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Casey Graham Brown
Texas A&M University, Commerce

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Setting Sights on Campus Safety: The Possibility of Firearms on Campus and Campus Violence Prevention

Casey Graham Brown, Ph.D.ⁱ
Texas A&M University- Commerce

PK-12 school leaders spend a sizeable amount of time discussing, facilitating, and contemplating school safety and security. University administrators do as well, although their discussion and contemplation in some states has been scattered with controversies of allowing weapons on university campuses. School administrators seek to keep weapons out; many university administrators do also, although the legislatures of multiple states have allowed their presence on university campuses.

Last year Texas legislators volleyed the issue of allowing guns on university property. I thus began to research costs. *Let's say they pass it, I pondered. How much does the typical handgun cost? How much is a holster? How much is a concealed handgun license (CHL)? How much is the preparation course for the CHL?*

Many faculty members in multiple states, whether for or against permitting weapons on campus, have been obliged to entertain the prospect of multiple armed students in a classroom with an unarmed professor. The thought begets the question *friend or foe?* If an adverse situation arose, would students be against you? Or, might those armed lend you and others protection? Might someone accidentally discharge his or her weapon, causing harm rather than protection, the alleged goal of various bills? How would unarmed students feel sitting next to students who they know or suspect may be armed, and vice versa? Would students segregate themselves with handgun possession as the discriminating factor? Would classrooms need a sentinel stationed at the door? Would we begin to make the announcement at the beginning of class: *Please silent your cell phone and engage the safety on your handgun.* And faculty meetings. . .perhaps more tense with armed individuals? Would online courses become chosen more often, driven by fear? Imagine announcing a lack of merit pay, perhaps to a group of angry, weapon-carrying faculty? How posterous my thoughts became!

Then the absurdity began to wear off. Faculty members sometimes walk to their vehicles very late at night, through often dark parking lots. We hear about tragic situations involving robbery, bodily injury, and even death. Would someone cause more violence in a bad situation on campus, presuming that the person on campus against whom he or she is perpetrating is armed, just because the victim had the right to be? Thoughts then turned to the Virginia Tech tragedy, then to the Alabama faculty member, allegedly denied tenure, who killed three colleagues during a department meeting.

How does the impending threat of possible danger affect a person? If I have a pocket knife in my purse does that threat bother you? Does a taser... a small pistol? Does a 9 mm? What if I carry a baseball bat? Does my feeling of safety trump yours? It began to remind me of issues of least restrictive environments—yours should not affect mine. Perhaps a student or professor decides

ⁱ **Dr. Casey Graham Brown** may be contacted at Casey_Brown@TAMU-Commerce.edu. Dr. Brown was President of TCPEA last year and instrumental in growth in subscriptions for the journal.

not to conceal, but to carry in the open—how does that affect others? Can a one-day concealed handgun course prepare a person for what he or she needs to know to handle and properly discharge (or not discharge) a weapon?

The presence of guns on university campuses begets a myriad of questions, many of which may never be able to be fully addressed. As faculty members we seek answers, particularly those pertaining to how university personnel can determine whether an armed person on campus means harm or good, whether an armed person knows how to handle the weapon, how to keep weapons off of campuses that do not allow them, and how to prevent and respond to crisis situations on all university campuses, whether or not they allow handguns.

Guns in America

Gun violence results in the loss of lives of thousands of people each day and impacts the lives of those who survive it. Those who cause gun violence destroy lives, devastate families, and contract “huge costs. . . in treating victims, supporting families, repairing infrastructure, prosecuting perpetrators, or as a result of lost productivity and investment” (Krug, Mercy, Dahlberg, & Zwi, 2002, p. 1083). According to Reich, Culross, and Behrman (2002),

the lethality and widespread availability of guns have worsened youth violence in this country. Gun violence is a significant cause of death and injury among young people, and imposes serious psychological, economic, and social consequences on children, families, and communities. (p. 5)

Gun Possession

The gun debate is in full swing, just as it has been for many years. Scott (1994) cited the research of Kleck, a Florida State University criminologist, who found that “armed citizens were three times more successful at repelling an attack than unarmed ones” (para. 3). According to Scott, potential perpetrators are dissuaded from committing crimes when law-following citizens have guns available to them. In contrast, Hemenway and Vrinotis (2009) stated that,

