

Finding a Safe and Secure Campus

The tragedy that recently occurred at Virginia Tech highlights a factor often overlooked or minimized in the college selection process. Be it families whose kids have already finalized their college choice or families with college bound students still undecided about which college to attend, campus safety and security should be taken into consideration as one part of the larger college decision process.

Reports of crime on college campuses, galvanized by the 1986 sexual assault and murder of Jeanne Clery at Lehigh University, captured media attention and brought the issue of campus safety sharply into public focus. Suits filed by college victims and surviving family members of homicide victims quickly promoted successful advocacy for federal legislation that required colleges to compile and publish annual campus security reports. Federal laws and collective policies and procedures now in place have gone far to enhance safety and security on college campuses today.

Under the federal *Crime Awareness and Campus Security Act (1991)*, all institutions of higher learning receiving federal funds must publish an annual campus security report, share campus crime statistics, post security policies, and make timely warnings.

As a result, colleges and universities have developed a variety of measures to strengthen campus safety and security. Measures include campus police forces, ID cards, illuminated call boxes, video surveillance, security checkpoints, peer escorts, campus-wide email systems, and safety orientation and training classes. Practices vary from campus to campus. For example, the University of Iowa police carry stun guns but no firearms and must return to headquarters to arm themselves before responding to a potentially deadly incident. The University of Louisville has emergency coordinators assigned to each building.

Despite advances, events at Virginia Tech demonstrate that campus safety remains a major concern. We are again seeing a call for wide scale review of safety plans on college campuses. College administrators plan a summit to discuss campus security especially mass emergency notification systems. However, challenges clearly exist. Schools definitely take these matters seriously and view campus safety as a high priority. By the same token, colleges have historically viewed themselves as bastions of academic freedom, and they place great value on an open and collaborative learning environment. Moreover, students' individual rights, even students with possible mental health problems, must be protected. Thus, colleges struggle to gauge an appropriate balance. In the aftermath of the Virginia Tech trauma, several questions were raised including:

- Should colleges conduct background checks to identify higher risk students (some already do)?
- Should colleges ban firearms?
- How can emergent technologies be used to design alert systems equipped to more quickly communicate possible danger to the entire academic community and thereby better protect students and campus personnel in the face of threat?

Acknowledging the challenges presented to colleges around campus security, it is nevertheless important to recognize that many improvements have been instituted across college campuses, and colleges still offer relatively safe environments for their residents. For example, the murder rate on college campuses is .28 per 100,000 people versus 5.5 nationally.

Resources exist making it easier for families to evaluate a school's safety practices and track record before deciding ultimately where to send their child to college. Parental tips include:

- Check out safety and security systems for any college your son or daughter is considering.
- Crime statistics for college campuses can be accessed via <http://ope.ed.gov/security>.
- JFVS can help families conduct a campus safety audit.

Article prepared by:

Ellen Shapira

College and Educational Consultant
Jewish Family and Vocational Service (JFVS)

Louisville, Kentucky
(502) 452-6341 ext. 225
ellens@jfvs.com