross-hairs of someone who is centered in the mind-state of relevance is one simple but recurring question--what can I productively do? Starting with the most important, they follow a path of descending cancellation, crossing things off a list that can't be touched, reached or accomplished, winding up eventually engrossed in the few activities that they can reasonably accomplish, which on an airplane typically boils down to talking to their aisle-mate, reading, watching the in-flight movie or taking a nap. Aeronautical goings-on, as important to their continued survival, are not a topic of active consideration for the simple reason that they lie outside their sphere of influence. And when it comes to the mind-state of focusing on what is relevant, all importance is pushed aside, and the only things that matter are things that lie within one's sphere of influence.

The precise same problem arises with students suffering from test anxiety. Most test anxious students are stuck in a mind-state of what is important. In the context of a major exam, what surfaces as most important is the question of what is going to happen as a result of how well or how poorly one does on this exam. As a result, a test-anxious student is focused not on the test, but on predicting the future consequences of taking the test. Students who are test-secure, being centered in a mind-state of focusing on what's relevant, aim their concentration at the test and what they can reasonably accomplish. In the context of taking a test, what becomes most relevant are the questions that comprise the test, specifically, "What is Question 1 saying to me?" And, "What do I have to say back to Question 1?"

The primary dilemma posed by students who are distressed or give evidence of apparent or obvious mental health problems is that they invariably invite, if not seduce, university personnel, with whom they come into contact, to drift into the same state of mind as those who are flight and test-anxious. Once invoked, this mind-state of focusing on what's most important leads university personnel to center squarely on what is the absolute worst thing that might happen next. In the context of a student in distress and/or with apparent mental health problems, the worst thing that can happen is he or she might become violent towards themselves or another person. Failing that, there is always litigation, media scrutiny and attacks on one's reputation to consider.

There is nothing wrong with being importance-focused. What better way to familiarize oneself with the possible consequences of one's actions? Problems arise when this mind-state ceases to become a choice or when one gets stuck focusing solely on what is most important. Personnel who become stuck find themselves hypervigilant, anxious, and risk-adverse. They also find it difficult to pursue complex courses of action across undulating legal, ethical, and administrative terrain. Two university staff members presented with the same scenario and set of facts, one centered in a mind-state of what is most important and the other centered in what is most relevant, will see two completely different worlds and have two non-overlapping patterns of reactions.

Back to Ms. Ward and the staffing--instead of offering a diagnosis, I asked her supervisors two simple questions. First, had Ms. Ward ever been violent in the past? Second, had she ever threatened to be violent, either explicitly or implicitly, in the past? To both questions, her three supervisors responded, "No." I asked the same two questions of her boyfriend and again the answer was, "No." Ms. Ward could veer off course cognitively and become upset faster than anyone they knew, but at no point in her 20 years of employment, had she ever become violent or threatened to become violent. They couldn't pinpoint the reason why, but they feared if they moved further down the current path of documentation and progressive discipline, there would come a day, when she would crack and explode into violence.

I acknowledged their fears and acknowledged that while violence was always a possibility, it wasn't a likely outcome. Then I made a series of standard comments. First, research shows that mental health professionals cannot predict violence with any accuracy. Second, with that caveat in mind, the best predictor of future behavior is past behavior. Third, her pattern of past behavior was to become upset and to express herself in a fairly disorganized fashion. Fourth, in response to supervision in the future, she would likely become upset and express herself in a fairly disorganized fashion. Fifth, to behave violently would represent a radical departure from Ms. Ward's previous pattern of behavior. Sixth, any transition from her pattern of past behavior to a new pattern of behavior that included violence, would in all likelihood not occur in a single step. Instead, she would accomplish the transition in a series of smaller steps that might include pushing, hitting and making threats. Seventh, each of these transitional steps would be immediately actionable from a criminal and administrative perspective.

I ended my comments by saying that I agreed with them that in such situations the most important thing to consider is the possibility of violence. But Ms. Ward had rights too and in the absence of documented behavior, we could not take action against her criminally or administratively, nor could we refrain from normal supervisory expectations and practices. In the absence of actionable behavior from a violence perspective, what became relevant were the more mundane issues of her lateness and unsatisfactory performance.

Instead of dwelling further on the possibility for violence, I invited them down a different track. I asked them in detail about her work performance. How late did she arrive at work? Had the expectation of timeliness been made in writing and had her lateness been documented and subjected to progressive discipline? How did she perform her assigned tasks? Had her tasks been bench-marked for output or errors? Were there concerns anecdotal and impressionistic or had they been documented in her file? How did she respond to supervisory feedback and requests? What of this had been documented in writing?

