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Campus Safety

Assessing and Managing Threats

By MARIO SCALORA, Ph.D., ANDRE SIMONS, M.A., and SHAWN VANSLYKE, J.D.



Since the shootings at Virginia Tech, academic institutions and police departments have dedicated substantial resources to alleviating concerns regarding campus safety. The incident in Blacksburg and the similar tragedy at Northern Illinois University have brought renewed attention to the prevention of violence at colleges and universities.

Campus professionals must assess the risk posed by known individuals, as well as by anonymous writers of threatening communications. The authors offer threat assessment and management strategies to address the increased demands faced by campus law enforcement, mental health, and administration officials who assess and manage threats, perhaps several simultaneously.¹

A CHALLENGE

Campus police departments have come under increasing pressure to address targeted violence and related threatening activity. College and university grounds often are porous, vulnerable to various types of threats (e.g., stalking, domestic violence, and other activities

conducted by disturbed or disgruntled students and employees) from both internal and external sources.

The campus safety professional must deal both reactively and proactively with these numerous threats. As much of the current literature concerning campus violence has focused on the elementary and high school levels, campus safety officials often must rely on data and research related to a younger age demographic operating in less diverse physical environments.

Campus law enforcement and safety agencies often are small compared with urban police departments, yet they operate within large, active communities. Further, campus safety officials must work with a variety of stakeholders, including

faculty, staff, administrators, students, and community members, and coordinate with law enforcement agencies responsible for the overall jurisdiction within which the institution is located. The campus safety official must accomplish all of this while preserving the tenets of an academic environment that values debate, free expression, and creativity. Unfortunately, the effort may be complicated by the fact that some people view law enforcement through an adversarial lens where campus safety measures conflict with these academic ideals.

A SOURCE OF HELP

Through the application of case experience, education, specialized training, and research,



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the FBI's National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime (NCAVC), part of the Critical Incident Response Group (CIRG), provides behaviorally based investigative and operational support to complex and time-sensitive situations involving violent acts or threats. Its Behavioral Analysis Unit-1 (BAU-1) assesses the risk of potential terrorist acts, school shootings, arsons, bombings, cyber attacks, and other incidents of targeted violence. Since April 2007, the unit has responded to numerous college and university requests to address cases of potential mass shooters. However, BAU-1 also has worked cooperatively with campus safety officials to craft effective threat management strategies pertaining to many other types of campus-oriented threats.

- For 20 years, a male subject with no formal relationship to or status on a campus but residing nearby continually harassed students and staff and blatantly disregarded formal requests to stay away from the grounds. Recently, he sent a letter containing hyperreligious references and veiled threats to the administration in which he expressed outrage over the revealing nature of dress exhibited by coeds attending services at his church.

- Extremists targeted a university laboratory because of its use of animals in research. Officials became concerned that one or more insiders set up the attack and continued to pose a threat to the safety of the laboratory, campus, and staff. University professors engaged in biomedical research received death threats, including those targeting their family members, at their residences.

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- College authorities received a frantic call from a parent of an incoming freshman who had found a profile on a social networking Web site of his assigned roommate and discovered several references to bombing the school and taking mass casualties. When subsequently confronted, the student of concern explained that these simply reflected his creative side and sense of humor.

- A cheerleader advisor at a large university received an anonymous letter containing threats to disrupt collegiate sporting events and kill innocent people, including school children, unless authorities met seemingly bizarre demands, the nature of which pertained to network television coverage and the perceived discrimination against cheerleader squads outfitted in sleeveless tops.

- A human resources specialist reported the potentially problematic termination of a disgruntled employee who allegedly made multiple references to recent acts of school violence and commented on how easily such an incident could occur within the individual's own campus. The employee also reportedly threatened, “They better not fire me if they don't want the same thing here.”

AN EFFECTIVE APPROACH

As a policing plan, a collaborative and standardized threat assessment protocol can prove valuable in addressing the various internal and external threats to campuses. Ideally, it involves flexible strategies to evaluate the range of observable behavioral factors (e.g., identified versus anonymous subject,



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the individual's motivations). Threat assessment methodology considers contextual, target- and subject-specific, and behavioral factors to determine the risk of violence.² Different from profile-based techniques focused primarily on subject characteristics, models of this approach deal more with the interaction of the perpetrator's behavior, the target's vulnerability, and related factors.³ Further, threat assessment differs from various surveys that evaluate site or asset vulnerabilities.⁴

A prevention-oriented strategy, threat assessment strives to accurately identify risks and to implement appropriate measures designed to minimize the potential for violence. To this end, investigators must evaluate the nature of the concerning (e.g., threatening or agitated) behaviors; the possible motives

and nature of the displayed grievance; and the target's, or victim's, reaction. The nature and intensity of the threat posed depends on how far the subject has escalated along a chain of behaviors that move from ideation to threatened or problematic action.

