

State of Security at US Colleges and Universities: A National Stakeholder Assessment and Recommendations

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ABSTRACT

In 2004 the US Department of Justice, Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, sponsored a National Summit on Campus Public Safety. The summit brought together various stakeholders including campus police and security officials, local police chiefs, college and university faculty and administrators, federal officials, students and parents, and community leaders to address the issues and complexities of campus safety. Delegates to the summit identified key issues in campus safety and security, which included establishing a national center on campus safety, balancing traditional open environments with the need to secure vulnerable sites, improving coordination with state and local police, reducing internal fragmentation, elevating professionalism, and increasing eligibility of campus police and security agencies to compete for federal law enforcement funds. Focus on “active shooters” on campus, resulting from the Virginia Tech incident, should not diminish attention placed on the broader, more prevalent safety and security issues facing the nation’s educational campuses. Recommendations resulting from the summit called for establishing a national agenda on campus safety, formation of a national center on campus public safety, and increased opportunity for campus police and security agencies to compete for federal and state funds. (*Disaster Med Public Health Preparedness*. 2007;1(Suppl 1):S47–S50)

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There are approximately 4000 Title IV (Higher Education Act of 1995) colleges and universities in the United States, serving a student population in excess of 15 million. These institutions employ and serve several million faculty, staff, and visitors.¹ Title IV institutions are those that meet criteria to participate in federal student financial aid programs. In addition, approximately 1200 community colleges (of which 145 are private and 31 are tribal) serve the nation, representing the fastest growing sector of higher education. More than 20,000 campus police and security officers protect these institutions.²

The shooting tragedy at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University (Virginia Tech), which led to the deaths of 33 people including the shooter, brought immediate attention to safety and security on the campuses of the nation’s colleges and universities. The resulting national dialogue on “active shooters” immediately overshadowed long-needed, broader discussion on the safety and security of colleges and universities. (An active shooter is defined as an armed person who has used deadly force and continues to do so with unrestricted access to additional victims.³) The US Senate Committee on Homeland

Security and Government Affairs held hearings on the subject within days of the Virginia Tech shootings.⁴ National news and popular media raised questions about student safety, repeatedly drawing parallels to Columbine High School in Colorado (April 20, 1999), the University of Texas clock tower shootings (August 1, 1966), and the shootings at the Amish schoolhouse in Pennsylvania (October 2, 2006).

Since the events of September 11, 2001, colleges and universities have been cited as soft, vulnerable targets to acts of terror.⁵ Campus-related concerns such as binge drinking and other forms of alcohol abuse, sexual assault, suicide, and postgame riots and rampages have been addressed for years,⁶ and these remain among the most significant safety-related issues facing colleges and universities.⁷ Similarly, the issue of guns and other weapons on campus has been discussed for some time, with a 2002 study suggesting that as many as 4% of students have access to a firearm on campus.⁸ Although deaths by gunfire on college and university campuses are tragic, the number over the past 40 years remains small when compared to per capita incidents in cities and counties.⁹

If progress is to occur, then awareness of the security

and safety issues facing the nation's campuses and how to approach them are essential. This article summarizes these issues, as identified in part through a national summit, and suggests several approaches to addressing them.

A NATIONAL STAKEHOLDER ASSESSMENT

In 2004 the National Summit on Campus Public Safety was held at Johns Hopkins University. Sponsored by the US Department of Justice, Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, it brought together police and security professionals, university administrators, students, and representatives of federal law enforcement and homeland security agencies. The summit did not include representatives of public health or emergency medicine, which was recognized as a weakness by some of the attending delegates. Two years before the Virginia Tech incident, this summit raised a myriad of concerns, called for and suggested a national agenda on campus safety, and set forth a series of short- and long-term recommendations.¹⁰

A year before the summit, a list of key issues facing the nation's college and university campuses was developed by the Mid-Atlantic Regional Community Policing Institute, 1 of 25 institutes nationwide supported by the Department of Justice, Office of Community Oriented Policing Services. Twenty key issues were identified based on a review of the literature and interviews with campus police and security officials, supervisors and executives in police and sheriffs departments, college and university administrators, fire/emergency medical services officials, and others. These issues served as a catalyst for discussion during the national summit.