Over the course of this 90 minute staffing, I never provided them with what they most wanted. I never made a diagnosis or a prediction of future violence other than to suggest it was unlikely. Instead of focusing on Ms. Ward, I focused on them. It was my feedback to them that in the course of supervising Ms. Ward, the management team of this unit had become centered in the mind-state of what was most important. It was my assessment that a sequence of supervisors had both adopted and bequeathed the same mind-state for the preceding 20 years. It was my impression that the application of this mind-state was limited to their supervision of Ms. Ward and did not extend to other employees. As a direct result of this mind-state, they had become fearful, focused on the future and preoccupied with the worst outcomes that might happen as a result of their actions. Like a test-anxious student who can't concentrate on his or her test, they were unable to supervise Ms. Ward in the context of her duties. They lost sight of the most relevant fact of this entire situation--Ms. Ward was hired to do a job and was not performing her duties to a satisfactory standard.

I fully supported the new supervisor's efforts over the last six months but suggested she was skirmishing with Ms. Ward and not pursuing a track of typical progressive discipline. I suggested that they had abdicated the work environment to Ms. Ward and she was calling the shots. I suggested that they should see the next 6 to 12 months as a time to help Ms. Ward bring her behavior in line with supervisory expectations. Failing that, the consequences of Ms. Ward's performance would fall on Ms. Ward in the form of progressive discipline leading to termination. I suggested that of all the behavior that had been cited, the most relevant, from the standpoint of discipline, was her lateness. Based on their reports, I suggested they document her lateness over the next three days, convene a disciplinary hearing, and propose an appropriate sanction. Ironically, what turns out to be the most relevant element of a situation, is often the least important.

There was a palpable shift within the room. When we started, the three supervisors were anxious and disoriented. All they could see was the future and the threat of violence. When we were done, they were calm and focused on minute and previously mundane elements of the situation. The same facts and elements had been organized in two completely different patterns based on a shift of mind-states. The supervisors were resolved to put this new perspective into practice and to stay on track.

Unless front-line personnel are otherwise trained and enculturated, distressed and distressing students typically arouse a focus on what's most important. This can be especially true with students who threaten or attempt suicide. Such a psychological orientation is often the first and natural response of personnel who are not involved with crisis situations on a frequent basis.

Through years of practice and mutual acculturation, the members of the Coordinated Campus Response Team focus on what's relevant. If a student has not made a

documented threat of violence or committed an act of documented violence, then a criminal recourse is not relevant. The Team refrains from making predictions of violence. Instead, it carefully documents and responds to documented statements and actions that have occurred. Through years of practice, the members of the Team quickly reduce complex situations down to those narrow elements that are actionable from a criminal, judicial and administrative perspective.

There is an inverse and hydraulic relationship between any two competing mind-states. The more we inhabit one, the less that we can inhabit the other. Accordingly, the best way to dislodge a staff member or unit that is stuck in a mind-state of focusing on what is most important, is to arouse a mind-state of focusing on what is most relevant. This is what occurred over the course of the 90 minute staffing of Ms. Ward and this is routinely what occurs when members of the Coordinated Campus Response Team consult with university personnel.

Within two weeks of my staffing regarding Ms. Ward, the unit had written Ms. Ward a detailed letter of expectations. With that letter, the center of gravity shifted from one of responding to Ms. Ward to one of applying the unit's expectations in a consistent fashion. They systematically documented her lateness and inability to perform assigned tasks. When appropriate, they incorporated this documentation into progressive discipline. As predicted, Ms. Ward became upset but not violent. Within six months of our meeting, Ms. Ward negotiated an early retirement and resigned from her position.

Constructing a Structured Environment In Which Contests of In-Chargeness Might Occur

Mr. Sanjay was a second year masters student from India. The first time he came to the university's attention was in the context of a police report. In the police report, a female undergraduate alleged that Mr. Sanjay had become overly aggressive in the process of expressing his romantic interest. Ms. Whitley reported Mr. Sanjay was a complete stranger except for a week before the incident, when for a brief moment they made eye contact during a church service. A week later, Mr. Sanjay knelt on the lawn in front of her apartment for an hour, ring in hand, proposing that they get married. Refusing to take a polite "No" for an answer, he took larger matters into his own hands and a week later, he posted flyers around campus, announcing their impending wedding two weeks hence. He specified both the time and church in which the ceremony would occur. A few days later, he contacted his future in-laws by phone to properly introduce himself. The Office of Student Conflict Resolution issued an Order of No-Contact. The Dean of Students ordered him to submit to a psychiatric evaluation. He met with a university psychiatrist but immediately after the evaluation was completed and after being notified once again not to make contact with Ms. Whitley, he drove to her apartment, banged angrily on her door and

demanded admittance. The police were called and he was arrested. After a day in jail, he attempted suicide. The State's Attorney was willing to drop all charges, if he would agree to leave the country and not return. His sister flew from India and escorted him home.

