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Perceptions of Safety by On-Campus Location, Rurality, and Type of Security/Police Force: The Case of the Community College

Robert C. Patton Dennis E. Gregory

This study examined Virginia community college students' perceptions of campus safety. A survey of 11,161 students revealed the crimes students most feared being a victim of while on the community college campus and the areas in which they felt the most and least safe. The research also demonstrated the effect of certain variables had on students' overall perception of campus safety. The variables studied included student demographics, the presence and type of security personnel, and the rurality of the campus setting. The campuses with the highest and lowest degrees of perceived safety were then further studied via case studies to gather detailed information, which may assist college administrators and policymakers in improving campus safety on community college campuses.

Sociologists have long argued that crime, more precisely society's reaction to crime, has benefits for society (Warr, 2000). Emile Durkheim (1933, p. 397) and other functionalists believed that the fear of crime strengthens community bonds by unifying those who are concerned about criminal activity. More recent ideology suggests that the reaction to crime does not have a unifying effect. Rather, it deters social interaction (Liska & Warner, 1991). Deterring or disrupting social interaction on college campuses inhibits the formation of a free and positive campus environment (Cooper, 1997). Research indicates that

positive social interaction positively correlates with student success and retention (Lotkowski, Robbins, & Noeth, 2004).

According to a report by the Bureau of Justice Statistics in 2005, American college campuses have lower crime rates than does society as a whole and the crime rate on campuses is decreasing (Baum & Klaus, 2005). Although this continues to be true, perceptions of the prevalence of crime on college campuses and concerns for student safety have increased in the past two decades (Wilcox, Jordan, & Pritchard, 2007). Much of this increase is due to the popular media's fascination with, and portrayal of, criminal acts committed on college campuses (Gregory & Janosik, 2006). Such events include the mass shootings at Northern Illinois University in 2008, Virginia Tech in 2007 (Ress, 2008), Shepherd University in 2006 (Haney, 2008), and two tragedies in 2002 at the University of Arizona and Virginia's Appalachian School of Law (Caizo & O'Sullivan, 2002). Most recently, the attempted shooting of a math professor by a student at Northern Virginia Community College demonstrated that such events are possible on the community college campus and within the Virginia Community College System (VCCS; Urbina, 2009).

Compounding these concerns were reports that colleges and universities were minimizing crime on campus and in some

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cases failing to accurately report criminal events (Gregory & Janosik, 2002). Perhaps the most well-cited example of this is the case of Jeanne Clery. In 1986, Ms. Clery, age 19, was accosted, assaulted, and murdered as she slept in her residence hall at Lehigh University. As her parents began a crusade to increase campus safety they discovered that there had been 38 violent crimes at the university in the 3 years prior to the incident, which had not been reported to students. This led to legislation, which would become known as the Clery Act (1990), which called for colleges and universities to make substantial reforms in campus safety and the reporting of criminal activity on campus (Cooper, 1998). As a result of the lawsuit filed by Jeanne Clery's parents, the university agreed to make over one million dollars of campus safety improvements including increased lighting, the installation of more emergency call boxes, and the implementation of student shuttle services after dark (Hanchette, 1988).

College and university administrators are faced with a seemingly impossible task. They must provide a safe and secure environment for students, faculty, and staff while maintaining a positive and unrestricted college environment (Cooper, 1997). Creating such an environment often involves the hiring of additional personnel, the installation of physical security measures, and the procurement of surveillance and notification technology. Unfortunately, these measures are expensive. Administrators must develop comprehensive strategies to ensure safety and address the concerns of students while considering the resources available to them. For colleges with limited resources, this can be a challenging task. Accurate and timely information concerning student perceptions of safety is needed in order to make meaningful decisions concerning campus security.

There have been relatively few empirical

studies on students' perceptions of campus safety, despite society's recent interest in campus safety (Warr & Safford, 1983; Wilcox et al., 2007). The studies that do exist focused primarily on four-year colleges and universities (Day, 1999; Fisher & Nasar, 1995; Johnson & Bromley, 1999; McConnell, 1997; Nichols, 1995; Reisling, 1995; Smith, 1995).

