**Prevention programme suggestions for response to campus-based recruitment to cults and extremist groups**

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**Background**

Students the world over are recruited while on campus to a variety of ideologically extremist groups. It’s a useful time for such groups: students are at a developmental turning point, they may be away from their families and friends, and – the educators amongst us like to think – their minds are opening to the wealth of intellectual opportunities awaiting them.

Unfortunately, totalistic groups of all kinds – extreme right-wing or left-wing groups, Islamist political cults, religious, “personal growth” or New Age groups – know how to take advantage of these situational changes in students’ lives and can begin their techniques of befriending, engaging, pressuring and generally seducing. These techniques are quite well-known to scholars: draw the recruit in with a resonant message, shower the recruit with attention, gradually isolate them from friends and family and engage all their free time. Then comes the more insidious step: induce a sense of threat in the student.

If the group has effectively isolated the student from their prior network of friends and family and replaced them with only group-related “friends”, the recruit will draw closer to the group in response to feelings of fear. They will search for comfort within the group. Although some recruits may leave at various points, those who have been effectively isolated may find it too frightening to do so having cut off their prior social support. An anxious dependency, or trauma bond, is created. Such a bond creates a diminished cognitive capacity regarding the relationship in question, further disempowering the follower from taking effective action to protect their own interests. The group member is no longer autonomous – they can be directed to all kinds of actions and become exploited and deployable. A 2010 study from Michael Jacobson (Washington Institute for Near East Studies) shows that followers who drop out of terrorist groups often do so if the groups fail to effectively maintain the rupture with the follower’s friendship and family ties. But without sufficient external ties it can take years for people to break free; some never do.

A variety of extremist groups engage in this same process. Our response to their presence in educational institutions must be to engage in prevention education with students. This does not need to focus on any particular ideology or political grievance. Instead, as is being done by cutting-edge scholars and teachers around the world, it can be done by teaching students about the recruitment and conversion *processes* which are the foundation of these types of dangerous and exploitative relationships. In other words, it is behaviours rather than beliefs that must be understood and addressed.

Universities and colleges can take the lead on this and begin to raise awareness among both faculty and students about the methods and warning signs of recruitment and conversion attempts. This is not only a battle of ideas, it is a battle to understand sadly universal human responses to a set of known conditions of extreme social influence.

There are many political and religious cults currently recruiting on campuses globally. Scholars of terrorism such as Jessica Stern at Harvard and Phil Zimbardo at Stanford are highlighting these cultic recruitment and conversion methods in their research on terrorism. Martha Crenshaw, a leading terrorism studies scholar, states that recruits to terrorism do not deliberately seek this path – they most often end up as terrorists “by accident” – usually on their way to quite different goals. My own research supports this view. There is a good deal of information on how extremist political and/or religious groups such as these operate to trip up unwary individuals. Engaging in ideologically neutral education about these methods can help students protect themselves from life-altering, sometimes life-ending involvements, and in the process also take one useful step to protect the general public.

**Educational approaches**

Universities and colleges can employ a variety of approaches to disseminate information on recruitment and conversion processes. Below are some possible approaches. A small pilot with appropriate goals and evaluation would be helpful for each campus. As with public health campaigns, a culture of awareness is needed, which ideally requires education at a variety of levels. To re-emphasize a critical point: *this type of education does not single out any particular faith or political viewpoint.* It is about the processes of recruitment and conversion and the structures of closed, totalitarian organizations and their corresponding exclusive belief systems.

1. **A series of workshops and presentations** open to students and faculty:

* Former extremists or former members of political and other types of cultic organizations to speak about their personal experiences of conversion.
* Academic experts on recruitment and conversion can be invited to speak. (I can suggest speakers in both these categories.)

1. **Information session** to be included in induction for first year students (“inoculation approach”):

* Written materials with warning signs, basic processes outlined
* Short presentation by faculty member, including information on who to contact should a student experience recruitment pressures (for support, not for monitoring purposes).

1. **Specific short courses or workshops** to train staff, faculty or peer mentors in awareness of recruitment and conversion processes.
2. **Inter-disciplinary 2nd or 3rd year course** on totalitarian organizations and ideologies (“contagion approach”). A sample syllabus is available for such a course.

A further breakdown of resources required can be provided for any or all of these options.