

No Smoking Guns Here: Residence Life Directors' Perspectives on Concealed Carry in On-Campus Living Communities



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THE ROLE OF STUDENT AFFAIRS EDUCATORS is to ensure that students not only obtain an educational experience, but also that out-of-classroom experiences contribute to holistic development. In particular, student affairs professionals often coordinate residential living, student activities, and advising programs. These programmatic offerings need to account for the diversifying student body and respond to shifting political landscapes. Student affairs practitioners face daily dilemmas that require decisions grounded in multicultural competent critical thinking and acute awareness (Pope, Reynolds, & Mueller, 2004; Watt, 2015). An area engendering more attention is the role of concealed carry weapons on college campuses. The emergence of gun violence within college and university settings beginning in 2007 with the Virginia Tech shootings launched myriad discussions about prevention and accountability among campus leadership, concerned citizens, and state legislatures. Within student affairs, conversations about students' safety always have been a priority, so addressing gun violence on campus moved higher on the discussion list.

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To date, a few studies about perceptions of campus-concealed carry weapons have been conducted with undergraduate students attending public universities (Bouffard, Nobles, & Wells, 2011; Bouffard, Nobles, Wells, & Cavanaugh, 2011; Cavanaugh, Bouffard, Wells, & Nobles, 2012; Fennel, 2009; Payne & Riedel, 2002; Thompson et al., 2013). These studies mainly focused on whether students support or oppose concealed carry, whether they felt safe on campuses, and the likelihood that students would carry a handgun. Students' perceptions of concealed carry on campus is an important component of the campus carry discourse, yet, other stakeholders should be acknowledged and their expertise considered in the policy-making process. Rarely have state policymakers incorporated the voices of people charged with implementing these policies. In the present study, student affairs professionals, such as residence life directors, are tasked with making sense of policy implementation.

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The voices of residence life professionals who are responsible for ensuring the implementation of policies and training residence life staff at any level—resident assistants, graduate and full-time professional staff—is absent from research about campus-concealed weapons within living spaces. Hence, the purpose of this qualitative study was to provide an opportunity for directors of residence life programs at public universities to share how they make sense of campus-concealed carry policies that permit handguns in residence halls and campus apartments. Specifically, the researchers investigated how these policies were created to comply with state laws, court rulings, and state higher education system policies; how staff trainings were updated or modified to ensure the first responders, resident assistants and graduate student staff members were prepared; and if staff turnover was significant.

BACKGROUND OF FIREARMS ON COLLEGE CAMPUSES

Ten states legislatively have allowed concealed carry of firearms in public institutions of higher education. The states with these provisions are: Arkansas, Colorado, Georgia, Idaho, Kansas, Mississippi, Oregon, Texas, Utah and Wisconsin (<http://www.ncsl.org/research/education/guns-on-campus-overview.aspx>). These state laws gradually have been enacted over the last 15 years. Utah was the first state to adopt a campus-concealed carry law in 2004 (Morse, Sisneros, Perez, & Sponsler, 2016). Mississippi and Wisconsin passed laws in 2011. Kansas enacted legislation in 2013, followed by Idaho in 2014, Texas in 2015, and Georgia in 2017. Arkansas expanded its law

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in 2017. Through court rulings, Colorado and Oregon both were ordered to allow concealed campus carry (<http://www.ncsl.org/research/education/guns-on-campus-overview.aspx>).

Concealed carry and higher education is a topic that brings controversy on campuses across the nation. While much has been written about campus-concealed firearms bans, the topic of gun bans in the student-housing context has been largely unaddressed (Smith, 2013). Furthermore, while there are policies in place regarding weapons in classrooms at many campuses, there is a lack of empirical research specifically on firearms in residence halls. Proponents for campus-concealed carry in residence halls argue that residence hall rooms are akin to homes and that students should have the right to protect themselves (Smith, 2013); others argue that public colleges and universities should be able to maintain their authority to prohibit guns on their campuses and in their residence halls since institutions “have a

recognized duty in reasonably ensuring a safe environment for their students, faculty, staff, and visitors. Accordingly, higher education institutions should be able to operate autonomously and promulgate reasonable regulations that will mitigate the harm caused by firearms” (Miller, 2011, p. 263).