Within any individual, there appears to be two competing sensibilities or states of mind. The first is an inclination to perceive oneself to be legitimately "in-charge." The second is an inclination to perceive oneself to be not in-charge. In such instances, another person, a force, or fate is perceived to be legitimately in-charge. At any given moment, one of these two inclinations predominates and the other is suppressed. Accordingly, at any given moment a person in the mind-state of being in-charge cannot defer and the person in the mind-state of being not in-charge cannot assume control of a situation.

To make matters more complicated, no one person is in-charge of everything, nor defers being in-charge of absolutely everything. Instead, this structure is domain-specific and a person perceives himself or herself to be in-charge of one or more specified domains. A domain can be anything--a person, an object, a physical space, a decision. With hundreds, if not thousands of conceivable domains, life boils down to occupying and abdicating countless interlocking and tiered domains of in-chargeness in the context of one's contemporaries and community.

To take a personal example, when my youngest son was four, he became preoccupied with action figures--small plastic models of movie characters of a mostly villainous nature. He insisted on carrying a small group of them wherever he went. In stores, he would invariably drop or forget one, leading to a crisis and a time-consuming search. After losing precious Gaston, I instituted a rule that he could bring no more than two action figures into a store. He could pick which two. He balked at this limit on his former privilege and pushed the limit by trying to leave the car with three or four. I held firm and said it was two or none. Eventually, after a few contentious exchanges, he abdicated being in-charge of how many and happily settled into being in-charge of which two.

As with other dispositional balances, a person can move flexibly between these two dispositions, not move flexibly, or not move at all. A person who is stuck in the mind-state of being not in-charge is not likely to bring a grievance, even though he or she might have more than sufficient grounds. A person who is stuck always needing to be in-charge, is not only going to be prone to bringing grievances, but is prone to getting stuck in a persisting grievance. He or she also has a small but increased potential for becoming violent in the process.

Applying these principles to Mr. Sanjay, ideally he would have made himself in-charge of a decision to express a limited display of romantic intent. Upon discovering Ms. Whitley didn't share his intent, he would have allowed her lack of intent to trump his presence of intent, removed himself from the situation and refrained from further

communication. Instead of deferring, he overruled her. Eventually, he escalated, making himself in-charge of a more important domain--her all-important decision of whom to marry--inserting himself as the groom-to-be. Recognizing the disturbance, the university interceded and exercised an in-chargeness of whom he could contact. Mr. Sanjay deferred to the university for a day or two, but soon reverted back to his stance of being in-charge of Ms. Whitley's choices and decisions. Finally, the police assumed an in-chargeness over Mr. Sanjays's physical movements by detaining him, first by their presence and then through the use of a jail cell.

If one were to map the grievance process from start to finish, there are legitimate areas in which a grievant is in-charge and legitimate areas in which the institution is in-charge. By anyone's accounting the institution is in-charge of more elements and more of the important elements than the grievant. The grievance process is housed within the institution's informal culture and/or formal administrative code. The university is in-charge of setting up the rules. The university is in-charge of designating the personnel who are, in turn, in-charge of investigating the grievant's complaint, gathering facts and relevant information. Most importantly, the staff of the institution are in-charge of deliberating on the merits of the grievant's complaint and deciding what, if any, remedy applies.

With regards to the grievant, he or she is in-charge of a set of domains that are best seen as a series of critical decisions--whether to grieve or not to grieve, whether to grieve formally or informally, whether to include such and such facts and arguments or leave them out, whether to appeal or not, and whether to persist or relent.

The fact that the institution is in-charge of constructing the rules and staffing the process, doesn't prevent some grievants from going beyond the bounds of their legitimate domains and exercising a far more colorful and expanded sense of in-chargeness. If the institution isn't active and deliberate in constructing the appropriate environment in which to engage students, it runs the risk of being overrun.

Fortunately, the vast majority of students who activate the grievance processes within a university are well-bounded and traffic easily between these mind-states of being in-charge and being not in-charge. These students readily appreciate the times and places the university holds sway, as well as the choices and decisions over which they hold personal dominion. When all is said and done and a final decision is rendered, they defer to the university's decision, whether they agree with it or not. Then they walk away.

There are students however, who for a variety of reasons, have difficulty with this business of sometimes-but-not-always being in-charge. Just as Mr. Sanjay failed to recognize Ms. Whitley was in-charge of whom to marry, they fail to recognize that the university is in-charge of whether to grant them a remedy or deny it. These individuals persistently exceed their legitimate domains or worse, invent larger and more encompassing domains over which they feel entitled.

