

An Op-Ed on the Media Response to the Virginia Tech Tragedy

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If you believe the pundits and talking heads in the aftermath of the Virginia Tech tragedy, every college and university should rush to implement text-message-based early warning systems, should install loudspeakers throughout campus, should perform criminal background checks on all incoming students, should allow students to install their own locks on their residence hall room doors, and should exclude from admission or expel students with serious mental health conditions. We should profile loners, establish lockdown protocols and develop mass-shooting evacuation plans. We should even arm our students to the teeth. In the immediate aftermath, security experts and college and university officials have been quoted in newspapers and on TV with considering all of these remedies, and more, to be able to assure the public that WE ARE DOING SOMETHING.

Since when do we let the media dictate to us our best practices? Do we need to do something? Do we need to be doing all or some of these things? Here's what I think. These are just my opinions, informed by what I have learned so far in the reportage on what happened at Virginia Tech. Because that coverage is inaccurate and incomplete, please consider these my thoughts so far, subject to revision as more facts come to light.

- We should not be rushing to implement text-message-based warning systems. At the low cost of \$1 per student per year, you might ask what the downside could be? Well, the real cost is the \$1 per student that we don't spend on mental health support, where we really need to spend it. And, what do you get for your \$1? A system that will send an emergency text to the cell phone number of every student who is registered with the service. If we acknowledge that many campuses still don't have the most current mailing address for some of our students who live off-campus, is it realistic to expect that students are going to universally supply us with their cell phone numbers? You could argue that students are flocking to sign-up for this service on the campuses that currently provide it (less than 50 nationally), but that is driven by the panic of current events. Next fall, when the shock has worn off, apathy will inevitably return, and voluntary sign-up rates will drop. How about mandating that students participate? What about the costs of the bureaucracy we will need to collect and who will input this data? Who will track which students have yet to give us their numbers, remind them, and hound them to submit the information? Who will update this database as students switch cellphone numbers midyear, which many do? That's more than a full-time job, with implementation already costing more than the \$1 per student. Some students want their privacy. They won't want administrators to have their cellphone number. Some students don't have cellphones. Many students do not have text services enabled on their phones. More added cost. Many professors instruct students to turn off their phones in classrooms. Texting is useless.

It's useless on the field for athletes, while students are swimming, sleeping, showering, etc. And, perhaps most dangerously, texting an alert may send that alert to a psychopath who is also signed-up for the system, telling him exactly what administrators know, what the emergency plan is, and where to go to effect the most harm. Would a text system create a legal duty that colleges and universities do not have, a duty of universal warning? What happens in a crisis if the system is overloaded, as were cellphone lines in Blacksburg? What happens if the data entry folks mistype a number, and a student who needs warning does not get one? We will be sued for negligence. We need to spend this time, money and effort on the real problem: mental health.

- We should consider installing loudspeakers throughout campus. This technology has potentially better coverage than text messages, with much less cost. Virginia Tech used such loudspeakers to good effect during the shootings.
- We should not rush to perform criminal background checks (CBCs) on all incoming students. The N.C. State system task force studied this issue after two 2004 campus shootings, and decided that the advantages were not worth the disadvantages. You might catch a random dangerous applicant, but most students who enter with criminal backgrounds were minors when they committed their crimes, and their records may have been sealed or expunged. If your student population is largely of non-traditional age, CBCs may reveal more, but then you have to weigh the cost and the question of whether you are able to perform due diligence on screening the results of the checks if someone is red-flagged. How will you determine which students who have criminal histories are worthy of admission and which are not? And, there is always the reality that if you perform a check on all incoming students and the college across the street does not, the student with the criminal background will apply to them and not to you. If you decide to check incoming students, what will you do about currently-enrolled students? Will you do a state-level check, or a 50-state and federal check (FBI/DOJ)? Will your admitted applicants be willing to wait the 30-days that it takes to get the results? Other colleges who admitted them are also waiting for an answer. The comprehensive check can cost \$80 per student. We need to spend this time, money and effort on the real problem: mental health.
- We should NOT be considering whether to allow students to install their own locks on their residence hall room doors. Credit Fox News Live for this deplorably dumb idea. If we let students change their locks, residential life and campus law enforcement will not be able to key into student rooms when they overdose on alcohol or try to commit suicide. This idea would prevent us from saving lives, rather than help to protect members of our community. Mr. Cho could have shot through a lock, no matter whether it was the original or a retrofit. This is our property, and we need to have access to it. We need to focus our attention on the real issue: mental health.
- Perhaps the most preposterous suggestion of all is that we need to relax our campus weapons bans so that armed members of our communities can defend themselves. We should NOT allow weapons on college campuses. Imagine you are seated in Norris Hall, facing the whiteboard at the front of the room. Mr. Cho enters from the back and begins shooting. What good is your gun going to do at this point? Many pro-gun advocates have talked about the deterrent and defense values of a well-armed