Although research concerning campus crime has increased as public concern has risen, little of the research has been directed toward community colleges (Costello, 2003). Community college administrators cannot rely on current research involving university students due to the differences in the student bodies and the differences in the campus environments (Lee, 2000). For these reasons, a need exists for research that focuses solely on the community college student and the community college environment. This study created a first step toward accomplishing that goal and also investigated whether differences existed between the community colleges within the VCCS. This system was chosen for the study, and to serve as an example for community colleges across the U.S. because it provided a total of 40 diverse campuses to study and because the colleges within it differed in terms of size, resources, rurality, and the level of security employed on each campus. The campus settings were diverse, as some campuses were in very rural communities and some in very urban locations. It is hoped that the results of this research will be used to improve community college students' safety and, thus, their perceptions of campus safety within the system and elsewhere in similar settings.

Purpose Statement and Research Questions

This study sought to answer the following research questions related to students' perceptions of campus safety within the VCCS:

1. What types of crime do Virginia community college students most fear being a victim of while on campus?
2. Does the level of fear of crime on campus vary by student demographic?
3. Do student perceptions of campus safety vary by the type of security/police present on their campus?
4. Do student perceptions of campus safety vary by the rurality of campus attended?
5. Do students' perceptions of campus safety vary by the different areas within the community college campus?

Overview of the Methodology

Once the proposed study passed Old Dominion University's Institutional Review and Human Subjects Review board, a description of the intent of the survey and a request to e-mail the student body of the 23 institutions that make up the VCCS were e-mailed to the president of each institution. All 23 presidents within the system accepted the invitation and responded with the name of a contact person who was then asked to e-mail the entire student body of his or her respective institution.

The study employed an explanatory sequential mixed methods design. This methodology allowed for a more detailed analysis of the research questions than could be accomplished using either quantitative or qualitative methods alone.

The quantitative portion of the study utilized a nonexperimental survey research design. Due to the large number of potential respondents within the VCCS, this study used electronic surveys to collect data on students' perceptions of campus safety. Considering the large geographical service area of the VCCS, survey research was chosen as primary method of data collection based on convenience, economy, and ease of use (Creswell, 2003).

Statistical analyses were performed using SAS v. 9.1 statistical analysis software. General frequencies were recorded and analyzed to identify the types of crime that community college students most fear being victimized by while on campus. The same statistic was used for determining which areas of the community college campus concerned students the most in regard to safety. Independent samples *t* tests and analysis of variance (ANOVA) were used to determine if there was a statistically significant difference between the levels of perceived safety among different student groups. Next, ANOVA was used to determine if students' perceptions of safety differed significantly among college campuses by the type of security present. Finally, ANOVA was used to determine if students' perceptions of safety differed significantly in relation to the rurality of the campus setting and areas of campus visited.

The qualitative portion of this study utilized a critical instance case study design of two Virginia community colleges, which were identified as the most and the least safe based on student responses to the survey. Once the most and least safe campuses were identified, a request was made to the respective college president for permission to visit the campus and interview the most direct campus administrator in charge and also an academic dean. The purpose of this case study was to identify characteristics, actions, and policies that may have affected students' perceptions of campus safety. This was accomplished by comparing campus characteristics that coincided with current best practices identified by the literature and recent federal and state taskforce reports concerning campus safety.

DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

Invitations to participate in an electronic survey were e-mailed to 163,678 Virginia

community college students enrolled in the Spring semester of 2010. A total of 11,161 surveys were returned, giving the study a response rate of 6.8%. Although this is a relatively low response rate, a sufficient number of surveys from each of the 40 campuses were received to allow for statistical analysis on and comparisons of the data collected. The following sections provide the findings related to each research question and a discussion of the possible implications for community college campus safety planning.

Research Question 1

The purpose of the first research question was to ascertain the crime of which community college students most feared being a victim while attending classes at their campus. Students' perceptions of the likelihood they may be a victim of certain crimes were high compared to the actual occurrences of those crimes. For example, nearly one quarter of the students (24%) perceived themselves to be likely or very likely to be a victim of robbery while visiting a community college campus. Since 2001, there had only been 18 reported instances of robberies occurring on a campus within the system (Office of Postsecondary Education [OPE], n.d.). Crime statistics indicated that there were more motor vehicle thefts ($n = 49$) and aggravated assaults ($n = 31$) than there were robberies, yet students rated robbery as the crime of which they were most likely to be a victim (OPE, n.d.). Students also demonstrated a concern for the crimes of murder/nonnegligent manslaughter (5%) and negligent manslaughter (8%), although there had been no reported occurrences of either crime since 2001 (OPE, n.d.).