Much of the violence and particularly, much of the foreseeable violence that occurs on campuses, occurs in the context of a grievance process. When violence does occur, it always occurs, in large part, as a product of a disordered perception of in-chargeness. For example:

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|---|--|
| University of Iowa:
November 2,
1991 | Doctoral student Gang Lu, 28, shot and killed a rival doctoral student and three professors of physics. It was reported that Gang Lu had been "filing complaints against Dr. Dwight R. Nicholson, Chairman of Department of Physics and Astronomy for his fraud in the departmental nomination for the D.C. Spriesterbach dissertation award offered by the graduate college" for five months preceding the shooting. ³ |
| San Diego State
University:
August 15, 1996 | Thirty-six year-old master's-degree candidate Martin Davidson, shot and killed three engineering faculty at a defense of his thesis. Mr. Davidson had failed to pass at a defense held several months earlier. ⁴ Subsequent reports call into question whether there had been an earlier defense. ⁵ |
| University of Arkansas:
August 28, 2000 | Thirty-seven year-old doctoral student, James Kelly shot and killed Professor John Locke before committing suicide. Mr. Kelly, who had been struggling to earn a doctorate for over a decade, had been expelled in the spring of 1999. Mr. Kelly appealed the decision to the Graduate College and it was decided to give him another chance. A week before the shootings he "had been dismissed from the comp-lit program for poor performance." ⁶ |
| Appalachian School of
Law:
January 16, 2002 | Former law student, Peter Odighizuwa, shot and killed his dean, a law professor and a fellow student. Mr. Odighizuwa had been dismissed for attendance and failing grades and was in the process of petitioning for readmittance. He had been expelled for similar academic reasons the year before but readmitted. |

³Letter to the editor, *Des Moines Register*, September 17, 1991.

⁴Burd, Steven. Murder of 3 professors at a thesis defense stuns campus. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, September 6, 1996.

⁵Plotkin, Allen. Letter to the editor. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, July 11, 1997.

⁶Wilson, Robin. The murder of a professor. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, September 15, 2000.

University of Arizona: Nursing student, Robert Flores, 41, shot and killed three
October 28, 2002 professors before fatally shooting himself. It was reported that he was "angry about being barred from taking a midterm exam." It was reported some months before the shootings, Mr. Flores in a meeting with a professor shouted, "You better watch your back if you're going to flunk me." Eighteen months earlier an instructor reported to the police that he said, "he might put something under the college."⁷

Universities are certainly active during the original process of establishing the by-laws that create grievance channels, but once constructed, these channels tend to sit inertly, waiting for a student to activate them. While the grievance culture of a university is necessarily complaint-driven, it is important for the institution not to become stuck in a passive posture of speaking when spoken to, writing when written to and so forth.

Institutions of higher education have traditionally side-stepped or soft-peddled the issue of who is in-charge. Already renowned for their heightened level of tolerance, universities often grant distressed students even greater than typical tolerance of eccentric, bizarre and disruptive behavior, often overlooking behavior that is rude, offensive and bordering on abusive. Grieving students are often offered a "holiday" from the normal expectations of civility. There is a naive assumption that once the grievance has come to its natural conclusion, the holiday will as well, and the student will return to the normal confines of civility.

The bottom line is this--grievance procedures need to be more than simply adjudicating a student's complaint. At the same time that the institution is moving forward with its procedures, it should simultaneously be building in encounters that gauge a grievant's ability to take charge of decisions that legitimately belong to him or her, as well as his or her ability to abdicate decisions that legitimately belong to the university. The grievance process is prudently the occasion for a greater attention to issues of civility, not the occasion for less.

Engagements with distressed and distressing students never occur in a vacuum. They occur in a context or an environment. That context or environment can be constructed by the student, by the institution or co-constructed as a collaboration between student and institution. At the very least, the institution should create an initial environment in which there are rules, standards and expectations of civility. If the student demonstrates that he or she can function in that structured environment, the environment can be loosened up and incorporate more elements proposed by the student. But if the student demonstrates that he or she cannot function in that initial environment, that environment needs to tighten up and become increasingly directive and restrictive.

⁷Smallwood, Scott. The deadly risk of giving an F. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, November 15, 2002.

Mr. Wilson appeared in the Office of the Chancellor, demanding to meet with the Chancellor. An Associate Vice Chancellor agreed to meet with Mr. Wilson. At the end of the meeting the administrator agreed to make some inquiries and meet with Mr. Wilson again a week later. He asked Mr. Wilson to refrain from spontaneously dropping in and wait until the meeting scheduled for a week later. Mr. Wilson agreed. Two days later, Mr. Wilson again appeared, demanding to meet with the Chancellor. The administrator met briefly with Mr. Wilson, reminded him of their agreement and asked him to leave. The administrator then wrote Mr. Wilson a letter, putting his expectations in writing.

