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### After 3 Suspected Suicides, Cornell Reaches Out



Niko Kallianiotis for The New York Times

Patrols have been placed on bridges at Cornell University.

By TRIP GABRIEL

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ITHACA, N.Y. — All weekend, Cornell University's residential advisers knocked on dorm rooms to inquire how students were coping.

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Niko Kallianiotis for The New York Times

The Thurston Avenue Bridge at Cornell University, which is working to curb campus suicides.

On Monday and Tuesday, the start of a stressful exam week before spring break, professors interrupted classes to tell students they cared for them not just academically, but personally. Both days, the university president, Dr. David J. Skorton, took out a full-page ad in the campus paper, The Cornell Daily Sun, saying: "Your well-being is the foundation on which your success is built. If you learn anything at Cornell, please learn to ask for help."

The university is on high alert about the mental health of its students after the apparent suicides of three of them in less than a month in the deep gorges rending the campus. The deaths, two on successive days last week, have cast a pall over the university and revived talk of Cornell's reputation — unsupported, say officials — as a high-stress "suicide school."

"I think everybody's kind of shaken. I know I am," said Nicole Wagner, a 19-year-old freshman from Newport Beach, Calif. "I wanted to go home."

She was crossing the Thurston Avenue Bridge, which was strewn with red carnations and affixed with fresh stickers for a suicide prevention telephone line.

On Thursday, the body of a sophomore engineering student, William Sinclair, of Chevy Chase, Md., was recovered from the rugged gorge more than 70 feet below the bridge,

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where the fierce waters of Fall Creek sluice through a narrow corridor. The body of Bradley Ginsburg, a freshman from Boca Raton, Fla., was found in the same vicinity on Feb. 17.

Then on Friday, Matthew Zika, a junior engineering student from Lafayette, Ind., died when he dropped from a suspension foot bridge a short distance downstream, according to the university. Rescue workers have yet to recover his body in the rain-swollen creek.

The Ithaca Police Department is investigating both of last week's deaths, but the university is responding as if they were suicides. Besides aggressive mental health outreach, Cornell has stationed guards on the bridges through the end of the week.

"While we know that our gorges are beautiful features of our campus, they can be scary places at times like this," Susan Murphy, the vice president for student and academic services, said in a video message posted on a new Web site, [caringcommunity.cornell.edu](http://caringcommunity.cornell.edu).

As disturbing as the recent deaths are, they are just the latest of 10 by enrolled students this academic year, including deaths from illness, accident and no fewer than six ruled as suicides by the county medical examiner or still under investigation, according to campus officials.

Last Thursday, e-mail blasts went out to 35,000 students and faculty and staff members acknowledging Mr. Sinclair's death, followed by a message to parents and one from the college president.

"Unbelievably, shockingly, we had to do the same thing the next day," said Thomas Bruce, the vice president for communications.

Despite the half-dozen known or suspected suicides this year, Timothy Marchell, a clinical psychologist in Cornell's campus health services whose specialties include suicide, said that, historically, Cornell suicides have not been higher than what national statistics predict for a university population of 20,000 students; about two per year.

Between 2000 and 2005, there were 10 confirmed suicides, Dr. Marchell said, and from the beginning of 2006 through the beginning of this academic year, there were none.

Dr. Marchell said he was "well acquainted with the perception of Cornell as a suicide school," having grown up in Ithaca and graduated from Cornell. But it is an urban legend, he said, largely fueled by the fact that suicides there are often shockingly public.

"When someone dies by suicide in a gorge, it's a very visible public act," he said.

Cornell's mental health outreach in recent years, which has attracted national attention, is intended to bring students who are at risk, and who might not seek help, into counseling. Custodians are trained to look for signs of emotional trouble when cleaning out dorms; therapists hold open-door hours at 10 campus locations; and a faculty handbook advises professors about how to spot students' distress in its many contemporary forms, from disturbing artwork to clothes that disguise self-mutilation.

Despite these efforts, Dr. Skorton said in an interview, "We are not getting the job done," adding that suicide among young people is a national health crisis and is not specific to one campus. Administrators at Cornell have been "very intensively reassessing" existing programs in recent weeks, he said.

Around campus, students and staff wondered whether some combination of familiar stresses — the long upstate New York winter, classroom demands of an Ivy League university — and new factors, like the evaporation of internships and jobs for graduates during a bleak recession, had provoked the recent deaths.

Dr. Marchell cautioned that it is almost impossible to link broad causes to suicide rates, that "the psychology of suicide can be very individual."

He and others, however, are concerned that students' deaths may lower barriers for others who are contemplating it. "We have to be thinking about the potential influence on the collective psychology," he said.

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Mr. Zika, the most recent to die, was remembered by friends not as lonely and stressed-out, but as quick to laugh and a caring friend — he drove for hours during the recent winter break from New York to Indiana visiting friends, recalled Deirdre Mulligan, one of those he dropped in on.

INSIDE NYTIMES.COM



Mr. Zika, who had been a star baseball player in high school, played Ultimate Frisbee with Cornell friends, wrote poetry on his [Facebook](#) page and had a tattoo with a lyric from the rock band Incubus: "If the wind blew me in the right direction, would I even care? I would."