Overall, there is limited research on firearms in residence halls. Residence hall policies vary from campus to campus, and prior court interpretation may help clarify how campuses should address the issues that may arise specific to firearms in residence halls. When creating campus policy, looking at arguments on both sides of the issue should help guide the policy making process. With further research, the implications of campus-concealed carry and how it applies to residence halls can assist colleges and universities on how to proceed on the issue. Institutional leaders must interpret and make sense of these legislative changes. Within the context of residence halls, directors of residence life are the institutional leaders charged with developing a response and training teams on legislative matters.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Weick, Sutcliffe, and Obstfeld’s (2005) process of sensemaking provides an avenue for exploring how residence life directors understand and interpret changes in state campus carry laws. Sensemaking as an organizing principle serves a “central role in the determination of human behavior” (p. 409) and interplays with how an individual makes sense of a situation and influences a person’s actions. Weick (1995) suggested that the need for sensemaking emerges when individuals encounter *discrepant events*, such as changes in laws, and are charged with

“authoring as well as interpretation, creation as well as discovery” (p. 8). Sensemaking processes provide an individual with a foundation for how to interpret and process situations, and involves attempts for understanding organizational behavior. In particular, the sensemaking process provides insight into how people within organizations interact with words (e.g., policy) and the ways in which person-to-person interactions can serve as a tool for shaping behavior (Weick et al., 2005). This theoretical perspective suggests that the ways in which a person makes sense of their experiences is through their interactions with different contexts. In sum, a sensemaking perspective concerns itself with “interplay of action and interpretation rather than the influence of evaluation on choice” (p. 409).

As the interplay of sensemaking unfolds, Weick et al., (2005) suggested two primary questions capture the essence of the sensemaking process. First, “how does something come to be an event for institutional members? (p. 410). Second, “what does an event mean?” (p. 410). In addressing these questions, organizational members seek to understand retrospective experiences and social contexts that would foreground how people understand organizational challenges. The ways in which an individual makes sense of fluctuation is through an interpretation of their role within the specific organization. In this study, state lawmakers have implemented fundamental changes to college campuses and residence halls by legalizing campus carry laws. We specifically seek to understand the ways in which an organizational leader—residence life directors—make sense of these law changes and craft institutional policies responding to legal matters.

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METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study explores how residence life directors make sense of shifts in residence life policies based upon changes in state laws permitting the carrying of firearms in residence halls. This study follows a constructivist epistemological approach, such that knowledge is constructed through an individual's (director of residence life) interaction with policy enactments (people and state policy) (Creswell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). In this section, we describe our participant recruitment and selection, data collection procedures, and analytic approach. We conclude this section addressing reliability and validity of data analyses.

Participant Recruitment and Selection

The investigators sought a purposive sample to address study aims (Patton, 2015). "Purposeful sampling is based on the assumption that the investigators want to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 96). Since the study intends to understand how state policy is enacted in residence life communities and programming, we considered participants, who have been in the position of receiving the legislation and making sense of how to implement enacted law. We applied three criteria for selecting participants: a) hold a position as a residence life director at a public institution with firearm possession policies for on campus living spaces due to state laws or court rulings; b) possess at least one year or more with firearms in the residence halls at their institutions; and c) leverage involvement and knowledge of the policy creation, implementa-

tion, training of staff, and oversight of living spaces with campus-concealed carry procedures. These criteria were important for the researchers because we understand that "the criteria you establish for purposeful sampling directly reflect the purpose of the study and guide in the identification of information-rich cases" (p. 97).

Before beginning participant recruitment, the researchers received institutional review board (IRB) approval. Residence life directors at 15 public universities in five states (e.g., Arkansas, Colorado, Kansas, Texas, and Utah) that allow campus-concealed carry received an email to either conduct a Skype or phone interview or complete the interview questions

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on their own time. Five respondents from five different public institutions agreed to participate in the study. Four participated in a phone interview and one submitted written responses, emailing them back to the researchers. Study participant demographics represented various racial and gender identities. However, to protect the anonymity of participants, we do not specifically provide social identity markers and additional institutional information.