Lessons Learned

The experiences of law enforcement officers, as well as campus public safety personnel, administrators, and mental health practitioners, can provide valuable insight. The authors offer lessons learned from their own practice and from threat assessment literature.

Avoid Tunnel Vision

When planning strategies to prevent and manage threats, authorities must recognize that campuses face them from a

variety of sources, both internal and external, as indicated by the incidents addressed by BAU-1. While much attention focuses on violent students, public safety officials should resist a myopic approach and remain vigilant to *all* potential threats, recognizing that outsiders, employees, and other consumers of campus services may pose a threat to safety. Through comprehensive planning and collaboration, officials should anticipate multiple potential sources of violence and plan for copycat and hoax activity in the wake of highly publicized attacks at other institutions. While extreme acts of campus violence are rare, all stakeholders must consider themselves fortunate but not immune from the myriad safety concerns that plague colleges and universities across the nation.

Recognize Campus Values

Safety policies must respect institutions as unique environments of higher learning. Acts of extreme violence often reflect hatred, intolerance, and bigotry, and people recognize that such behavior cannot be tolerated within campus environments. Scholarship, creativity, and the fruitful exchange of ideas and learning could not thrive. Yet, the actual work of fusing pragmatic security measures with cherished Promethean ideals can prove challenging. Through education and outreach, campuses can allow safety planning and preparation to flourish as friends of an open campus environment.

In recognition of this balance, safety strategies should be flexible. Rigid policies (e.g., zero tolerance) do not necessarily promote secure environments and may contribute to outlandish applications of discipline that enrage and alienate the general campus populous. Administrators should review harsh disciplinary measures that may discourage individuals from reporting concerns and suspicions for fear a coworker or fellow student will face unjust punishment.

Communication must flow freely between consumers and providers. Students, faculty, and employees first must fully understand the mission of public safety before they

can cooperate with and support it. Therefore, administrators and campus law enforcement personnel should seek opportunities to provide campus consumers with information concerning threat assessment reporting protocols, as well as information concerning confidentiality. Authorities should consider facilitating confidential reporting opportunities via text messaging, e-mail, and other Web-based resources. Attackers

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typically do not make direct threats to the targets, but they often “leak” their intentions to a range of bystanders. Perpetrators with hostile aspirations often manifest concerning behaviors, including ominous and menacing verbal statements; violent-themed content posted on social networking sites; and written assignments saturated with hatred, despair, and rage. Maximizing and streamlining

the opportunities for these bystanders to recognize and report troubling behaviors remains one of the essential challenges faced by campus safety professionals.

Assess Threatening Communications

Assessing threatening or intimidating communications does not stifle creativity but, rather, represents a key aspect of maintaining a safe campus. Sometimes, faculty members may encounter disturbing or violent text or imagery from students while reviewing course assignments or conducting other classroom activities. Several noteworthy examples exist of subjects telegraphing or rehearsing violent intentions through text and video media. Though not all graphic or violent imagery necessarily predicts an individual’s actions, campus personnel should report such content for a discrete threat assessment. At a minimum, a student could be pleading for help through such disturbing messages. Faculty members may feel hesitant to report them for fear of creating a chilling effect within the classroom or alienating the student. However, a discrete threat assessment might allow campus law enforcement personnel and other professionals to not only gauge risk but also work with the faculty to develop strategies to approach the student.

Officials should evaluate drawings, essays, or videos that depict extreme acts of hostility, aggression, homicide, or suicide within the totality of the circumstances. Examining such products as part of an overall tapestry or mosaic further demonstrates the important role of the threat assessment team (TAT), which also can consider other pertinent factors, such as whether the student has actively sought to obtain items depicted in drawings (e.g., trench coats, weapons, masks).⁵

For instance, a student discloses to a mental health provider a particular resentment toward an individual. The counselor then learns that the subject has posted a video online in which he insults and disparages the person. A different video features the student shooting a handgun at a firing range. In a class assignment, the same subject writes of his overwhelming sense of despair and rage against the wealthy students at the university. Taken alone, each of these factors may not seem particularly dramatic, but, taken together, the TAT can begin to fully comprehend the true level of potential risk posed by the individual and manage it effectively.

Share Responsibility

Recognizing the need to gather information on any particular subject from a variety

of perspectives, threat management within the campus requires participation from multiple stakeholders, including, among others, student affairs, faculty, administrators, mental health care providers, and law enforcement officers—possibly municipal, considering the blended boundaries that often exist between on- and off-campus facilities. No single agency or other entity can manage the range of threats posed to university and college settings.



TATs should contemplate a holistic assessment and management strategy that considers the many aspects of the student's life—academic, residential, work, and social. Various colleges and universities have recognized the complexity of campus life and created teams designed to deal with crisis situations on

campus, complemented by separate TATs designed to address long-term follow-up issues, such as treatment compliance and reintegration.

