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ANDREW SMASH

Suicide: Opposing legislative bill rejected

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within three days of receiving a letter to that effect and may be asked to attend three subsequent assessment sessions in order to meet standards for self care.

Students who are placed on leave are immediately withdrawn from classes and receive tuition and fee refunds. The vice president for student affairs can also decide to grant incompletes if the leave occurs late in the term.

A long process

Leavitt said a team within the Student Affairs division has been working for about two years on how to help the campus understand and prevent suicide. She said officials realized about one year ago that the University's policies needed to be updated.

Leavitt said she, General Counsel to the University Melinda Grier and Holmes worked through about 15 drafts of the policy before they decided on the final proposal March 1.

A hearing on the changes will be held in April or May, allowing community members to submit written testimony, Leavitt said.

Leavitt said much of the work on the proposal involved determining who had authority over which parts of the process, allowing physicians and psychiatrists to provide input but not make final enrollment decisions.

"We don't want to sever (enrollment) unless it's so severe," she said. "Almost all of it is about helping students or getting to a voluntary leave situation."

Leavitt said students are asked to leave involuntarily in "very rare instances." Only two students have been put on involuntary leave in the last 15 years, she said.

Leavitt said some people have expressed concerns that the new policy will make it easier to force students out of school. Yet, she said, the policy is intended to clarify the resources and processes available to students.

ASUO President Adam Petkun said he has conversed with Holmes about

the changes.

"I honestly do feel pretty comfortable with what I've heard," he said. "I initially had concerns over the mandatory leave policy and have since learned from Robin that first, it's not a change, it's something they do already, and at the same time it's not something they just do willy-nilly."

Petkun said he would have questions for Holmes regarding students' readmission.

"So far she's proven to me she has the best interest of students at heart," he said.

Leavitt said the tendency toward suicide is a part of the community, but it doesn't have to happen.

"That's really what this is designed to do — get help in time for students," she said.

Holmes added that officials need to balance privacy and confidentiality concerns with basic human rights.

"Trying to balance those very important things with making sure this is a safe community for everybody is really a tough challenge," she said.

She also emphasized that the University is not dealing with mental-health emergencies as conduct issues, as she said some universities do.

Bill dies in Senate

Until recently, the new policy faced a challenge by legislation filed Feb. 14 by State Senator Bill Morrisette that would have placed constraints on Oregon universities recommending students take medication or be placed on medical leave. The bill would have allowed mandatory leave only if the student in question was "given the opportunity to pursue treatment options for the mental disorder that would not necessitate a medical leave," and the "leave of absence ends when a psychiatrist or psychologist concludes that the student does not pose a danger to self or others."

But Senate Education and Workforce Committee Chairwoman Vicki Walker told the Emerald Thursday she has decided not to hear the bill.

Don Bishoff, legislative assistant to Morrisette, previously said Senate Bill

561 was designed as a "due-process bill" that would "make sure that students have the proper procedures in place so students aren't dealt with arbitrarily by the system."

"(Morrisette) doesn't necessarily believe the UO ... is going to be arbitrary, but at the same time he thinks it's good to have rule in place to prevent arbitrariness in case it rears its ugly head," he said.

Walker said she decided not to hear it because the legislation would "get in the way" of counselors, doctors and students.

"We're talking about adults here, and I don't want to be micro-managing their care," she said.

She said she supported Morrisette's earlier attempts to regulate medication for K-12 students, but said that was "quite a different situation."

"I just think this bill would take one of the tools out of the tool box," Walker said.

She added that she appreciates the University's attempts to combat suicide.

Bishoff said the senator will support any efforts by bill creator and retired pharmacist Jim Whittenburg to introduce similar legislation in the House.

"Obviously Senator Morrisette is ... unhappy and disappointed that the bill won't get a hearing because he feels it is of considerable value," Bishoff said. "That's the way things happen sometimes."

Holmes said University officials had "very, very serious concerns about that bill" because it would have prevented nurse practitioners, primary care physicians and psychiatrists at the University from prescribing medication as they are licensed to do anywhere in the state.

"It's an ill-conceived, poorly written bill that's vague, makes no sense, and I think would be very damaging," she said. "You can't legislate that someone can't practice their profession."

Holmes said not allowing medical personnel at the University to write prescriptions would have been a "huge loss for students."

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