Data Collection

Interview transcripts served as the primary data for this study. Additionally, we supplemented the interviews with institutional documents discussing campus-concealed carry laws. Semi-structured interviews ranged in length from 30 to 90 minutes, with the average interview lasting 60 minutes. To understand how the study participants made sense of the decision-making process, we crafted a semi-structured interview protocol designed to elicit narratives exploring how campus-concealed carry legislation related to higher education, sensemaking processes of these legislative changes, and interpretations for their residence life staffs. The interview protocol posed questions to the participant for specific examples of changes, if any. An example of our questions is: "Describe the process of creating and/or updating campus living spaces policies to address concealed carry." We also sought to find out if there had been staff turnover specifically due to the allowance of firearm possession in campus living spaces. All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Data Analysis Approach

Our data analysis plan followed Merriam and Tisdell's (2015) data analysis recommenda-

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tions. Each researcher independently reviewed interview transcripts line-by-line (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). This open-coding process allowed the researchers to review the interview contents, make notes about emerging ideas, and construct a rudimentary coding scheme. After open-coding concluded, the researchers met to discuss their independent coding schemes and to more fully develop a comprehensive set of themes. Establishing an agreed-upon coding scheme and related codebook allowed the researchers to move forward with their analysis. Finally, the researchers uploaded the interview transcripts to Dedoose, an online qualitative software, and coded each interview transcript. The findings presented in the next section emerged as the most commonly discussed items.

Reliability & Validity

The researchers enter the conversation about campus carry in living spaces at public institutions of higher education, as professors who teach in higher education and student affairs programs. One of the researchers began their career in higher education as a residence life graduate and hall director. We teach graduate

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students, who often work in residence life positions and share experiences in our classes that reflect awareness of their roles as implementers of policies. We acknowledged our role in educating future student affairs professionals and bracketed our previous work experiences that might bias the data analyses.

To determine if our results accurately captured the essence of our interviews, we employed member checking and multiple investigator triangulation. Each participant received a copy of his or her interview transcript. When participants signed the informed consent form for the study, we shared that member checking was an option and would be exercised if the participant agreed. Each participant reviewed his or her transcripts and chose not to make amendments to interview transcripts. Second, Patton (2015) asserted “triangulation, in whatever form, increases cred-

ibility and quality by countering the concern (or accusation) that a study’s findings are simply an artifact of a single method, a single source, or a single investigator’s blinders” (p. 674). We used multiple investigator triangulation in this case. Each researcher reviewed the interview transcripts and then convened to discuss observations within the data. Together, we created a code scheme that all researchers agreed to abide. Furthermore, every interview transcript coding was reviewed by all members of the research team and provided oversight to the open and axial coding processes.

A fourth way we addressed reliability and validity was through saturation of interviews. Saturation was reached as the researchers made comparisons of responses throughout the data collection process. Responses yielded redundancy in themes, which confirmed for the researchers that an adequate number of participants had been reached (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Participant quotes provide rich evidence and direct insight into how public university residence life programs are addressing campus-concealed carry policies in the living spaces.

While we believe the research design to be robust, at least three limitations must be considered when interpreting our findings. One, we focused on the top administrators and did not include assistant directors, graduate directors or resident assistants. The perspectives of these individuals likely would add more richness to the concealed carry policy creation and implementation since they have daily interactions with students and typically are the first responders to situations that occur in living spaces. Second, we only interviewed five directors of residence life, which is a very small

number of participants and therefore cannot be viewed as a representative sample of the total number of public institutions with individuals in that position. Despite the small number of participants, the representation was significant. Utah has the first public institution to allow concealed carry and Texas has a history of statewide concealed carry laws. The perspectives of directors of residence life in these two states shed insight that is counter to the dominant narrative of mayhem with campus-concealed carry in the living communities. Finally, this study was cross-sectional in design. Future exploration of the perspectives of residence life staff could be cross-section as well as attitudes being studied over time in a longitudinal study would be beneficial.

RESULTS

Three themes emerged from the data collected from the five directors of residence life. Interview findings demonstrate that directors of residence life made sense of implementing campus carry laws within residence hall contexts. Quotes from participants support how designing policy is value-laden, understanding how the law came to be, and observing how other institutions implement campus carry policies.