Due to the fact that students reported fearing robbery more than any other crime, campus administrators should address the concern early on in the students' career at their college. Crime statistics for the campus

should be presented to new students during orientation to the college. Providing evidence that these crimes happen rarely on community college campuses may reduce the students' perceived fear of victimization. New student orientation also provides a good opportunity to inform students of the threat assessment team and emergency alert system at each college. By providing crime data and other safety information to the student body in this manner, the college may help alleviate some of the perceived risk students possess.

Research Question 2

Current literature on victimization suggests that different demographics of the population have different levels of fear concerning crime (Ferrar & LaGrange, 1987, Ferraro, 1995, Day, 1999; McConnell, 1997). The second research question was meant to determine if the different student groups varied in their perceptions of campus safety. Although there were no significant differences in perceptions of safety among student groups according to race and gender, there were significant effects for age and enrollment status. This research found younger students, those from 18–24 years of age, generally felt safer while on campus than did their older counterparts with the exception of the group 60 years of age and over. This difference in perceptions of safety may be due to the fact that younger students are more traditional in their college attendance. For instance, 80% of the 18 to 24-year-old group were classified as full-time students and only 11% of the group took courses mainly in the evening hours. Conversely, only 47% of those 30–44 years old were full-time students and 31% of them took classes mainly in the evenings. In other words, traditional students were more likely to attend class during the day and be enrolled full time whereas nontraditional students attended part-time and 40% of the group attended class

only during the evening hours. The fact that the variable of enrollment status was found to be significant, with part-time students reporting lower perceptions of campus safety than did full-time students, would seem to support this theory.

Community college administrators should address the concerns of part-time students in a variety of ways. Information given during regular new student orientation sessions should also be offered at night to accommodate these students. The same information can be mailed, e-mailed, or posted on the college's website. Community college administrators should also continue with efforts to improve lighting and remove obstructions within parking areas, which block a students' view of their surroundings. Administrators should make sure there is sufficient lighting to and from buildings on campus, as walkways were an area of concern for students.

Research Question 3

The third research question sought to determine if the presence of police or security departments had a positive impact on the students' perceptions of campus safety. Perceptions of campus safety were collected via items on a 10-point Likert-type scale with a selection of 1 indicating the safest the respondent could possibly feel and a selection of 10 indicating the least safe the respondent could possible feel while on campus. Students attending colleges that employed a security department or a police department demonstrated similar levels of perceived campus safety. A possible explanation for this could be that some students were unable to differentiate between the two forms of campus security. Students attending a campus with no security or police department were shown to have the greatest concern of campus safety. Although such departments seemed to positively affect students' perceptions of campus safety,

the differences between the perceptions of students' attending a campus with some type of security and those without were not found to be significant.

Employing a security department or a police department on campus requires a considerable investment of resources. Most community colleges in Virginia have made this investment. At the time of this research, a total of 19 of the system's 23 community colleges employed either security or police officers. Presently, all but one of the colleges have employed at least some type of paid security on campus. Although the differences in students' perceptions of safety were not significant among the colleges with security and those without, the research demonstrated that there was a difference. That is, students attending a college with no form of security felt less safe than did students attending a campus with security.

The campus that was perceived to be the safest employed one part-time security guard during the evening hours. Although still an investment, the amount of resources to provide this type of security is small compared to operating a full security or police department. Community colleges should survey their student bodies regarding campus safety regularly and then experiment with providing security, especially in the evening hours to address the concerns of part-time students. This is important, as the greatest percentage (40%) of part-time students take classes mostly during the evening hours, according to this research.

It is important to note that over one quarter of the students surveyed were unsure of the type of security on their campus. This group reported perceptions of campus safety that were less than those reporting the presence of some type of security on campus but greater than the students who reported no security at their campus. This would seem to suggest

that some students taking the survey were aware that security existed but were unable to report the type. It may also suggest that some students within this group were unsure if any security was present on their campus, which caused the average perception of safety to be less than for those students who could identify the type of security on their campus.

