



PoliceOne
with Editor Rachel Fretz

Virginia Tech massacre: Where do we go from here?

The national response to the shootings at Virginia Tech, while unified in grief, has been highly emotional and often contentious in terms of answering the question, “Where do we go from here?” This question weighs most heavily on law enforcement officers who do not have time to point fingers and wring hands. It is time to act.

But what does this mean? What action will prove decisive and, if possible, preventive enough?

First, public safety agencies and academia must work together to draw up emergency response plans. This may not always be a straightforward task, as some academic institutions tend to regard law enforcement with wariness that can fall somewhere between ambivalence and open hostility. As a result, many schools prohibit police on campus, unless specifically requested.

“This becomes a huge problem when there’s an event of major significance,” says national security expert Vincent Henry. “Because the police have never been there—they don’t know the lay of the land, don’t know the community; they don’t know what the streets look like.”

Henry, a retired 21-year veteran of the NYPD in charge of the department’s first counterterrorism training after the 2001 World Trade Center attacks and lead instructor at the Homeland Security Management Institute’s terrorism training division, recalls an incident that took place on a New York City campus in the early 90s that left 10 people dead after a rap concert. “There was a report done and politics became involved,” he says, “but for the most part, the NYPD still does not have access—they’re still not allowed to come on that campus.”

Unbelievable as it sounds, that seems to be the trend. “And if they’re not actively prohibited and told to stay off college campuses, they’re certainly not invited on a regular basis—whether it’s for law enforcement, or just to drive around and see what things look like,” he says.



(AP Photo/Evan Vucci)

Furthermore, school bureaucracies often regard campus safety as an afterthought. The problem is two-pronged, says Henry: Schools don't have the resources to put towards state-of-the-art communication systems; and the people in charge of school security generally don't have background in the field.

In fact, the person in charge is usually a dean, provost, or another administrator—probably a former professor. “The nicest people,” Henry says, “but not the ones who should be responsible for these kids' safety.”

Despite the wake-up calls, an alarming number of colleges and universities still lack an emergency response plan. “You'd be shocked,” says Henry. “Aside from 'locking doors,' many of these schools don't have any plan at all.”

In order for public safety to start talking to academia, differences must be put aside. Police need to identify the rank of the campus safety contacts in their jurisdiction: How high is their position? How much time/authority do they have? Do they have the ability to interface with the decision-makers?

“Not every college needs a sworn law enforcement officer, but they do need a public safety person who has the latitude to interact with police.”

It's virtually impossible to identify an upside to a tragic situation like this. But if there's anything positive that will surface, it's discussion and an intense focus on coming up with strategies that will help keep the public—and police officers—even safer.

Whether it's making patrol-level active shooter response training mandatory, arming officers with more effective weapons designed to stop threats from a distance, remembering to stay ready for the possibility that you, too, may face a situation like this or making sure that campus officers are armed...whatever it is, in today's increasingly pressurized society, it's a sad but safe bet that situations like the one at Virginia Tech could happen again. We've seen it before. With that, let's use this in a proactive way. Let's evaluate, plan, strategize and above all, *learn*.

Be sure to read the important feature articles below, submitted by PoliceOne columnists within hours of the Virginia Tech incident, and to review the [news reports and past columnist submissions](#). They'll help you stay sharp and above all, stay safe.

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