Institutions should be concerned with students who show an inability or unwillingness to defer to the institution over areas in which the institution is legitimately in-charge. One might argue that disruptive behavior is a reliable indicator of such an inability or unwillingness. By failing to recognize breaches of in-charge-ness early in the process and by failing to take appropriate steps to reassert appropriate boundaries, institutions only postpone the moment of inevitable conflict. It could be argued that the longer a grievant perceives himself or herself to be in-charge, the greater he or she becomes attached to the privileges associated with that perception, and the harder it will be to eventually disengage from this individual.

It is recommended that institutions of higher education establish the practice of attaching uniform expectations of a grievant's behavior. Rather than relax already relaxed standards, it is recommended that institutions actively hold a grievant's speech and conduct to a campus-wide standard of civility. Examples of common sense expectations might include:

1. The grievant will meet filing deadlines.
2. Face-to-face meetings will occur in the context of scheduled appointments.
3. The grievant will refrain from shouting.
4. The grievant will refrain from name-calling, swearing, or the use of a mean or malicious tone of voice.

Frank Dillard was pursuing a grievance with the university over a grade he received in a course. On one occasion, he walked up to the reception desk of an office and asked to see Mr. Wilkins. He was told Mr. Wilkins was away from the office and would not return until the following Friday. Obviously frustrated and upset, Mr. Dillard clenched his fists into a ball, looked up at the ceiling and let out a scream that was so loud that the two receptionists placed their hands over their ears. After about ten seconds, Mr. Dillard stopped screaming, turned around and left. The two secretaries looked at each other, shrugged, and went about their business.

The Coordinated Campus Response Team can play an important role in insuring that university personnel don't become stuck deferring to inappropriate states of in-

challengeness displayed by distressed and distressing students. After consulting with the Coordinated Campus Response Team, the department wrote the following letter:

"Dear Mr. Dillard:

It was reported that on October 11, upon hearing that Mr. Wilkins was out of the office and unable to meet with you, you "screamed at the top of your lungs for a period of approximately 10 seconds." I am writing to inform you that we expect all members of the university to conduct their business in such a manner that it is not alarming or disturbing. Your screaming was alarming and disturbing to the staff of that office. I have instructed the staff of that office that in the event that you engage in this or similar behavior in the future, that they call the police and file an official report."

The practice of attaching expectations should make allowances, within reason, for cultural differences in speech and conduct. At the same time that individual administrators are encouraged to use their best judgment in making such allowances and extending special considerations, the process is incomplete if the same administrator doesn't formulate a series of new culturally appropriate expectations. The presence of cultural issues does not eliminate the need for standards, just the need for particular standards. For every standard that is relaxed or removed, a new, culturally appropriate standard should be introduced. When appropriate, the institution should discretely consult with one or more members of the student's ethnic or racial community and seek assistance in constructing the most appropriate cultural context for the engagement to occur.

Through a series of small-scale interactions, the institution should be consistently sending the message that it is aware of the domains over which it is in-charge, aware of breaches of these domains on the part of the student, and capable and willing to reassert its control over these areas. This practice gives the student maximal opportunity to bring his or her behavior in line with the acceptable norms and maximal opportunity to complete the process. The same practice simultaneously provides the institution with increasingly clear information about the student's trustworthiness in the process. Students who continue to act as if they are in-charge, despite repeated requests to the contrary, are placed in more restricted tracks that allow them to complete the process, but protect the staff of the institution from abuse and the potential for violence. For example:

"Ms. Harris, we have a scheduled appointment next Monday at 11:00. If you drop in the office as you did today, you will be reminded of your upcoming appointment and invited to return at that time. You are welcome to remain in the lobby as long as you are not disruptive to the staff or other patrons. If you are disruptive, as it was reported today, you will be asked to leave. If you decide to remain, you will be informed that the police will be called and invited again to leave. If you decide to remain, the police will be called with instructions to remove you."

The purpose of these limits and expectations is not to push for confrontation. Instead, the purpose is to construct a structured environment that is deliberate and precise about who is in-charge of specific domains. If there is going to be a conflict over who is in-charge, it is preferable to construct an environment that allows the conflict to occur at the beginning of the process, rather than the end, to have it occur at a time and place of the institution's choosing, rather than the student's, and to have the conflict occur over relatively neutral procedural issues, rather than the more substantive content issues of the grievance itself. The process can move rapidly. For example:

"Ms. Marston: On March 11, you were asked to put your grievance in writing and informed that this office would no longer entertain phone calls and e-mails referring to the problem. On April 2, you were asked, in writing, not to call other offices about this issue, but center your grievance on this office. On April 15, after a series of phone calls to this office that were deemed to be alarming, you were asked not to make further phone calls, but to either conduct your business in writing or in scheduled visits to this office. On May 3, after three phone calls you made to Dean Warren at home, which she felt were to be alarming, you were assigned to work with Captain Williams of Public Safety. She is your sole point of contact with the university for this matter."