Research Question 4

The fourth research question sought to determine if student perceptions of campus safety varied by the rurality of campus attended. Campuses were given a rurality code based on the Department of Agriculture's Rural-Urban Continuum Code (RUCC) scale. An ANOVA determined that there were significant differences between students' perceptions of safety considering the rurality of the campus setting. Furthermore, the perception of safety within the different levels of rurality was found to be significantly different from the others when a post hoc Tukey test for significance was applied.

Although this information is interesting, one should consider the multitude of variables that also affect students' perceptions of safety at each campus when evaluating these results. The enrollment of part-time students, presence of security, and presence of night-time administrators vary not only from college to college but also between campuses of the same college and across levels of rurality. Although more research is needed to determine the role rurality plays in the perception of campus safety, it should be noted that the campus that had the highest student perception of campus safety was found to be rural whereas the campus with the lowest student perception of safety was urban.

Research Question 5

The final research question asked if students' perceptions of campus safety varied by the different areas within the community college

campus. Students felt the safest in science labs, followed by the library, classrooms, and the student lounge. Parking lots were found to be the area on campus which students had the most concern for their safety, followed by walkways, and bathrooms.

It is important to realize that the areas students perceived to be the safest were ones in which they would most likely be in the company of other people. Conversely, parking lots, walkways, and restrooms are places students generally visit alone. Because of this, community colleges should consider the use of security to make students feel safer in these areas. It is also important to make sure there is sufficient lighting along walkways and in the parking lots on campus, considering the fact part-time students felt less safe than did full-time students and the fact that the majority of part-time students visit these areas in the evening hours.

Campus Visits

Two campuses were selected based on the results of the quantitative portion of the research. The campuses perceived by the students as the least and most safe were selected for further inquiry. The campus that received the highest rating for students' perceptions of campus safety ($M = 4.5$) had a RUCC Scale rating of 6 on a scale from 1 to 9, indicating that the campus is located in a rural setting; the campus was one of the smallest within the VCCS. The campus perceived to be the least safe in the quantitative portion of the research ($M = 5.8$) had a RUCC scale rating of 1 on a scale from 1 to 9, indicating that the campus is situated in an urban setting; this campus is a medium-size campus within the VCCS. The following summarizes the information gathered through interviews with administrators and personal observations of the campuses.

Both campus visits were made during the Spring semester of 2010. Interviews were

scheduled with the Vice President of Finance and Administration and an academic dean at each college. After the interview, a campus tour was accomplished for the purposes of assessing the implementation of campus safety strategies.

Neither of the campuses had utilized principles of crime prevention through environmental design in the initial design or construction of their facilities as indicated as a best practice by the Virginia State Crime Commission (2006). Both had plans to address the issue of target hardening or designing spaces to improve student safety through reactive design measures such as improving lighting and installing call boxes in the parking lot. Both colleges had instituted both a Threat Assessment Team (which is required by Virginia law) and a Safety Committee to address issues of campus safety at their college as suggested by the Virginia State Crime Commission (2006). Another best practice identified by the Virginia Crime Commission was to regularly survey students to gain insight into issues pertaining to campus safety on their campus. These data would allow for the efficient allocation of resources that are currently scarce. Neither college had a system to regularly survey their student body concerning issues of campus safety.

A lack of budgetary resources was cited as a barrier for improving campus safety on both of the campuses visited during this research. Although administrators on both campuses indicated that there were plans to improve lighting in specific areas of the campus, the one that was perceived to be the most safe had sought and obtained funding for improvements from grants and private foundations. The employment of a part-time security guard during the evening hours also demonstrated a commitment to improve perceptions of campus safety on this campus. The effect of this commitment to campus

safety appears to have had an effect on the students who were attending that campus.