Nicole Huynh, a freshman who began dating Mr. Zika last semester, said in an e-mail message: "During this current semester, some who knew him more than others could see he was having a rough time. He'd talk, but it wasn't as much. He slept more than usual. Didn't feel motivated about some things. Tried distancing himself, little by little."

She does not think the stress of studies pushed him to the edge, but rather troubles he carried from early in life. She suspected he was having suicidal thoughts, and both she and Ms. Mulligan said close friends had urged him to seek counseling, but they did not know if he did. The university declined to comment, citing privacy laws.

Ms. Huynh said she and Mr. Zika agreed to suspend their relationship a few weeks ago as he pushed her away.

"Many people listened and cared a lot about him," Ms. Huynh said. "But no matter how great his support system was, his mind was set, and he was going to do whatever he wanted to do."

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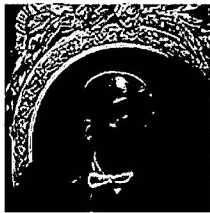
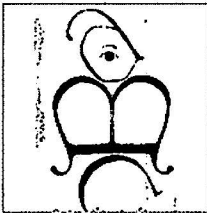
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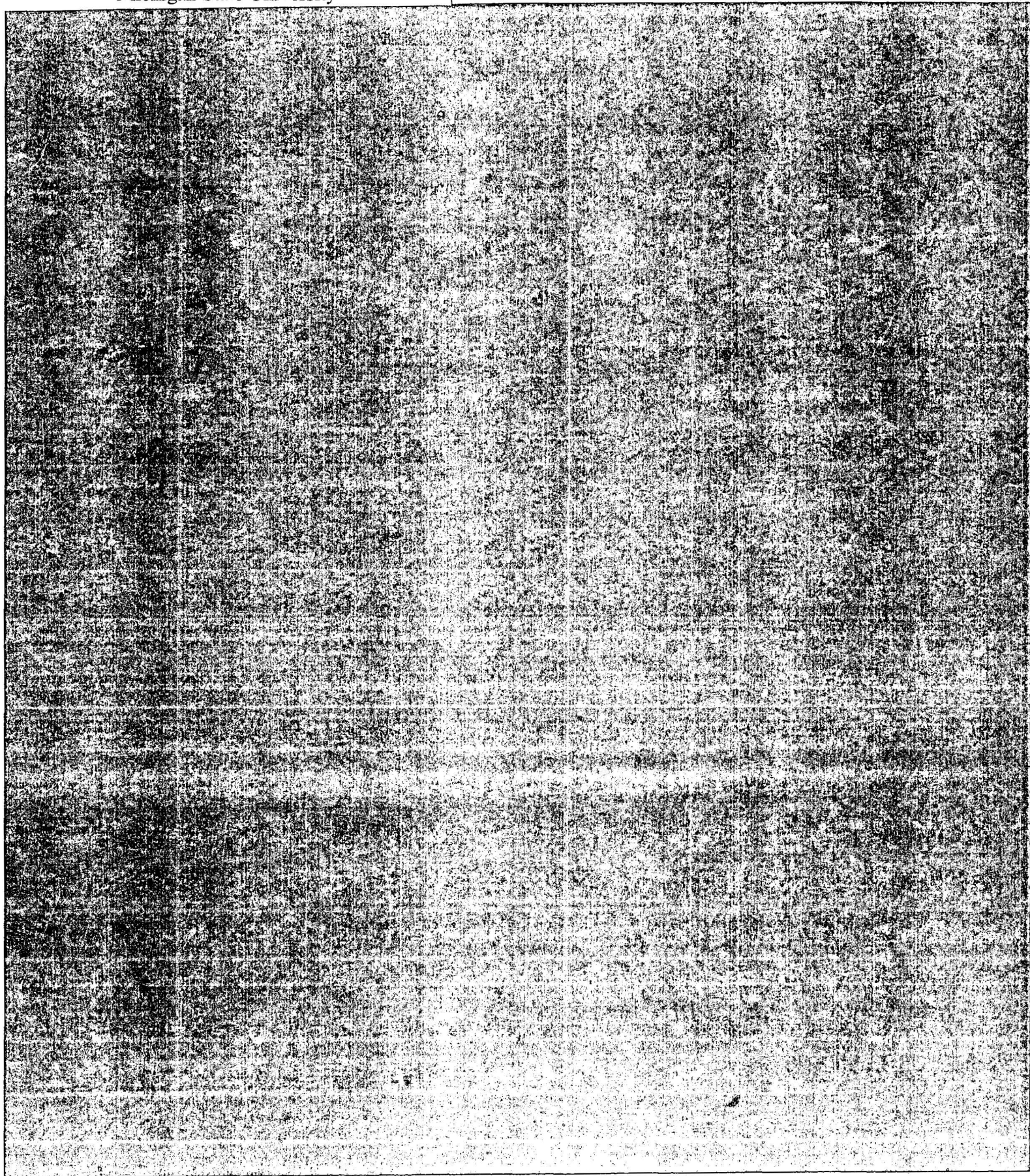
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