The potential for violence is greater, when two parties simultaneously perceive themselves to be in-charge and refuse to yield to the other's perception. From the perspective of violence prevention, the absolute worst scenario occurs when an institution allows a grievant to labor through successful stages of the grievance process under the misperception that he or she is in-charge, only to end the process abruptly with an adverse decision that the grievant neither expects, nor perceives the institution as having the legitimate authority to make.

A party to a conflict of in-charge-ness over a given domain has only three options. He or she can persist at attempting to exercise his or her in-charge-ness, he or she can back down and assume a stance of being not in-charge, or he or she can escalate by attempting to be in-charge of a more commanding domain. An act of violence always and necessarily represents an expression of this third option. Instead of remaining in a tug-of-war over the outcome of a grievance process, the grievant escalates and perceives himself to be in-charge of the process itself, the university as a whole, or the right of one or more parties to the grievance to continue living.

When violence does occur in the course of a grievance process, it almost never occurs suddenly and without warning. Individuals prone to such domain-jumping give tell-tale indications of that proneness in small but consistent ways. This might include trying to change the terms, pushing the boundaries and making threats. While we can't predict with any accuracy which particular individual displaying difficulties with in-charge-ness will

become violent, we can reasonably predict that when violence does occur, it will occur among a group of individuals who have given ample indication.

The Coordinated Campus Response Team

The University of Illinois has a student body of 40,000 students. It employs 12,000 faculty and staff. Counting parents of students, active alumni, spouses and children of students, faculty and staff, as well as engaged members of the public, the university community is comprised of several hundred thousand individuals. Because of the size of this community and the relative infrequency of distressed and distressing individuals, any staff member or office rarely obtains enough experience to become an expert. At best, a staff member might encounter a few challenging situations in his or her university career. As a result, the personnel that constitute the institution's front-line represent a series of rotating novices.

One of the many benefits of having a Coordinated Campus Response Team is that it concentrates the institution's expertise within a group of 10 to 12 individuals. Some of the Team's expertise is represented by what the members know, whom they know, and their ability to center themselves psychologically in the most functional states of mind. When a crisis does occur, front-line staff come into contact with members of the Team, either one-on-one or in the context of a special staffing. In the course of these contacts, front-line staff are drawn into similar states of mind for the duration of the crisis.

It is recommended that the Team be comprised of representatives from Legal Counsel, University Police, Graduate College, Housing Division, Office of the Chancellor, Office of the Provost, Office of Equal Opportunity and Access, Office of Student Judicial Affairs, Student Health Service, Office of the Dean of Students and the Counseling Center. It is recommended that participants not necessarily be the directors of these offices, but instead be front-line professionals who have day-to-day contact with distressed and distressing students. It is recommended that the Team meet every month for a period of two hours. It is suggested that the team adopt a facilitated case discussion format in which participants are invited to inform the other members of the Team of current cases and update the Team regarding the most recent developments. In addition to the monthly meetings, it is recommended that the members of the Team be available for special meetings to address fast-moving situations or situations with the potential for violence.

The Coordinated Campus Response Team has no authority of its own, but draws its authority from the authority housed within the units of the participating members. The Team also does not establish policy, though it might make suggestions for policy modifications through the offices of its individual members. It is recommended that the

representative from legal counsel keep minutes of the meeting and that these minutes be treated as privileged communication.

The University of Illinois has four separate Coordinated Campus Response Teams. The first focuses on situations of interpersonal violence in which the perpetrators and survivors have a pre-existing relationship, either romantic or friendship. The second team focuses on disruptive and violent behavior occurring in the university workplace. The third team focuses on suicide threats and attempts and other types of self-harming behavior. The fourth team focuses on all other situations, including persistent grievances, community members with apparent or obvious mental health conditions, and distressed and distressing members of the university community. The Suicide Prevention Team meets every other week for one hour. The other three groups meet once a month for up to two hours.

Summary

The last posture the front-line personnel of an institution of higher education want to assume in the context of a distressed or distressing student is one of simply responding to that student. In responding, the institution signals that it has lost control of the process and made the student the sole center of gravity. While it is natural to want to focus on those in distress and have them become the center of gravity, such a focus can become part of the problem. Ideally, front-line personnel should step back from the situation, consider their values and objectives and make themselves and the institutional community one of two co-existing centers of gravity.