A common set of issues emerged from both the national summit and Mid-Atlantic Regional Community Policing Institute review. The issues varied based on a number of factors. Most important were the type of college or university, residential or transient student population, size of the student population, proximity to urban centers, frequency of special events, vulnerabilities on campus (biologicals, radiologicals, controversial research), relationship with local or state police, and importance given to the police or security operation within the college or university. Response to college campuses by law enforcement, fire/emergency medical services, public health, emergency medicine, and other first responders also varied considerably.¹¹ The following is a list of the key issues conveyed by the delegates to the National Summit on Campus Public Safety:

- Lack of a national center or institute dedicated to serving campus public safety agencies
- Lack of an ongoing national advisory board on campus public safety
- Excessive fragmentation among campus security and police agencies
- Lack of education and preparedness of college and university administrators to engage in campus security and safety issues

- Lack of models (policies and procedures, memoranda of agreement, best practices)
- Overemphasis on "one size fits all" structures, programs, policies, laws, and grants
- Lack of awareness of campus culture by state, local, and tribal police officers
- Conflicting beliefs over maintaining college campuses as open environments
- Security risks caused by storing chemicals, biologicals, radiologicals, and other potentially hazardous substances in an accessible environment
- Campuses rarely included in local and regional evacuation plans
- Lack of plans to change the campus culture to embrace prevention strategies
- Risk and vulnerability associated with special events (eg, sports, lectures, graduation)
- Lack of high-quality, affordable education for campus police and security personnel
- Colleges and universities slow to accept and incorporate the costs of homeland security
- Lack of high-quality research on campus public safety
- Lack of guidance in managing the fears of students, parents, faculty, and staff that is precipitated by several high-profile events
- Lack of attention to campus public safety as an emerging profession and discipline
- Lack of eligibility of campus police and security agencies federal and state funds made available to municipal police departments

CONSENSUS ON ISSUES

The summit represents the first gathering of a varied and multidisciplinary group of stakeholders for the sole purpose of identifying the most pressing issues in campus public safety and pertinent recommendations. The critical nature of advancing this information cannot be understated.

Developing homeland security plans, projecting needs, preparing personnel, and budgeting appropriately for increased security have been slow to evolve on the nation's college and university campuses. Beyond basic target hardening and providing essential protective equipment, colleges and universities have not budgeted adequately for homeland security. Risk analysis suggests that the vulnerability of many colleges and universities to crises and catastrophic events is low; however, there is an expectation that all colleges and universities will engage in risk analysis and implement reasonable precautions and readiness strategies. The capability to meet expectations remains low.

Campus police, security, and safety operations are highly fragmented, with wide variance in their roles, structure, and authority. There is no federal agency or other central authority that supports campus safety and security as a priority. There is no institute or center committed to improving and supporting campus police and security operations. There is no

national policy center, information clearinghouse, center for model practices, or research center dedicated to campus safety. There is no educational institution committed to campus safety and security as its primary mission.

“One size fits all” structures, strategies, programs, policies, and laws, as often suggested by federal grant providers, do not work. Colleges and universities are large, small, urban, rural, residential, transient, 2-year, 4-year, public, and private. Campus police and security agencies are equally diverse, with only the nation’s largest colleges and universities having their own full-service police departments. Security officers, generally without full police powers and unarmed, patrol most of the nation’s college campuses.¹² This fragmentation and inconsistency inhibits innovation, partnerships, and professionalism.

Few state, local, and tribal police agencies consider college and university campuses in their allocation of resources. In some jurisdictions, however, students and employees on campuses encompass the highest concentration or density of people in a locale. Few if any police academies provide patrol officers or criminal investigators with instruction in the unique policing and security needs of campuses. Community and junior colleges are less engaged in law enforcement research, planning, problem solving, and operational activities than are their 4-year and graduate counterparts.

Colleges and universities are designed for the free movement of people and materials. Target hardening of campuses may be difficult, due more to philosophical differences over access than to the cost of protective technology.¹³ One risk of an open environment is access to potentially harmful materials. There is no definitive list of hazardous or potentially dangerous materials common to university campuses.¹⁴ In the event of a hazardous materials crisis or other catastrophe, campuses present a unique set of protection and transportation dilemmas. This is a particular problem for campuses that house large residential student populations. Evacuation models rarely designate places for large numbers of students to go. College and university campuses are rarely cited in the evacuation plans of local jurisdictions. (A review of evacuation plans of large jurisdictions in the mid-Atlantic region [Pennsylvania, Delaware, Maryland, Washington, DC, Virginia] was conducted in 2005 by the Mid-Atlantic Regional Community Policing Institute for presentation to the Regional Police Chiefs/Fire Chiefs Forum.) Although efforts are underway by the International Association of Campus Law Enforcement Administrators (IACLEA) to collect critical data, there remains a lack of research on campus crime and security.

