

Meeting held during via teleconferencing

On November 20, 2010

To discuss the suicides happening at IIT Kanpur

As a plan for the action item the following mail was sent to all alumni by the President

Dear Fellow Alumni,

On behalf of the IIT Kanpur Alumni Association Board, it is with great sadness that I am informing you of the recent suicide of Ms. Madhuri Sale, a 4th Year B Tech student at IITK. We extend our condolences and heartfelt sympathies to Madhuri's family and friends.

From what we have learned so far, the suicide may have been the result of a number of factors, including possible academic, personal relationships, and health issues. As an investigation is ongoing, it will be premature to speculate on the underlying causes of the suicide.

On Saturday, November 20, 2010, the IITK Alumni Association (AA) Board held an emergency meeting to discuss this issue, and what has been done and can be done about the suicide, the 8th in a period of 5 years. After a string of suicides in 2006 through 2008, the IITK Alumni Association convened a task team under the leadership of Dr. Ram Misra (IITK BTech 1968), then president of IITK Foundation. The task team produced a position paper (http://www.iitkalumni.org/Position_paper_suicide.pdf) with recommendations that were discussed with the IITK administration. These recommendations, including revamped counseling services, special training and awareness programs, and provision of psychiatrists were acted upon. This was greatly facilitated by funds collected by the Class of 1981 for their silver jubilee reunion. Perhaps as a result of these programs, this is the first suicide case in almost two years, a very significant drop from the rate of two cases a year prior to the changes in the program. While it is difficult to conclude any pattern based on one data point, however we feel it is worth pointing it out at this juncture.

Unfortunately the steps taken at and by IITK have not completely prevented suicides. We can all have our opinions as to the major causes, ranging from blaming teachers and administration, too much academic pressure, students up till late at night and not attending classes, isolation caused by "virtual world", parental and society pressures, fixed mind set vs. growth mind set where any failure is seen as a final calamity, lack of personal support system, and relationship issues. While counseling and awareness has helped, it has not been enough. At the IITK AA Board meeting, including IITK faculty and administration, we discussed as to what more we could do. Some of the ideas generated, which we will be putting into action as soon as possible include:

- 1) Involve students of all classes (all levels of UG and PG) and different performance levels in further defining these solutions. We plan to have meetings with the students and alumni in early January 2011 at IITK to develop a strategy which includes inputs from students directly.
- 2) Prepare a video focusing attention on the issues related to stress, suicides and changing mindsets and expectations. The video will also show real life examples of highly successful alumni who took 6 or 7 years to graduate.
- 3) Increased awareness of students, specially wing monitors, as to how to recognize the signs of depression or some one who may be contemplating suicide, so help can be obtained.
- 4) Improved accessibility to Counseling services and "Help Line".
- 5) Improvements in academic curriculum to provide increased flexibility and additional programs for inculcating a growth mind set that sees that a failure can be a learning experience, a stepping stone to success.
- 6) Increased communication and interaction with parents.
- 7) Establishing student-alumni mentoring network.

When we look at a suicide at IITK, it should be noted that India has the highest suicide rate amongst its student population. Can we and should we be better at IITK than the national norm – absolutely. Sweeping changes may be needed through out the education system, as well as in parental and society thinking, and in the way we emphasize intense competition (starting with JEE), and the focus on grades rather than learning. IITK was the first to introduce continuous evaluation and focus on learning instead of marks and grades, perhaps it is time to make some changes again, and IITK with the help of its students, faculty and alumni can lead the way.

Finally, we are in on-going communication with the IITK administration and will keep you posted on new developments and actions as we learn of them.

Your ideas and suggestions on this important and timely subject of preventing suicides are most welcome.

Warm regards,
Rakesh Pandey
President, Alumni Association