student body, but none of them have mentioned the potential collateral criminal consequences of armed students: increases in armed robbery, muggings, escalation of interpersonal and relationship violence, etc. Virginia, like most states, cannot keep guns out of the hands of those with potentially lethal mental health crises. When we talk about arming students, we'd be arming them too. We need to focus our attention on the real issue: mental health.

- We should establish lockdown protocols that are specific to the nature of the threat. Lockdowns are an established mass-protection tactic. They can isolate perpetrators, insulate targets from threats and restrict personal movement away from a dangerous line-of-fire. But, if lockdowns are just a random response, they have the potential to lock students in with a still-unidentified perpetrator. If not used correctly, they have the potential to lock students into facilities from which they need immediate egress for safety reasons. And, if not enforced when imposed, lockdowns expose us to the potential liability of not following our own policies. We should also establish protocols for judicious use of evacuations. When police at Virginia Tech herded students out of buildings and across the Drill Field, it was based on their assessment of a low risk that someone was going to open fire on students as they fled out into the open, and a high risk of leaving the occupants of certain buildings in situ, making evacuation from a zone of danger an appropriate escape method.
- We should not exclude from admission or expel students with mental health conditions, unless they pose a substantial threat of harm to themselves or the community. Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act prohibits colleges and universities from discrimination in admission against those with disabilities. It also prohibits colleges and universities from suspending or expelling disabled students, including those who are suicidal, unless the student is deemed to be a direct threat of substantial harm in an objective process based on the most current medical assessment available. Many colleges do provide health surveys to incoming students, and when those surveys disclose mental health conditions, we need to consider what appropriate follow-up should occur as a result. Mr. Cho likely was schizophrenic or mildly autistic (Asperger's Syndrome?), and identifying those disabilities early on and providing support, accommodation--and potentially intervention--is our issue.
- We should consider means and mechanisms for early intervention with students who exhibit behavioral issues, but we should not profile loners. At the University of South Carolina, the Behavioral Intervention Team makes many early catches of students whose behavior is threatening, disruptive or potentially self-injurious. By working with faculty and staff at opening communication and support, the USC model is enhancing campus safety in a way that many other campuses are not. In the aftermath of what happened at Virginia Tech, I hope many campuses are considering a model designed to help raise flags for early screening and intervention. Many students are loners, isolated, withdrawn, pierced, tattooed, dyed, Wiccan, skate rats, fantasy gamers or otherwise outside the "mainstream". This variety enlivens the richness of college campuses, and offers layers of culture that quilt the fabric of diverse communities. Their preferences and differences cannot and should not be cause for fearing them or suspecting them. But, when any member of the community starts a downward spiral along the continuum of violence, begins to lose contact with reality, goes off their medication regimen, threatens, disrupts, or otherwise gains our attention

with unhealthy or dangerous patterns, we can't be bystanders any longer. Our willingness to intervene can make all the difference. All of the pundits insist that random violence can't be predicted, but many randomly violent people exhibit a pattern of detectable disintegration of self, often linked to suicidality. People around them perceive it. We can all be better attuned to those patterns and our protocols for communicating our concerns to those who have the ability to address them. This will focus our attention on the real issue: mental health.