When faced with a demanding task or situation, the eventual outcome reflects three initial elements, 1) aptitude, 2) preparation, and 3) state of mind. States of mind come in pairs, with each half of the pair having the capacity to dismantle the existence of the other. In the context of any given situation, one half of this two-sided pair renders its bearer more functional, and the other half renders him or her less functional. This is true whether the demanding situation is a test, a cross-Atlantic flight, or working with a student showing signs of distress. The focus of this paper has been on four pairs of competing mind-states that govern environments that might be created in interacting with distressed or distressing students. The personnel at institutions of higher education are likely to achieve more consistent and favorable outcomes when they become deliberate about cultivating certain states of mind before they interact with students in distress. The four pairs of mind-states are as follows:

<p>Doing one's best versus getting done:</p>	<p>A person can be located either in a mind-state that compels them to do their best or a mind-state that compels them to get done. Universities as a whole are prone to being centered in doing their best and this centeredness spills over to its interactions with distressed and distressing students. As a result, front-line professionals are prone to become disorganized, ungrounded and codependent. They run the risk of losing sight of their larger role or mission. Of these two competing mind-states, the preferred mind-state is a commitment to getting done. As a result of this prevailing bias, involved personnel are well-bounded, precise and goal-oriented.</p> <p>Institutions should construct structured environments in which front-line personnel listen carefully to the student and the student's concerns, but are bound to the larger objective of arriving at a timely resolution, ideally both for the student and the institution, but at the very least for the institution. The staff of the Coordinated Campus Response Team recognizes that many of the most challenging situations don't naturally end on their own. Instead, the institution is required to take a series of coordinated actions to bring the matter to a close.</p>
<p>Engaging or constructing barriers to exposure:</p>	<p>A person can center either in a mind-state of engaging or in a mind-state of constructing barriers to exposure. The prevailing culture at institutions of higher education is overwhelmingly biased towards a posture of engagement. As a result, this prevailing mind-state spills over to personnel responsible for interacting with distressed and distressing students. Such personnel find it difficult to establish boundaries and set limits.</p> <p>In constructing a structured environment in which to engage distressed students, it is useful to depart from the prevailing culture and when necessary, center in the mind-state of constructing barriers to exposure. This might include explicit barriers to abusive speech, to harmful behavior (e.g., the University of Illinois's policy of self-welfare following a suicide attempt), and to discontinuing discussions about a grievance after a student has exhausted all routes of appeal. There are times when the most effective environment is one that deliberately disengages from students around precise matters, or one that precisely alternates between times and arenas of engagement and times and arenas of non-engagement.</p>

<p>Focusing on what is most important versus what is most relevant:</p>	<p>A person can be located either in a mind-state that has them focus on what is most important or a mind-state that has them focus on what is most relevant. An individual focused on what is most important, is focused on what might happen next or what might happen next as the result of a course of action. When a person is focused on what is most relevant, he or she puts aside what is most important in favor of focusing on what is conceivably possible to accomplish. Interactions with distressed and distressing students often encourage untrained personnel to focus on what is most important and through this focus, on their worst fears of violence, self-harm, litigation and media scrutiny. Unfortunately, we cannot predict what will happen next and focusing on the future for extended periods of time, can leave personnel in a state of panic and indecision and render them unable to commit to complex courses of action. Personnel who find themselves stuck in such an orientation often become hypervigilant, anxious and risk-adverse. The countervailing mind-state that focuses on relevance allows its bearer to be aware of the worst things that can happen, but allows them to put aside matters over which they have no control and approach complex situations in a coordinated, step-wise fashion.</p>
<p>Being in charge versus being not in charge:</p>	<p>A person can perceive himself or herself to either be in-charge of a given object, decision or domain or to be not in-charge. Students in distress often perceive themselves to be in-charge of choices, property and personhood that is appropriately seen as under the dominion of someone else. Institutions of higher education often have a habit of being culturally oblivious to small-scale transgressions of these structures among distressed and distressing students. These transgressions can be an institution's best tool in assessing students and guiding future interactions.</p> <p>Ideally, universities need to construct an environment in which they take great care in assigning students and the institution precise regions of in-chargeness. By tracking a student's ability to adhere to these regions and carefully adjusting this environment, an institution is in the best position to meet its objectives of engaging with distressed students, while at the same time protecting its staff from possible acts of violence.</p>

Appendix 1
A taxonomy of disruptive behavior

1. In the context of an actual, ended, hoped for, or imagined romantic and/or sexual relationship
 - a. Property damage (slashed tires, broken windows)
 - b. Dating violence
 - c. Domestic violence
 - d. Harassment
 - e. Stalking
 - f. Sexual assault