RECOMMENDATIONS

After analyzing both the quantitative and qualitative data collected during this study, the following recommendations regarding campus safety were made:

- Community colleges should regularly survey their students to gain insights into the perceptions of campus safety on the campus they attend.
- Results from such surveys should be analyzed and efforts should be made to address areas and issues students are most concerned about particular to each campus.
- Community colleges should employ some type of security on campus during the evening hours. If a professional security agency cannot be employed due to financial constraints, colleges should explore the best practice of using interns and student volunteers to help maintain a presence in secluded areas during the evening hours. At least one of the colleges that participated in the study used students to form a Campus Safety Department. Students in this program were given radios, flashlights, and wore uniforms, which identified them as campus safety officers.
- Administrators should focus on improving lighting in parking lots and walkways, as this was identified during the research as areas about which students were most concerned.
- Colleges should take into consideration principles of crime prevention through environmental design when planning for the construction of new buildings, parking lots, and walkways.

- New student orientation information concerning crime statistics and safety information should be distributed to part-time students. These students may not attend regular orientation sessions during the day due to work and family obligations.
- Colleges that are employing some form of security should direct these services toward the times and locations about which students report being the most concerned.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This research examined a variety of student variables and the issue of campus safety. Significance was found when considering students' age, enrollment status, and setting of the campus they were attending in terms of rurality. Further research on each of these variables is needed to determine exactly how they impact students' perceptions of safety on the community college campus. For instance, this research determined that the oldest age group surveyed demonstrated the greatest perceptions of safety. This seems consistent with current victimization literature (Ferrari & LaGrange, 1987; Ferraro, 1995); however, it would be worthwhile to conduct similar research while controlling for the other variables found to be significant. Such a study may provide insights into the attitudes or behaviors of this group, which may help to improve the perceptions of campus safety for all students.

Because of the amount of resources necessary to operate a security or police department on campus, the effectiveness of utilizing student interns or volunteers to help promote campus safety should be evaluated. If it is determined that such a program positively effects the perceptions of campus safety, colleges could implement and

maintain these programs with little financial commitment. Colleges should also explore the possibility of hiring off duty local law enforcement officers to provide security on campus during certain hours.

Part-time students should also be studied in more detail to ascertain their specific concerns regarding campus safety. Once this is accomplished, community college administrators will be more informed as to what strategies can be employed to improve their perceptions of safety while visiting the campus.

Administrators or local officials may be able to garner a better response rate if the study is replicated particular to individual campuses utilizing more effective means of communication with students.

Finally, research similar to this should be conducted in other states to determine if the findings are particular to Virginia or similar to community colleges in other states.

CONCLUSION

Virginia community college students exhibit concerns for campus safety. A myriad of factors appear to be the cause. The need for more research on this topic is apparent. The variables of rurality, student enrollment status, and student age were found to be significant variables in the perception of safety while on campus. Until more research is conducted to understand the effects these variables have on students' perception of campus safety, making conclusions concerning them individually is difficult. This research did indicate that part-time students, who were more likely to be older, felt less safe than did their full-time counterparts. It also determined that part-time students attend classes mainly during the evening hours. This, taken with the fact that students reported being most concerned in areas of the campus they are most likely to visit alone, gives college administrators

information concerning variables of the student experience that they need to address to improve perceptions of campus safety.

Although many of the strategies and best practices to improve campus safety mentioned in this research require significant funding to employ, others can be implemented with little to no cost to the community college. Each community college's safety committee should make sure they understand the concerns of their respective student body. One of the best methods to accomplish this is to regularly obtain student opinions and perceptions of campus safety through surveys. Once these data are collected, college administrators should work toward addressing the concerns through effective use of available funds, strategic planning, and the use of volunteer students and interns.

Community colleges should also make sure safety information, crime statistics, and other orientation information reaches part-time students who are unlikely to visit the college during the day. This is another example of a campus safety strategy that can be employed internally without dedicating a great deal of financial resources. Colleges should concentrate available funds on pro-

viding security during the evening hours, improving lighting in parking lots and along walkways, and employing principles of crime prevention through environmental design when constructing new facilities on campus.

In conclusion, the best strategy to improve campus safety at Virginia community college campuses, and by extension, community colleges around the country, is to seek students' concerns at each campus and then apply suggested best practices to address these issues. This process should be ongoing. Until college administrators can establish this cycle of gathering student input and addressing concerns, they should focus their time and energy on areas students are likely to visit alone during the evening hours and work toward making these areas safer. Once an effective cycle of collecting student concerns and addressing them is created, more specific campus safety issues can be identified and addressed particular to each community college campus.

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