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Colleges help vulnerable students caught in 'Red Zone'

Add training programs to keep the first weeks of college safer

By **Matt Rocheleau**

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SUZANNE KREITER/GLOBE STAFF

Tufts University students listened to a safety seminar Monday at the school.

College administrators call it the Red Zone: The weeks between Labor Day and Thanksgiving when college students are believed to be most at risk of sexual assault. It is also a period when students are more prone to accidental injury and alcohol poisoning, experts say.

The dangers hit home this month when two students were injured in separate falls from windows at Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Wesleyan University. So far this autumn, at least eight freshmen have died at US colleges, with causes including alcohol poisoning, accidental falls, car accidents, and suicide, according to the [Inside Higher Ed](#) website.

With the Red Zone in mind, colleges in the region are taking greater steps to reach students early, fine-tuning training and educational programs aimed at keeping them safe.

Freshmen are particularly vulnerable because most are living away from home for the first time, trying to fit in with new

groups, and may be drinking or using other drugs for the first time or in greater amounts than in the past. And first-year students likely won't, at first, have close friends looking out for them.

“They might take risks,” said Becky Lockwood, associate director of the Center for Women and Community at University of Massachusetts Amherst. “It’s a normal part of development where a young person takes risks when they’re in a new environment.”



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For many parents of college students, discussing the subject with their son or daughter remains taboo.

This fall, the UMass center, joining with campus residence life officials, began holding more workshops about sexual violence prevention and response for first-year students in their dorm buildings. Previously, the center’s staff would schedule workshops only after a residence assistant requested them.

Trainers are focusing on bystander intervention training, teaching friends and acquaintances when to step in if they see someone making bad decisions while drunk, for example. Such acts can be useful not only to prevent sexual assault but also to help head off other dangerous behavior.

“It teaches students what to look for and how to intervene if they



SUZANNE KREITER/GLOBE STAFF

Colleges, including Tufts, are particularly focused on safety efforts for students during the first several weeks of the year.

see a potentially dangerous situation,” Lockwood said. “We want to do as many of these workshops as we can during the first six weeks,” she added.

In recent years, UMass has also established first-year-only dorms, where students move in early and take part in special programs to help them adjust to campus life.

At Northeastern University, self-defense training is offered year-round, but more classes are scheduled during the fall, according to campus spokeswoman Casey Bayer. The university also runs alcohol prevention and education programming throughout October, the month when National Collegiate Alcohol Awareness Week is held.

Early in the fall semester, Boston College runs “Healthapalooza,” an afternoon of interactive programming to promote health and safety, including information about healthy relationships, bystander intervention training, and alcohol and drug education.

“It’s really helpful for students to get these resources right away,” said Elise Tofias Phillips, director of BC’s health promotion office.

Tufts University reaches out to first-year students in a variety of ways to advise them how to avoid trouble, said spokeswoman Kimberly Thurler. Programs focus on topics including alcohol use, sexual misconduct, healthy relationships, and social justice.

Tufts also educates parents about the challenges students may confront during their first few weeks.

“For example, we send parents an e-booklet acknowledging some of the early risks students may face, with suggestions about beginning conversations about those issues with their students before they come to campus,” Thurler said.

Some parents said they worry about safety during the beginning of the school year — especially this year amid the rising national attention about campus sexual assault.

Nancy Kricorian, whose 18-year-old daughter is a freshman at Wesleyan, said it’s scary to think about how many victims of campus rape are assaulted during the first several weeks of college.

Kricorian, a novelist from New York City, cited a [New York Times article this summer](#) about one student's terrifying account of being raped and the troubling missteps by school officials and local prosecutors that followed. She said it became the topic of conversation at her book club, which includes several other parents who have children who started college this fall.

"All of the mothers had read it and were just in absolute shock," Kricorian said.

Still, Kricorian and her husband, producer and screenwriter James Schamus, said that both their freshman daughter and their 22-year-old daughter, a student at Columbia University, are well aware of sexual assault prevention and response, and even are peer leaders on the matter.

"We talk about this stuff all the time, and they really keep on top of these issues themselves," Schamus said.

Many recommend that parents sit their children down before the school year starts, or at least early in the semester, to talk through what they might try to do to prevent sexual assault and what they would do if they were a victim.

"It's a very difficult conversation to have, because a lot of parents are in a healthy amount of denial," said Colby Bruno, an attorney at the Victim Rights Law Center in Boston, a nonprofit that gives free legal services to sexual assault victims. "No parent ever wants to look at the statistics and say 'that's going to be my kid.' "

Researchers caution that most evidence about increased safety risks in the first several weeks of college is anecdotal, but they endorse the idea of teaching students about the dangers as early as possible.

"I think if you start students off with education about safety procedures and how to stay safe, they're going to be better off in the long run, and I don't know of a single school that lets up in the spring," said national campus safety expert S. Daniel Carter, director of the 32 National Campus Safety Initiative.

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