Designing Policy is Value-Laden

Designing concealed carry policies for on-campus living communities is a value-laden process. Specifically, implementation is an emotional and cultural experience for directors of residence life. The policy-making process incorporated lots of emotion and stress because the decisions directly influenced the staff members that were engaging in the policy-

making process. For example, many residence life staff live in the residence halls with the students. As a result, all directors noted that the live-in staff were more cautious and apprehensive about the policy than other student affairs professionals that left at 5:00 p.m. and returned to off-campus homes. Resident assistants and other graduate students also strongly

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voiced concerns, so through the internal policy-making process, directors had to make sense from various constituents and their particular concerns. Since students and parents or guardians may come from any of the 50 states and countries around the world, the idea that a gun may be concealed in a residence hall room may induce anxiety for students and their families in addition to national news.

One director's comments reflected an understanding that language used about roommate situations could influence the ways in which students perceived the residence life office's position on campus handgun carry. One participant shared:

"We made the decision not to ask on the housing application, 'Do you prefer not to live with someone who is a concealed carry permit holder?' We didn't want that to drive the dialogue at that point . . . the language we put out there was if you become aware that your roommate or suitemate has a license to carry a concealed weapon and you don't want to live with a permit holder, come to housing and let us know. We will move you. If you are a permit holder, your firearm needs to be concealed."

Given the changes in law that could have detrimental impact in the health and safety of the campus community and the rights of individuals, all directors mentioned the updates to training of staff as an area of concern. In one instance, a director acknowledged there may be personal disagreement with the law and addressing it was key. The director stated:

"We really approached this [new campus-concealed carry law] from an analytical perspective and prefaced our training with the caveat that while we didn't necessarily agree with the new law, as state agents, we are required to uphold it. We didn't provide space to debate the issue, because there was no room to do so once the law was passed."

Four directors mentioned that not much changed or was added to the training; however, many consulted or worked closely with the campus police. Many directors mentioned that the relationship with campus police was crucial so that all parties knew their roles. While a contentious topic, the directors emphasized that emotions and values could not dominate the training.

All five directors of residence life demonstrated a thorough understanding of how the law in their states was enacted and how reading and understanding the details is crucial. . . . once people understood more clearly the law and prospective institutional policies, they realized changes were going to be less intrusive than expected.

Understanding How the Law Came to Be

The second finding focused on the legislative creation process. All five directors of residence life demonstrated a thorough understanding of how the law in their states was enacted and how reading and understanding the details is crucial. These participants spoke about varying misconceptions of the law by staff, students, parents, and the general public. Given the politically polarizing nature of the topic, many people have preconceived biases regarding firearms, especially on campus. As a result, directors of residence life mentioned the stress that came along with crafting relevant policies from staff and stakeholders. However, once people understood more clearly the law and prospective institutional policies, they realized changes were going to be less intrusive than expected. As a result, it was incumbent on the

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directors to intimately and thoroughly understand the law and policies so that they could clearly articulate it to their staff and public.

With a thorough understanding of the law, a director of resident life provided an example of their active role in advocating for clarity in policies being created that would impact residence halls:

“We had staff on the working committees who discussed staff issues and had a role to write out and flesh out some policies that could be shared with the larger subcommittee . . . one of the things we had to do was iron out was [whether] the live-in staff [will] be able to maintain a handgun in their apartment. We had to look at the larger university, recommend language to discern whether or not it was even a question. Then two, if there was language in there that allowed us to go off of so then define [it] specifically. We were able to find some that didn't speak directly to it but also didn't exclude it. So we had to come up with a little bit more of a definition than what was in the recommendations.”

Additionally, the director shared how campus living is distinct from other areas of student affairs:

“Our positions are very unique so it's [not] like the larger university committee to talk explicitly about that . . . And so in addition to having to iron out how we were going to permit living staff to have it [handgun], it was going to be how and who. Because we have several levels of live in staff, we have RAs, graduate students, and full time staff and in the spirit of the recommendation we believe based on the words and the interpretation of that particular recommendation they were talking about full time staff of the university.

And so, one of the things we were really helpful in getting them to see was it ended up being a policy after the amendment was passed . . . the addition of the word 'full-time' because without that means RAs were authorized and that's something we did not want to see happen. So were successful in getting the president's office to consider that amendment.”

Given the nature of campus carry laws and the fact that they were state-level policies, directors of residence life have to be knowledgeable of laws and policies to determine reciprocity of permit holders that lived on campus but were from another state. The fact that campus carry laws are state-level policies, this means that the directors have to stay up to date and abreast of legal changes across the nation.