The opportunity for a law-abiding gun owner to use a gun in a socially desirable manner—against a criminal during the commission of a crime—will occur, for the average gun owner, perhaps once or never in a lifetime. . . . Other than self-defense, the use of a gun against another human is socially undesirable. Regular citizens with guns, who are sometimes tired, angry, drunk, or afraid, and who are not trained in dispute resolution, have lots of opportunities for inappropriate gun uses. People engage in innumerable annoying and somewhat hostile interactions with each other in the course of a lifetime. It should not be surprising that inappropriate, socially undesirable "self-defense" gun uses by people who believe they are law-abiding citizens outnumber the appropriate and socially beneficial use of guns. (p. 3)

Branas et al. (2009) studied the cases of 677 people shot during an assault (and 684 control participants) and found that those persons who possessed a gun were 4.46 times more likely to be shot during an assault than those persons not in possession of a gun. Further, “among gun assaults

where the victim had at least some chance to resist, this adjusted odds ratio increased to 5.45 ($p < .05$)” (para. 3). According to the Violence Prevention Center (2009), “the gun lobby has been successful at hiding the truth about crimes committed by concealed handgun permit holders by forcing most states to keep secret the identities of permit holders. As a result, until recently, the false claims made by pro-gun advocates regarding these ‘upstanding community leaders’ have been left unchallenged” (para. 3).

Guns on Campus

Some universities are debating whether or not to arm their campus security guards (Ahmed, 2009) while some states have decided to allow students and faculty, and staff to arm themselves. Just as guns have been disputed in the general public, their presence has also been debated at institutions of higher education. The University of Utah attempted to ban guns on its campus following a state gun-rights law, but the Utah Supreme Court ruled against the university (Shuppy, 2006). The university had contended that the law “hindered academic freedom and that its institutional autonomy under the Utah Constitution allowed it to enforce the ban” (para. 3).

The aftermath of the Virginia Tech tragedy led to a change in gun possession statistics, but perhaps a change that was surprising to some. Gun control changes in the year after the Virginia Tech shootings were examined in an article in *The Economist* (“Curbing Guns, But Not Too Much,” 2008). Applications for concealed handgun permits increased in Virginia by 73%. According to *The Economist*, the increase in applications, posited the gun-rights advocates, was as a result of the Virginia Tech tragedy.

Those in favor of gun-rights have stated that argue that lessening restrictions on guns could “enhance both individual and collective security on campus and may deter violence” while, on the contrary, “the vast majority of college administrators, law enforcement personnel and students maintain that allowing concealed weapons on campus will pose increased risks for students and faculty, will not deter future attacks, and will lead to confusion during emergency situations” (Harnisch, 2008, para. 1).

The gun-rights advocate group Students for Concealed Carry on Campus has argued that students with permits for guns should be allowed “the same right to carry on college campuses that they are currently afforded virtually everywhere else” (Harnisch, 2008, p. 3). The organization’s members maintain that university students and personnel should have the right to protect themselves when walking home, or to their vehicles late in areas that are unsafe (Harnisch). The organization further contended that concealed weapons would assist individuals if they had to protect themselves in a violent episode on campus and that the concealed weapons could,

potentially deter campus attacks and lessen campus crime. Current regulations restricting firearms on campus have not deterred recent attacks, and some gun-rights advocates believe that would-be attackers might reconsider their actions if they knew students or faculty were allowed to possess weapons. (Harnisch, 2008, pp. 4-5)

In opposition, others have argued that guns may make students and faculty less safe and lead to disputes between individuals that resulted in gun violence. Another concern involves security personnel's apprehension with campus faculty or students with CHLs "not trained or integrated into campus security plans" who may "escalate an already explosive situation further, accidentally cause harm or use a gun in a situation that is not warranted;" further, "police could mistake the attacker for an armed student or employee (or vice versa) during a situation in which failure to make quick, discernable judgments can be extraordinarily costly for all parties involved" (Harnisch, p. 5).

Ahmed (2009) wrote that a tragedy like Virginia Tech is atypical and that a handgun would probably not thwart or preclude a shooting, but posited that "other violent incidents, such as domestic disputes, calls with knives involved, and physical arguments are on the rise" and that "the possession of a lethal weapon by a campus public safety officer might be the only way to mitigate a large portion of those incidents where no other option is available" (para. 2).

Violent Offenders

How do campus police know whether someone is a potential perpetrator? Attempting to profile potential offenders is not unfailing, as "there are significant problems inherent in predicting violence, both to the institution and its students" (Redden, 2008, para. 4).