A TAT with diverse representation often will operate more efficiently and effectively. In one case, the BAU-1 evaluated a university student who, in the months following the shootings at Virginia Tech, had engaged in increasingly bizarre behaviors, to include the torturing of animals. The subject had collected photographs of friends and drawn target circles around the head and face of one individual. The student made numerous disturbing statements that included claiming he was the best shot in the state and asserting that he would be “the next Virginia Tech.” Perhaps most disturbing, he had constructed a makeshift shooting range in his backyard for target practice.

The college's TAT had worked diligently in the months preceding this incident to establish lines of communication with external law enforcement agencies. Accordingly, the TAT activated an external network of allied agencies to identify crisis management strategies for reducing the potential for violence. Mental health practitioners and law enforcement officers and agents representing university, local, and federal organizations

instantly collaborated to design and implement an intervention strategy. Campus and municipal law enforcement officials located and interviewed the subject, then discovered that he had procured a semiautomatic handgun and a rifle. The student agreed to be voluntarily committed to a hospital for a mental health evaluation. Although he later revoked his permission, doctors had witnessed such disturbing behavior during their time with him that full commitment was authorized. One doctor considered the subject a “time bomb” who undoubtedly would have perpetrated an act of violence had the TAT not intervened. While this student was clearly engaged in disturbing behavior, the decision to intervene was enabled by preexisting channels of communication that facilitated a rapid and effective response.

Pinpoint Dangerous Individuals

Authorities should focus time and effort on individuals who actually pose a threat. Consistent across several studies and a central tenet of threat assessment literature—although some perpetrators may alert third parties or, perhaps, even their target—threatened violence does not necessarily predict that an individual ultimately will engage in the act.⁶

In the authors’ experience, a direct but generic communicated threat to commit campus violence on a certain date (e.g., “I’m going to kill everyone in this library on May 9!”) rarely materializes. By alerting public safety officials of their intent and the date of the attack, a threatener sets off a predictable chain of events resulting in additional security measures

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(e.g., bomb dogs, check points, evacuations) that ultimately reduces the chance for success. Therefore, a communicated threat announcing the plan generally proves counterproductive to the plan itself. Of course, authorities must take all threats seriously and investigate them to the fullest feasible extent. However, campus safety professionals should remain aware of the clear distinction between threateners and attackers.

Do Not Rely on Expulsion

Except as a last resort and unless absolutely necessary to ensure campus safety, authorities should avoid the temptation to simply expel students of concern to quickly resolve a risk. Isolated from other contingency and safety planning, this strategy sometimes can worsen matters. The final humiliation of expulsion may serve as a precipitating, or triggering, stressor in the subject’s life and propel the marginalized and hostile individual toward violence. Even after they physically remove the subject from the campus, officials will find it difficult, if not impossible, to prevent a determined student from returning. While expulsion remains an option, authorities must carefully consider the ramifications and limitations of such an action.

Students requiring discipline often can receive monitoring through mental health or other resources mandated by campus student services or judicial affairs offices more easily if not thrust unwillingly into the unstructured outside environment. Short of subjects displaying some extremely troubling behaviors that warrant immediate expulsion, campus professionals and law enforcement officers may collaborate to monitor such individuals on a probationary status. Officials should consider

the potential for such monitoring on a case-by-case basis.

Rather than isolating the subject and possibly exacerbating existing grievances, university officials can explore ways to integrate the student into an environment where monitoring and treatment coexist with safety and security. For instance, authorities can make appropriate referrals, with follow-up, to social services, mental health, and psychological counseling resources. Although officials must ensure the overall safety of the campus, they can benefit from a supervised integration, rather than isolation, of the individual. Doing so allows them to put the student into a supportive educational environment and to monitor, reinforce, and adjust interventional treatment strategies.

Also, in certain cases involving a student separated from the university, authorities should consider reintegrating the individual, provided the maintenance of appropriate safeguards. Presumably, students who suffer from a serious physical or medical condition will have the approval to pause studies, receive treatment, and return to classes with full privileges. While these individuals clearly present an entirely different scenario from those who pose a threat, it may be worthwhile to consider reintegrating a student who receives appropriate mental health care, treatment, and counseling and who demonstrates a record of compliance with security and treatment parameters.

If a subject presents safety concerns far too serious for reintegration to the campus environment, officials should consider active engagement in a process to ensure that the individual is not left adrift and isolated. While campus authorities do not traditionally take responsibility for assisting in students' lives once they leave the institution, it seems prudent to adopt a long-term threat-management perspective, collaborate with outside agencies, and become an active participant in the process to minimize the potential risk an individual still could pose to the campus. Campus safety professionals should check with legal counsel to verify that such contact with and monitoring of a former student is permitted.

