

Higher Education Institutions: Complex and Underprepared for Active-Shooter Situations

By Kimberly Myers, Ed.D., Director of Criminal Justice, Homeland Security and Public Safety & Security Programs at Goodwin College (Ret.)

The rate of violent crimes on college campuses, especially campus shootings, is increasing in America. Recently, national attention has focused on incidents of shootings/mass murders on college and university campuses. Higher education institutions across the country have struggled with violent and disruptive behavior for years, and it seems difficult to find a solution to this ever-growing threat that hinders academic life (Baker & Boland, 2011).

A college or university is generally a multi-layered entity within which many different elements must interact in a somewhat cohesive way for the organization to be effective and achieve its mission. Decreased revenue, increased costs, daily efficiency and cost-saving issues, enrollment downturns, rapidly changing technology, and layer upon layer of federal and state policies are among the many factors that higher education administrators must address (Christensen & Eyring, 2011).

Public safety directors have a unique and relentless job of protecting all members of the campus community at all times. The many moving parts of higher education organizations can create an especially challenging environment for public safety directors, who are among the select group of campus leader-managers who must work within each and every aspect of the organization to create and enforce policies that affect every single member of the campus community. In their role as campus leader-managers,



Kimberly Myers, Ed.D.

public safety directors need to look at organizations from various perspectives so that they can implement policies and manage and address safety concerns that arise throughout the organization.

Numerous acts of targeted gun violence on college and university campuses throughout the United States have resulted in significant injuries and deaths, as well as millions of dollars in civil service expenses (i.e., police,

fire, and EMS; Drysdale, Modzeleski, & Simons, 2010). According to FBI statistics, an active-shooter incident lasts an average of 12 minutes and 37% of active-shooter incidents last less than five minutes (Schweit, 2013). Within this limited time frame, the ability to respond immediately and effectively is critical in order to minimize the number of victims. Responding to a high-stress situation such as an active shooter on campus places enormous demands on staff across an institution (Ambler et al., 2008). Staff members must be sufficiently prepared to handle violent situations on campus in accordance with a set of consistent and well-understood policies, and it is not effective to debate key response procedures or develop policies while in the midst of a crisis situation (Zdziarski, Dunkle, & Rollo, 2007).

While institutions of higher education have a legal and moral responsibility to provide a safe and secure campus environment, they cannot maintain an open and free community and, at the same time, eliminate the possibility of random acts of violence. Clearly, the persistent history of gun violence on campuses

.... these leader-managers must navigate the complexity of their respective organizations to implement federal policy, create institutional policy, and work to keep their campus communities safe.

Continued on page 35

Continued from page 34

throughout the United States creates a need for public safety directors to mitigate the risk of the occurrence of an active-shooter situation. To do so, these leader-managers must navigate the complexity of their respective organizations to implement federal policy, create institutional policy, and work to keep their campus communities safe.

In a descriptive study, Myers (2016) explored public safety directors' reports of their deliberate efforts to design, implement, and assess preparedness procedures for responding to an active-shooter situation on their respective college or university campus. The study was conducted with eight public safety directors at private, four-year institutions in a state within the Northeastern United States. The study found most private colleges and universities in the participating state do not have a current active-shooter policy at their institutions. Thus, they are ill-prepared to address most active-shooter situations. All campuses participating in the study had a firearm policy at their institutions and structures in place to mitigate the risk of an active shooter. Some of the structures were an emergency notification system, camera systems, card access systems, and emergency blue light towers. Nevertheless, without an active-shooter policy, these structures alone are likely to be insufficient.

Myers (2016) recommended that all colleges and universities should have a current active-shooter policy that is known to the entire campus population. Because these shooting events cause confusion, chaos, and high stress, administrators, faculty,

staff, and students must be sufficiently prepared to handle violent situations on campus in accordance with a consistent and well-understood policy. For the institutions that have a current active-shooter policy in place, a set of criteria should be formulated for regularly examining the effectiveness

These drills or exercises should be conducted with law enforcement partners, firefighters, and other emergency responders.

of the current policy. Doing so is critical. Conditions regularly change on campuses, new situations arise, and new technology emerges.

Few, if any, private colleges and universities in the study have mandatory training for members of the campus community to deal with active-shooter situations. While others mainly have voluntary training, it is unlikely to attract sufficient members of

the campus communities. Within this study, all campuses noted that they had a handbook, brochures, documents, a Website, or videos to enhance awareness of how to handle an active-shooter situation. Nevertheless, not one campus practiced a drill or exercise specifically for an active-shooter situation.

This lack of training may be "standard practice" because organizing and implementing such training and drills is a daunting task and public safety departments are not positioned to authorize such activities on their own. They need support from top administrative echelons of each institution.