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Directors from different states acknowledged that colleagues at other institutions who have implemented policies can be valuable to the policy creation process. The participants mentioned that they had a network of other colleagues, either at other institutions or at their own, who they sought support from as they were going through the policy-making process.

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Observing How Other Institutions Implement Campus Carry Policies

A third finding illustrating how directors of residence life make sense of campus carry policies is through observing how other institutions implement these policy types. Directors from different states acknowledged that colleagues at other institutions who have implemented policies can be valuable to the policy creation process. The participants mentioned that they had a network of other colleagues, either at other institutions or at their own, who they sought support from as they were going through the policy-making process. Since the campus-concealed carry phenomenon is new and emerging in higher education, there is not much precedent to craft policy. Other colleagues who have traversed this process became good resources from which to learn. A director shared:

“We reached out to colleagues around the country and I am sure other committee members did as well. We reached out and we did a benchmark study. And we also reached out to a couple of people at schools at Utah and followed up with a call or two to individuals to ask them questions about it [campus-concealed carry policy].”

While each campuses’ policies are campus specific, learning from the experience of others helped the directors anticipate various challenges in the process. It also helped confirm that the law did not change much on campus as was anticipated. One director expressed:

“Reach out to colleagues at other institutions where it’s already been implemented. I certainly did that. And I talked with colleagues in Utah, Texas and found that they really hadn’t seen any changes in situations.”

Within the context of this study, directors of residence life have not fully comprehended how their institutional context would differ from the institutions that they intended to emulate and inform institutional policy. While they were aware variation would occur, they had not seen specific changes since residence life incorporated campus carry firearms into the fabric of residential living. Perhaps most notably, no major incidents had taken place in the residence halls of the directors in this study.

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From a sensemaking perspective, study findings demonstrate a deliberative approach directors incorporated into making policy for senior staff, residence directors, student staff, and students.

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DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to understand how residence life directors make sense of campus carry policies within residence halls. Qualitative findings demonstrate that participants engaged in three processes—how designing policy is value-laden, understanding how the law came to be, and observing how other institutions implement campus carry policies—while implementing their own campus carry policies. From a sensemaking perspective, study findings demonstrate a de-

liberative approach directors incorporated into making policy for senior staff, residence directors, student staff, and students.

How this decision directly influences people shaped participants' implementation plans. Participants discussed in detail who they thought these decisions might affect. In particular, directors were sensitive to the ways in which living communities would perceive campus-concealed carry laws. For this reason, participants discussed needing to immerse one's self in the policy creation process.

Finally, directors of residence life discussed following how other institutions navigated the implementation process. By focusing on how other directors executed an implementation plan, the participants were able to model the successful components of the process while adjusting for challenging moments. Those who made sense of their implementation through this approach perceived their process to be most successful.

The findings highlight the important role that sensemaking plays in preparing directors of residence life to engage the role of policy actor. While many participants operationalized practices that fostered successful policy enactments, directors did not feel fully equipped to make these decisions. With this opportunity for growth in mind, two practical suggestions can enhance sensemaking capacity. First, directors of residence life should be working in consultation with dean of students or vice president of student affairs professionals in crafting these specific policies. While they may have been involved in the process, directors did not mention executive level student affairs administration engagement in the policy enact-

ment process. By involving these other vested parties, directors can feel less pressure for developing all aspects of the implementation process. Second, more opportunities for crafting campus policies could be a useful approach for helping directors of residence life develop sensemaking capacity. Crafting and executing small-scale policies may provide residence life professionals with the opportunity to enhance their understanding of this process.

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Discussion Questions

1. The authors state “The policy-making process incorporated lots of emotion and stress because the decisions directly influenced the staff members that were engaging in the policy-making process.” What factors of the campus environment may contribute to the stress of residence hall directors in the policymaking process?
2. Knowing state laws was one aspect of sensemaking for campus carry policy for residence hall directors. How can residence hall directors convey the importance of these laws to other staff such as resident assistants, resident coordinators, and administrative staff?
3. Is it the responsibility of residence hall directors to change the perception of campus carry laws within residence halls? Why or why not?
4. The authors note “directors did not mention superiors engagement in the policy enactment process.” How can residence hall directors engage their superiors to begin the sensemaking process of campus carry policies within residence halls?
5. How can residence hall directors become competent policy actors through sensemaking?

Discussion questions developed by Alyse Gray Parker, The University of Texas at San Antonio.