

Suicide Data

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Most mental health experts agree that keeping tabs on student suicides could help colleges and universities plan their responses and prevent future deaths.

But, as an Associated Press investigation recently found, most of the country's largest institutions don't track the data. And universities that do, experts said in interviews with *Inside Higher Ed*, gather it unevenly and need to address the topic carefully with their students and the public to avoid glorifying suicide.

Counseling offices likely record attempted and completed suicides in some form, but loosely, said Lisa Adams, director of counseling at the University of West Georgia and the president of the American College Counseling Association, one of two professional higher education counseling associations. Representatives from the Association for University and College Counseling Center Directors did not make themselves available for comment.

Adams said her office would need to review the individual notes of patients to tally up both suicide attempts and deaths because the software the university runs does not generate that statistic without it being programmed in.

But that's only the deaths that her counseling center might hear about, Adams said. Often, suicides occur off campus. Students don't always seek therapy, she said -- only about 8 to 10 percent of students do. Student affairs offices might maintain the data differently or hear about deaths before counselors, Adams said.

There's also no consistent rubric for when a university should or should not count a suicide death. Often, students with suicidal ideations will drop out, and if they die subsequently, Adams said, universities could make a judgment call whether or not to include the death in their numbers, even if that student was enrolled just the semester before. She said of the three suicides with ties to West Georgia in the last decade, all of the students had left the university.

A student could end their life while visiting from another campus, she said. Or it could happen over a holiday break.

"Do I or do I not count that? No one knows the answer," Adams said.

The public can also be misinformed about suicide cases, such as one instance when a young man ended his life in a public park and was assumed to be a West Georgia student -- he was not, Adams said, which was eventually confirmed by the university's public relations team.

If one college was more diligent than another in tracking numbers, it could appear to have a crisis on its hands when, in reality, another institution could have equal or higher numbers, said Chris Brownson, associate vice president for student affairs and director of the counseling

and mental health center at the University of Texas at Austin.

"The devil is kind of in the details," Brownson said. "What I don't think would be helpful for this is to go the way of some sort of system where a college is evaluated based on the number of deaths of suicide. There are so many factors that go into that."

The AP's investigation found that of the largest 100 colleges in the country, 46 keep track of suicide statistics -- 43 did not at all, nine didn't track suicides consistently and two did not provide answers.

"If you don't collect the data, you're doing half the job," Gordon Smith, a former U.S. senator from Oregon whose son ended his life in 2003, told the AP. "We need information in mental health if we're actually going to be able to better tailor health and healing."

The U.S. Department of Education does instruct institutions to collect information on student deaths, but not necessarily their causes, including suicide.

No institutions publicize such data.

Adams said she feared a contagion effect if colleges were to make public such numbers. A concern for mental health professionals is copycats, in which a person will learn details about a suicide victim, which may prompt more deaths.

She said even something as seemingly innocuous as publishing statistics could set off some students.

"Students are really sensitive to this issue, this generation of students, anxious and depressed already, really high levels of alert. Their ability to cope with that kind of news is already poor," Adams said.

But she also said that she finds great value in holding on to that type of data. The perception following a high-profile suicide is that a "suicide problem" exists on campus -- such data can show the scale of an issue, Adams said.

Brownson said he found no issue in sharing any numbers regarding suicide. He pointed out that the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention release information about suicide without any apparent harm -- but not college-level data.

"I feel if done properly those issues could be managed," he said.