Perpetrators may be students, faculty, staff, or visitors; at the University of Alabama in Huntsville three faculty members were killed during a faculty meeting when a professor of biology started shooting (Gates, 2010). Three other university personnel were hurt in the shooting. In 2007, a student at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University went on a shooting spree that became one of the most lethal school shootings in the world. The shooter's spree lasted approximately two-and-a-half hours and resulted in the deaths of 32 people (27 students and five faculty members) before he killed himself. Another 17 individuals were wounded, some from the shooter and others from jumping from a building in an attempt to escape being shot (Drysdale, Modzeleski, & Simons, 2010).

Historically, perpetrators have been of varied ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic class, and educational background. "A weapons violator may be a high school dropout or, as we have seen in several university shootings, may have a Ph.D or be working on one" (Dorn, 2006, para. 6). Therefore, steps must be taken to prevent and mitigate crises.

According to Dorn (2006), "what is consistent about those who carry a weapon unlawfully, particularly a firearm, is the presence of certain physical behaviors. In short, individuals who carry a gun do specific things we can observe because of the presence of the gun on their person" (para. 6). Dorn recommended *visual weapons screening* to campus staff. "Visual screening techniques have been used to recover thousands of firearms and other weapons and have averted a number of planned weapons assaults" (para. 4). The author recommended techniques such as looking for people walking unnaturally or uncomfortably, adjusting what appear to be weapons under clothing, people with sagging jackets, or people with unusual bulges or outlines in their clothing.

Prevention and Mitigation

Prevention is what institutions do to decrease the likelihood that an incident or crisis will occur (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools, 2010). Mitigation is action taken to eliminate or reduce the loss of life and property damage related to an event or crisis, particularly those that cannot be prevented (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools, 2010).

Following the Virginia Tech calamity, “many universities were confronted with the troubling reality that one person can, in a few brief moments, devastate a college community through an act of targeted violence” (Drysdale, Modzeleski, & Simons, 2010, p. 27). In an attempt to impede such perpetrators, universities have facilitated threat assessment teams. The teams,

1. Identify individuals, whose behavior causes concern or disruption on or off campus, affecting IHE members such as students, faculty, or other staff.
2. Assess whether the identified individual possesses the intent and ability to carry out an attack against the IHE or members of the IHE community, and if the individual has taken any steps to prepare for the attack.
3. Manage the threat posed by the individual, to include disrupting potential plans of attack, mitigating the risk, and implementing strategies to facilitate long-term resolution. (p. 27)

The teams face issues including: (1) identifying the specific behaviors that are suggestive of an attack against persons affiliated with an IHE (including students, faculty, and staff); (2) considering whether concerning, suicidal, or threatening behaviors are warning signs of a violent act; and (3) fostering a secure environment while simultaneously promoting academic freedom and creative expression, and protecting student privacy (Drysdale, Modzeleski, & Simons, p. 27).

Emergency Plans

Campus security personnel are scrutinizing their plans for campus security in an effort to improve university way to increase university safety. Fields (2009) posited that to create a useful plan “it is critical to document the . . . security mission and physical security objectives, in addition to equipment and technology to be used in securing the campus” and that “the security master plan must also take into consideration the impact and effect it will have on the population of the campus and the level of control needed to create a sense of security and safety by those working, visiting, living, and/or occupying space there” (Fields, para. 4).

Universities are required to address emergency procedures. The Clery Act compels all Title IV institutions to “have and disclose emergency response and evacuation procedures in response to a significant emergency or dangerous situation involving an immediate threat to the health or safety of students or employees occurring on the campus” (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Postsecondary Education, 2011, p. 97).

The U.S. Department of Education, Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools (2010) proposed recommended steps for creating and employing an emergency management plan:

1. Get organized.

2. Identify hazards and conduct a risk assessment.
3. Develop or update the emergency management plan.
4. Adopt and implement the emergency management plan.

To get organized, universities should (1) build support by getting institutional commitment and leadership for emergency management work; (2) Identify, access, and use available resources, from both inside and outside the institution; (3) formulate a project organizational structure [that consists of an advisory committee, a planning team, a project manager, or other structural components; and (4) develop a project work plan that has tasks and milestones. As universities identify hazards, vulnerabilities, and threats, they should, 1) identify a vulnerability assessment tool, which assists an institution in the ongoing process of identifying and prioritizing risks; 2) identify and profile potential hazards, threats, and vulnerabilities; 3) assess vulnerabilities to potential hazards and the institution's capabilities in responding to an event; 4) assess potential consequences and impacts of various emergency events; and 5) identify actions that can be taken to prevent, mitigate, or prepare for hazards and potential hazards.