The complexities and dynamics of campus security are significant. The relationship between students and campus police or security force remains uneasy. There is lack of trust in campus officials, hesitance to report incidents, pressure to conform to stereotypes, lack of participation in campus-sponsored programs, and a general lack of a sense of safety on

campus.¹⁵ For example, little has been done to manage fear despite increased levels due to active shooter incidents. Effective fear management requires balanced information sharing to prevent overreaction and overstating concerns. It requires planning and intervention to restore people’s sense of safety and well-being. In the wake of a crisis many campus officials relinquish fear management responsibility to counseling centers and mental health agencies at a time when people turn to leaders for information and immediate relief of their apprehensions.

Attention to establishing professional standards nationally and providing quality education as keys to elevating the professional discipline of campus public safety personnel remains lacking despite the efforts of the IACLEA and the University and College Police Section of the International Association of Chiefs of Police. Participating in the accreditation process remains voluntary and a wide range of discrepancy exists between requirements for sworn and non-sworn officers.

Whether addressing active shooters, terror threats, or post-game riots/rampages, college and university administrators have a responsibility to maintain perspective and adopt measures that are proportional to the seriousness of the threat.¹⁶ For example, sexual assault and harassment on campus remains highly underreported and is a more significant concern to students and parents than the less likely headline-grabbing incidents.¹⁷ At a time when headlines and political rhetoric abound, reasonable approaches to the safety and security needs of campuses, based on risk and data analyses and common sense, are needed.

CONSENSUS ON RECOMMENDATIONS

Although numerous recommendations emerged from the national summit, 2 were identified as having the highest priority. First, a national agenda on campus safety should be developed to set forth short-term and long-term directions. It should be established through a multiagency effort and embraced by or serve as a guide for Congress, the Department of Justice, the Department of Homeland Security, and other federal, state, and nonprofit agencies and professional associations committed to the safety and well-being of the nation’s college and university campuses. Drawing input from various professions and organizations, the national agenda should set forth short-term and long-term approaches to improving campus public safety.

Second, and equally as important, a national center for campus public safety should be established to support and elevate the field, foster collaboration and cooperation among agencies, facilitate information sharing, promote research, and provide high-quality education. Among the potential components of a national center are a policy clearinghouse, research program, education initiative, best practices series, and technical assistance/outreach program. A national center has the potential to overcome the fragmentation and incon-

sistencies that permeate campus police and security operations. It should be the catalyst for problem solving, debate on issues of importance, elevation of campus safety as a profession, legislative awareness, and publication.

ADDITIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS

Other recommendations emerged from the national summit, with the following deemed to be among the most important. The Department of Justice and/or Department of Homeland Security should establish and sustain an ongoing National Advisory Panel on Campus Safety as a primary point of communication for federal agency administrators seeking to support or engage in campus safety. Allocating increased funding for research on campus public safety should be a priority of college and university administrators, federal and state funding agencies, professional associations, and private foundations. Local, state, and federal law enforcement agencies should provide officers, deputies, and troopers who work in areas (beats, sectors, zones) in which colleges and universities are located with an orientation to the characteristics, strengths, vulnerabilities, and needs of a campus. Levels of hierarchy between campus police and security chiefs and the top administrators (presidents, vice presidents, provosts, deans) should be minimized. Finally, campus police and security agencies should be allowed to compete for an increased number of federal and state grants.

POSTASSESSMENT

Since the summit was held, the national advisory panel has been formed. With the support of the Department of Justice, the panel is working to assist federal agencies in considering and implementing the recommendations cited in the summit report. Members of the advisory panel have sought input from other stakeholders, including public health, emergency medicine, and legislatures. The National Center for the Study of Preparedness and Catastrophic Event Response, comprising a consortium of colleges, universities and agencies and sponsored by the Department of Homeland Security, is engaged in providing guidance to members of the advisory panel. The National Center provides expertise in emergency medicine, public health, and disaster management to the panel's efforts. In addition, the American Council on Education joined with IACLEA in supporting the advisory panel and encouraging the formation of a national center on campus safety.¹⁸ As of this writing, the formation of the center was still under discussion.

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