

## **IT'S NOT OUR FAULT**

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*Four faculty members are enjoying a late spring morning chit-chatting in the departmental suite. A call to the department secretary from the Dean's Office breaks the mood by indicating that a young man who had just graduated had just been found dead in his parents' house; a suicide. The case is presented as a one act play with the four faculty members having very different reactions concerning what if any intervention could have been initiated by faculty members and peers.*

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### **SETTING THE STAGE**

Sheila, Departmental Secretary for Management and Marketing, arrives early this Monday. She loves mid-May. Graduation is finished. Only a few faculty members are teaching and the atmosphere is very relaxed. She scans the departmental suite and sees no faculty. She checks for phone messages and emails. All clear, so she heads down to the Dean's Office suite to chat with the office staff.

It's about 9:30 when she pops back into the departmental suite. She now sees four faculty members standing near her desk laughing and chit-chatting about nothing. Joe, a confirmed bachelor and senior full professor, is the only one teaching in the first summer term. Opinionated and socially conservative, Joe believes college students expect too much hand-holding. Donna, married with children in college, is socially liberal and is known to "mother" her students, but with high expectations and standards. Liza has two school-age children. Steeped in Catholic tradition, she sometimes feels conflicted about modern social behaviors. Frank, a self-described Jeffersonian Libertarian, is a social liberal, but with conservative fiscal views. He tends to take the middle-of-the-road.

Sheila exchanges teases and pleasantries as she bids them good morning. Moving toward her desk, the phone rings.

### **THE NEXT THIRTY MINUTES**

Sheila (even more animated than usual): "Good morning, Management and Marketing, Sheila speaking. How may I help you?"

The four colleagues barely tone-down their bantering until Sheila waves her hand briskly. Almost instinctively the group comes to a hush.

Sheila (business-like): “Has anyone had Jeremy Oxnard in class?”

Joe (with a smart-Alec tone): “Oh yes, a really bright kid, but really messed-up on drugs and booze. Did he finally get caught and land in jail?”

Sheila (monotone, but matter of fact): “That was the Dean’s Office. His body was found last night at his parents’ house; an apparent suicide.

In that instant the life was sucked out of the suite. The bantering was gone. The mood was somber and a few tears began to streak down faces.

Joe (clearly shocked): “That’s tough, but not unexpected. Hey folks, we are not babysitters. Anyway, he graduated last week!”

Donna (exasperated): “Joe, how can you be so cold?! He was part of our university family. He was one of our majors!”

Joe (defensively): “Don’t get me wrong. It’s a terrible tragedy for all involved, but these “kids” are young adults that have to learn to be responsible!”

Liza (voice quivering): “He was in two of my classes. There were several days when I smelled alcohol on his breath as he asked me questions after class. I didn’t say anything.”

Donna (objectively): “I never smelled alcohol, but I noticed his erratic attendance. It really hurt his course grade. He barely sneaked by. I never confronted him about any reasons for him missing class.”

Joe (trying to interject calm): “Now ladies, don’t beat yourselves up. You do your jobs very well. If all students did their jobs, things like this wouldn’t happen. Anyway, where were his peers? What did they do to help him?”

Frank (questioning): “I’m not sure about where anyone’s actual responsibility lies with something like this. But, Joe, I do see their point. I had noticed a glazed look about Jeremy and I never said anything either. I think we all notice things that make us question students’ personal lives. Maybe we SHOULD get involved.”

Liza (crying openly): “If I had reported his condition, maybe some formal action could have resulted in some real help that could have saved him.”

Donna (perplexed): “But what exactly can we do? Don’t they claim that there is a fine line between taking action and a student’s right-to-privacy?”

Joe (defiantly): “You’re absolutely right, Donna. That’s a good reason for us to stay

out of it. You could bring a lot of trouble down on yourself by sticking your nose where it doesn't belong!"

Liza (demonstrably): "Joe, we have to be involved. What we need is a prescribed set of actions."

Frank (thinking aloud): "Maybe the University has some unknown policy that would apply here. And, anyway, what does the law say?"

Donna (introspectively): "I don't know. Why don't we run these questions up through the administration and see what we find out."

The four faculty members continue their discussion, rehashing major points, until Joe notices the clock flip to 10:00.

Joe (hurried): "Oh, my gosh. Sorry, folks, but I have to run to class."

Joe pops open the suite doors and they calmly begin to swing shut as he bolts into the hall.

Joe (with finality): "Remember, it is not our fault, and anyway, he had already graduated!"

## **EPILOGUE**

During the next academic year, the University Administration explored approaches that might help faculty feel comfortable identifying student problems and taking appropriate actions. Of course, University Counseling Services had always been available but communication of their services and appropriate steps for intervention and referral had only been loosely communicated. This would have to change and clear communication would have to be part of any formal program for faculty.

Working with University Counseling Services and the Offices of Student Affairs and Academic Assessment a two-pronged approach was developed. First, as part of the University Retention Program the university joined a national program that administers a questionnaire to all new freshmen. Each student respondent gets a customized report that identifies their current status on a number of criteria shown to be associated with healthy assimilation and student life development such as involvement, commitment to the school, effort, expectations, and personal development. In addition to the student, select contact faculty, staff, and administrators have electronic access to assigned students' reports. The reporting system uses color coding to alert viewers of potential problem areas. Thus, for each student, multiple contacts will see the report and can identify potential risks for retention as well as more serious concerns. Contacts can interact with other contacts within the system to facilitate intervention, but avoid redundancy.

The second prong is aimed at helping faculty develop skills to identify at risk students during in-class and out-of-class encounters, learn how to approach such students, and how to refer them appropriately for help. University Counseling Services procured a customizable commercial internet-based faculty training program. The program is voluntary, self-paced, and covers each of the above mentioned areas with both audio and text. Multiple practice scenarios are provided to allow each participant to choose courses of action and then get feedback about the appropriateness of the course chosen. Within the program, all potential campus offices are listed that might be of help for identified at-risk students. Each listing includes a description of the types of problems that can be addressed. Detailed contact information for each office is provided. Most individuals can complete the program in an hour or less. Once a faculty member has completed the training, she/he has access to the support materials available from the vendor site.

The two-pronged effort was rolled-out at the beginning of this Fall semester. Training is ongoing. Initial student reports are just now beginning to be available. No data has been shared about the percentage of faculty that have completed the voluntary training.

Will it work? Only time will tell!