Officials may find that some students are suitable candidates for nontraditional or creative arrangements that enhance security without exacerbating or increasing the risk of violence. For example, a community college received reports of disturbing behavior from a male student making troubling statements and stalking females. Although only one semester from graduating, his behavior had escalated to the point that he could not remain on campus. Expelling this student potentially could have stoked resentment while simultaneously cutting off the college's ability to monitor



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his moods, statements, and behaviors. Thinking creatively, officials arranged for him to receive video-recorded copies of classes at his off-campus residence. An administrator who previously had positive interactions with the student and who had the individual's trust served as a primary point of contact. The administrator maintained regular interaction with the student to ensure the completion of his assignments and, more important, to gauge his level of anger and his disposition. The individual successfully completed assignments via e-mail, graduated on time, and avoided becoming further disenfranchised as a result of an expulsion.

Use a Single Point of Contact

When monitoring cases, campus safety professionals should consider providing a single contact (i.e., a "temperature taker") to a subject. The initial intervention with a student may prove insufficient as additional follow-up may be necessary. In some cases, continued monitoring of the subject's behavior or communications will be needed. Either way, someone must have responsibility for monitoring or conducting follow-up of the situation. Given that multiple campus entities could partner to provide support, authorities must ensure communications

The FBI's Behavioral Analysis Unit, part of the Critical Incident Response Group, offers assistance in conducting threat assessments and developing risk management strategies. The unit can be reached at 703-632-4333.



to a subject are consistent and "on the same page" to avoid confusion.

A Campus Example

Campus authorities can perform collaborative threat assessment and management activities by organizing existing resources. It is critical to have one entity responsible for coordinating and monitoring situations. The University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UNL) has successfully implemented a TAT that has addressed dozens of situations. It consists of officers specially trained in threat assessment, as well as a consulting psychologist. Other campus personnel (such as those in human resources and mental health and student services) participate on an as-needed basis. The university's police department has primary responsibility for the security of the campus and properties and the investigation of criminal incidents occurring on university grounds.

University stakeholders can make a referral for a threat assessment when encountering a concerning behavior, and,

through various campus educational activities, the TAT encourages them to do so. In addition to training sessions to encourage prevention and early reporting, TAT members also reach out to human resources and student affairs staff with guidelines and criteria for use in screening for problematic student or employee issues that may raise concerns or warrant referrals. The TAT also monitors campus and local police contacts for incidents (e.g., domestic violence, protection orders, stalking allegations) that may warrant further assessment or monitoring of potential threats to the campus setting. Additionally, TAT members coordinate interventions with other university services, as well as monitor situations as warranted, to ensure that there is no flare-up of a posed threat. As a key focus, the TAT has educated and collaborated with a wide range of university stakeholder groups.

CONCLUSION

Colleges and universities strive to attain the noble goal

of making society better. Unfortunately, recent events have highlighted the reality that not even these institutions of higher learning are immune to unthinkable acts.

Of course, campus and law enforcement authorities want to address this problem and keep students, faculty, and others safe. While all segments of society, including campuses, face danger of some sort, by incorporating effective threat assessment and management strategies, officials can put measures in place that will meet this challenge head-on. ♦

Endnotes

¹ Throughout this article, the authors refer to campus law enforcement in general terms. They understand that campuses may vary regarding the presence and amount of law enforcement and public safety officers.

² J. Berglund, R. Borum, R. Fein, and B. Vossekuil, "Threat Assessment: Defining an Approach for Evaluating Risk of Targeted Violence," *Behavioral Sciences and the Law* 17 (1999): 323-337; and M.J. Scalora, D.G. Wells, and W. Zimmerman, "Use of Threat Assessment for the Protection of Congress," in *Stalking, Threats, and Attacks Against Public Figures*, ed. J. Hoffman, J.R. Meloy, and L. Sheridan (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2008).

³ J. Berglund, R. Borum, R. Fein, W. Modzeleski, M. Reddy, and B. Vossekuil, "Evaluating Risk for Targeted Violence

in Schools: Comparing Risk Assessment, Threat Assessment, and Other Approaches," *Psychology in the Schools* 38 (2001): 157-172.

⁴ U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice, *Threat Assessment: An Approach to Prevent Targeted Violence* (Washington, DC, 1995).

⁵ A standard definition of TATs does not exist. Generally, such teams are multidisciplinary in nature, bringing together campus professionals responsible for safety and behavioral management (e.g., campus safety, law enforcement, mental health, EAP, human resources, and student affairs personnel). Team composition also may vary based upon the focus of the TAT (e.g., issues pertaining to students or personnel, external threats), as well as the resources available given the size of the institution.

⁶ *Threat Assessment: An Approach to Prevent Targeted Violence*.

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