2. In the context of a formal or informal grievance
 - a. Rude, obnoxious, disrespectful behavior
 - b. Intimidating and threatening behavior
 - c. Violent behavior
 - d. Persisting pursuit of a desired outcome in the face of an adverse judgment
 - e. Persisting pursuit of a desired outcome by shopping the grievance from unit to unit
 - f. Serial grievances

3. In the context of classroom instruction
 - a. Disruptive noises and interruptions
 - b. Disruptive speech targeted at the instructor
 - c. Disruptive speech targeted at other classmates
 - d. Inappropriate behavior directed at the instructor during or after the class

4. Self-harming behavior in any context
 - a. Cutting, self-mutilation
 - b. Suicide threats
 - c. Suicide attempts
 - d. Completed suicides
 - e. Alcohol use resulting in incapacitation
 - f. Untreated psychological conditions (e.g., the student who is apparently depressed, not getting out of bed, not going to classes and not seeking treatment)
 - g. Untreated medical conditions (e.g., the student who is diabetic but not taking prescribed insulin injections. Or the student who recurrently faints in class but is not seeking appropriate medical attention)
 - h. Public evidence of bulimia (e.g., leaving vomit in public places in the residence halls)
 - i. Life-threatening and untreated or undertreated anorexia

5. Other-harming behavior in any context
 - a. Threats of unspecified harm to unspecified individuals ("You haven't heard the last of this.")
 - b. Threats of unspecified harm to specified individuals ("I know where you live.")
 - c. Threats of specified (i.e., time, location, means, consequence) harm to unspecified individual ("I have a gun and I was well trained in the Marines.")
 - d. Threats of specified harm to specified individual(s)
 - e. Threats to use means of mass violence to specified or unspecified groups or communities (Columbine-like threats)

6. In the context of a parent's relationship with their student son or daughter
 - a. Persistent grievancing on behalf of their son or daughter
 - b. Harassment of their son or daughter for a desired outcome
 - c. Threats of violence
 - d. Acts of violence

7. In the context of a constituted group, gang or fraternity/sorority
 - a. Property crime or vandalism
 - b. Harassment of an individual and or group
 - c. Threats of violence directed at an individual or group
 - d. Acts of violence directed at an individual or group

8. In the context of ethnic or racial prejudice
 - a. Hateful graffiti or postings
 - b. Hateful speech
 - c. Hate-motivated threats of violence
 - d. Hate-motivated violence

Appendix 2:
Common phenomena in the grievance systems of
institutions of higher education

1. Persistent grievant: The persistent grievant persists in the pursuit of his or her grievance and either ignores or can't accept the institution's decision. There are some individuals who will persist until the institution takes active steps to bring the grievance to a close.
2. Aggressive grievant: The aggressive grievant uses force or the threat of force in the pursuit of his or her grievance. Examples of aggressiveness might include loudness, use of profanity, and malicious tone of voice.
3. Threatening grievant: The threatening grievant threatens either the university or members of the university with consequences if the desired outcome is not forthcoming. Threats may be vague and imprecise, "You've not heard the last of this." The threatened outcome might include violence, legal action or media attention.
4. Informal grievant: The informal grievant persists in making a complaint informally, despite the fact that the complaint is of such a nature or despite the fact that the remedy is of such a nature, that it can only be resolved by the filing of a formal grievance. Despite repeated requests and appeals, the individual refuses to file a formal grievance.
5. Malicious accusation: There are instances in which grievants make malicious accusations about the university, members of its community, or events that have transpired. The grievant might make a claim of malicious treatment and tender this as a justification of their own maliciousness in the grievance process.
6. Vague remedy: There are grievants who register complaints or accusations but appear to have no recognizable goal or objective. When asked what remedy he or she is seeking, he or she can provide no additional clarification.
7. Unrealistic remedy: There are grievants who seek a remedy that is impossible or unrealistic. For example, he or she might want a staff member fired, might want a position of employment or might want a large financial settlement.
8. Simultaneous grievances: There are situations in which a grievant is making multiple complaints simultaneously.

9. Sequential grievances: There are situations in which the grievant will see a grievance process to its natural conclusion and then lodge another related or unrelated grievance, ad infinitum.
10. Grieving the grievance officer or grievance process: There are grievants who in the course of the grievance process, lodge a complaint about the grievance officer or the grievance process. Typically, the institution requires that he or she begin a new grievance with a different officer.
11. Menacing but not threatening: There are grievants who step right up to the line of making a threat but don't cross over. In actions and statements, these grievants appear agitated, desperate, but fall short of declaring any intent to commit violent action. For example "I don't know how much longer I can take this harassment by the university."