Developing or updating the emergency management plan entails the following steps: (1) ensure that the plan incorporates the nine key principles in emergency management that contribute to a successful plan; (2) incorporate the results of work done in step 2, including identification of hazards, threats, and vulnerabilities through a risk assessment; and (3) address planning elements associated with each of the four phases of emergency management: Prevention and Mitigation, Preparedness, Response, and Recovery. As universities adopt and implement the emergency management plan they should (1) subject the draft plan to a thorough review and approval process; (2) communicate and distribute the plan in various forms (e.g., via the campus Web site, on posters in classrooms, in pull-out guides for specific audiences and responders) to a full range of involved parties; (3) test and practice the plan in training sessions, drills, and exercises; (4) implement action items related to prevention, mitigation, and preparedness; and (5) monitor and update the plan on an ongoing and regular basis, with assistance from after-action reports that are compiled following exercises and corrective action reports that are compiled following actual emergencies, and using lessons learned from both (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools, 2010).

Due to recent crimes and disasters, universities are reviewing safety systems and policies. Doing so necessitates university administrators "building support and conducting a thorough and systematic process to produce a quality plan to prepare for and manage emergencies on campus" (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools, 2010, p. 1).

Campus Safety Programs

When an emergency situation actually transpires, responders should assess what type of action is needed and respond within seconds. The ability to carry out a timely response requires a plan with clearly explained responsibilities and functions, as well as preparation and practice (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools, 2003). The more than 4,000 United States higher education institutions has an obligation to "ensure the safety and general welfare of those on their campuses and to provide appropriate policies, procedures, and strategies

to maintain a safe campus” (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools, 2010, p. 1).

The parts of a satisfactory campus safety program include (1) strategic planning; (2) CEO participation; (3) risk and threat awareness; (4) emergency planning; (5) community policing philosophy; (6) professional staffing and training; (7) background checks; (8) professional networking; (9) crime data processing and sharing; and (10) adequate budgeting (McBride, 2011, para. 3).

Training

Swanson (2011) recommended that training be held regularly, be dynamic, and be designed well. “An effective campus active shooter plan will encompass communication between your institution and first responders, lockdown procedures and mass notification” (para. 2). Training can assist campus security to prepare to react in shooter situations, however “no security measures or products, regardless of how involved or sophisticated. . . can ensure protection against every possible threat. The sole intent. . . is to discourage a criminal or group of criminals from perpetrating an incident or crime” (Fields, 2009, para. 28).

Response

The authors of *Practical Information on Crisis Planning: A Guide for Schools and Communities* posited that despite the amount of time and effort spent planning for a crisis, there will always be an element of surprise and associated confusion when a school is confronted with a crisis (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools, 2003). Response is defined as acting to successfully contain and resolve an emergency. During the response phase, university officials set the emergency management plan in motion. Emergency responses “vary greatly depending upon the severity, magnitude, duration, and intensity of the event. . . .Effective response requires informed decision-making and identification of clear lines of decision authority” (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools, 2010, p. 12). A sample of response activities includes,

1. Activating the Incident Command System;
2. Dialoguing with first responders and other community partners (as articulated in memorandums of understanding [MOUs] or other formal agreements) to make informed decisions and deploy resources; and
3. Establishing an Emergency Operation Center (EOC).
4. Activating communication plans using multiple modalities (e.g., e-mail, text message, phone).
5. Determining and executing the appropriate response strategy.
6. Accounting for students, faculty, and staff.
7. Conducting an after-action report as a tool for modifying and improving the emergency management plan. (pp. 12-13)

The U.S. Department of Education, Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools (2010) set forth nine key principals in emergency management for institutions of higher education (IHEs):

1. Effective emergency management begins with senior leadership on campus.
2. An IHE emergency management initiative requires partnerships and collaboration.
3. An IHE emergency management plan must adopt an “all-hazards” approach to account for the full range of hazards that threaten or may threaten the campus.
4. An IHE emergency management plan should use the four phases of emergency management to effectively prepare and respond to emergencies.
5. The IHE emergency management plan must be based on a comprehensive design, while also providing for staff, students, faculty, and visitors with special needs.
6. Campuses should engage in a comprehensive planning process that addresses the particular circumstances and environment of their institution.
7. An IHE should conduct trainings based on the institution’s prevention and preparedness efforts, prioritized threats, and issues highlighted from assessments.
8. Higher education institutions should conduct tabletop exercises prior to fully adopting and implementing the emergency management plan.
9. After adoption, disseminate information about the plan to students, staff, faculty, community partners, and families. (pp. 3-5)

The decision-making process at institutions of higher education can be lengthy and “hinder campus response to a crisis” (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools, 2010, p. 2) “therefore “the need for clear lines of authority and decision-making are all the more important at IHEs. Responsibility for developing, testing, and implementing an emergency management plan should be shared and communicated across all departments and functions” (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools, 2010, p. 2).