Myers (2016) recommended that mandatory training for responding to an active-shooter situation should

be provided once a year to the entire campus community. The training should cover evaluating current response concepts and institutional and public safety department policies, plans, and protocols. Educating the entire campus community on what to do in this type of situation is critical. Consistency in training and preparation is imperative to lessen the impact on the potential loss of life. In addition to classroom training, mandatory drills or

exercises for responding to an active-shooter situation should also be included for the entire campus community. Having a live scenario-based drill or exercise will allow for hands-on training. These drills or exercises should be conducted with law enforcement partners, firefighters, and other emergency responders. In addition, training and drill programs should be evaluated on a regular, perhaps bi-annual basis. Doing so will allow for

revisions to be incorporated and best practices to be introduced. Furthermore, it is imperative to assess and evaluate the drills or exercises with law enforcement partners, firefighters, and other emergency responders to identify gaps and weaknesses.

Most colleges and universities in the participating state experienced unsuccessful internal political battles



Photo credit: JEFF MILLER/UW-MADISON COMMUNICATIONS
Campus police officers coordinate the response to a simulated bombing during an emergency response drill at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

Continued on page 37

surrounding critical funding for various safety and security concerns. The resulting shortages of personnel, equipment, facilities, training, ability to attend conferences, and access to mental health services undermine the safety of campus communities.

Unfortunately, campuses throughout the United States are under financial distress (Geiger, 2015). To assure campus safety, college and university leaders will have to place greater

With heightened national attention on college campuses as a result of an increase in shootings, the image of colleges and universities as safe and secure environments has been shaken.

priority on security preparedness. Myers (2016) recommended that campus leaders (e.g. presidents and vice presidents) allocate sufficient resources to their public safety departments. Given the financial challenges confronting post-secondary institutions throughout the country, this will necessarily involve adroit financial and political management and decision-making.

Most public safety directors in the private colleges and universities in the participating state provide members of the campus community with a sense of security by clearly communicating safety and security information, publicizing the availability of safety programs, and encouraging a shared responsibility for the safety of community members. The entire campus community needs to be educated about preventing and dealing with campus violence and personal safety precautions. Myers (2016) recommended that public safety directors should develop comprehensive communications

programs to ensure the accurate sharing of safety information across their campuses.

Clearly, there is a need to strive for consistency in public safety preparedness across all campuses for active-shooter situations. Preparedness efforts within colleges and universities are valuable safety assets that must be supported. Training about active-shooter situations and drills for administrators, faculty, staff, and students need to be high priorities. Such efforts can save lives.

With heightened national attention on college campuses as a result of an increase in shootings, the image of colleges and universities as safe and secure environments has been shaken. It is becoming increasingly clear that college campuses need to prioritize the commitment to campus safety and security, especially in light of recent campus shootings. The recent unfortunate shooting tragedies throughout the United States serve as a stark reminder of this need. Discussing these incidents, as well as preparing

Continued on page 38

Go beyond compliance.



- Healthy Relationships
- Discrimination
- Bystander Intervention
- Personal Safety
- Plus VAWA & Title IX Topics

360° STAY SAFE building Community | Create a Safe & Healthy College Campus

Comprehensive Online Training Program

Register for your demo today at
360staysafe.com

info@360staysafe.com | 877-629-4750 | 360staysafe.com

and training for them, should no longer be a taboo topic. We need to face these situations and be prepared for them. The longer we are in denial, the greater the risk.

References

Ambler, D., Barnett-Terry, R., Cook, L., Dunkle, J. H., Gatti, R., Greigo, E., Kindle, J., & Siko, K. L. (2008). In search of safer communities: Emerging practices for student affairs in addressing campus violence. *New Directions for Student Services*, 1-38.

Baker, K., & Boland, K. (2011). Assessing safety: A campus wide initiative. *College Student Journal*, 45(4), 683-699

Christensen, C. M., & Eyring, H. J. (2011). *The innovative university: Changing the DNA of higher education from the inside out*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Drysdale, D. A., Modzeleski, W., & Simons, A. (2010). Campus attacks: Targeted violence affecting institutions of higher education. U.S Secret Service, U.S Department of Homeland Security, Office of Safe and Drug Free Schools, U.S Department of Education, Federal Bureau of Investigation, and U.S. Department of Justice. Washington DC. Retrieved from <http://www2.ed.gov/admins/lead/safety/campus-attacks.pdf>.

Geiger, R. L. (2015). Impact of the financial crisis on higher education in the United States. *International Higher Education*, 59.

Manning, K. (2013). *Organizational theory in higher education*. New York: Routledge.

Myers, K (2016). Plan, prepare, and respond for an active shooter situation: An investigation of public safety directors at private four-year colleges and universities. Dissertation Abstracts International (Publication No. 10099641).

Schweit, K. W. (2013). Addressing the problem of the Active-Shooter. FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin May. Retrieved from <http://www.fbi.gov/stats-services/publications/law-enforcement-bulletin/2013/May/active-shooter>

Zdiarski, E., Dunkle, N., & Rollo, J. M. (2007). *Campus crisis management: A comprehensive guide to planning, prevention, response, and recovery*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.



The Future of Security Services

Creating Smart Alternatives to Traditional Guarding

At Securitas, we are always looking for innovative ways to provide the best security solution for both your campus and budget. As a corporate partner with IACLEA since 2008, we understand the safety issues that campuses of all sizes face on a daily basis. With cutting-edge technology and real-time reporting, Securitas can enhance your campus security program through the efficient deployment of on-site staff and the integration of systems technology.

www.securitasinc.com | 877.281.5543