In the article *10 Years after 9/11: Is Campus Security Better?* Gray (2011) found an apparent “lack of confidence. . .in healthcare and educational institutions’ abilities to respond to an active shooter or bomber incident;” 10% percent of those surveyed responded that they believed “their institutions would respond ineffectively or be completely unprepared to respond to a bomber. That percentage rises to 12 when respondents are asked about their institution’s ability to respond to active shooters” (p. 28). While examining whether campus security has improved after 9/11, Gray also found that,

Twelve percent. . .say their institution would respond ineffectively or be completely unprepared to respond to an active shooter, and another 9% say their campus would respond neither effectively nor ineffectively. . . .K-12 respondents were the most confident that their institutions would handle these situations well. Eighty-six percent say their campuses would respond very or somewhat effectively. (p. 28)

Current Status of Guns on University Campuses

The year 2011 was a big year for both gun lobbyists and anti-gun lobbyists. In the year 2011, “twenty three states introduced some form of legislation that would have forced colleges and universities to allow students and/or faculty to carry guns on campus. There were however, two

setbacks in Mississippi and Wisconsin, where legislation was signed to allow the carrying of concealed weapons on certain parts of public campuses (among other public places)” (“Guns on Campus Fails in 15 States,” 2011, para. 1). According to Legal Community Against Violence (2011), in 2011, bills pertaining to guns on university campuses were defeated in Arkansas, Arizona, Idaho, Louisiana, Nebraska, New Mexico, Nevada, Tennessee, Texas, West Virginia, and Virginia.

The issue of guns on college campuses was expected to pass in Texas. The gun lobby is strong in Texas and guns “occupy a special place in Texas culture. Politicians often tout owning a gun as essential to being Texan. Concealed handgun license holders are allowed to skip the metal detectors that scan Capitol visitors for guns, knives and other contraband” (“Texas Poised to Pass Bill to Allow Guns on Campus,” 2011, para. 9). In Texas, “nearly everyone, including the press, felt that guns on campus would be a lock this time around” (“Guns on Campus Fails in 15 States,” 2011, para. 2). The measure was not passed in Texas, however.

Beginning November 1, 2011, individuals in Wisconsin may carry concealed weapons in public (with several venues excluded). A stipulation in the law allowing postings to prohibit weapons in buildings will be used by University of Wisconsin administrators to disallow weapons in university buildings and stadiums (Durhams, 2011). As of August 2011, eight states allow the concealed carry of a firearm by a permit holder; the District of Columbia and 20 states prohibit it, and 22 states do not regulate it (Legal Community Against Violence, 2011).

Implications and Conclusions

An institution’s leadership is essential to the success of emergency management planning. Universities have distinctive characteristics with regard to emergency management, thus emergency management planning must be individualized to universities (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools, 2010). As places of learning, universities should exhibit “a spirit of learning and information sharing. . .in the emergency management planning process. . .All institutions of higher education undoubtedly see their obligations in this critical endeavor” (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools, 2010, p. 57).

Compared to K-12 campuses, universities differ in physical composition; they often contain more buildings and have larger classrooms. K-12 students usually encounter the same school personnel and, generally, multiple personnel know where students are during the day. K-12 campus personnel often share information about students. Universities usually have departmentalized faculty and more open access. Students have more variable schedules than those in K-12 settings. University personnel are less likely to communicate with students’ parents and the students often must seek help on their own (Drysdale, Modzeleski, & Simons, 2010).

Both K-12 schools and universities are filled with people who care about others, who want to ensure the safety of students and faculty, and who want to increase student success and decrease apprehension. Students aspiring to school leadership positions should observe secure, prepared environments on their leadership preparation program campuses.

As we prepare students to enter multiple lines of work, including school leadership, we should serve as an example of high expectations for safety and security. Just as educational leadership faculty should model sound instructional techniques, universities can exhibit quality safety responses and prevention techniques that we would want to see our future school leaders utilize on their K-12 campuses.

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