



## Prevention of Campus Threats and Violence

Park Dietz, M.D., M.P.H., Ph.D.  
Threat Assessment Group, Inc.  
Newport Beach, CA

Paper scheduled for presentation at the Annual Meeting of the National Association of College and University Attorneys, June 29, 2007, San Diego, California.

Dr. Dietz is President of Threat Assessment Group, Inc., 2906 Lafayette, Newport Beach, CA 92663 ([www.taginc.com](http://www.taginc.com)) and Clinical Professor of Psychiatry and Biobehavioral Sciences, UCLA School of Medicine.

## Prevention of Campus Threats and Violence

Park Dietz, M.D., M.P.H., Ph.D.  
Threat Assessment Group, Inc.  
Newport Beach, CA

In some ways the tragedy at Virginia Tech makes this the best of times to work toward improving campus safety; in other ways, it makes it the worst of times. It is the best of times for change because the incident and the attendant publicity focus the attention of both internal and external decision makers on the issue of campus safety to a greater degree than could otherwise occur. This creates fertile soil for change.

It is the worst of times for change because once again, in a cycle repeated endlessly since the Texas Tower shooting by Charles Whitman in August 1966, each campus mass shooting brings calls for all manner of legislative solutions, many of which are directed at alleviating the wrong problem and most of which lead to no improvement. The largest news events typically progress from a focus on suffering to a focus on blaming. Even as it gives lip service to "healing," the press often contributes to the suffering and creates new victims of its own. During the blame phase, their targets are often the administration, faculty, parents, gun manufacturers and dealers, responding law enforcement agencies, and the entertainment industry (like everyone else, campus shooters have been exposed to television, movies, videogames, and music). If the shooter has been treated and medicated, the treating professionals and pharmaceutical company, too, become targets of blame. Then the lawsuits begin, alleging negligent hiring and supervision (when the offender is an employee), negligent security, negligent training, negligent procedures for violence prevention, and other causes of action against the external defendants.

Important though all of these issues may be, the cases dominating the news are not the proper focus of attention for designing a prevention program because they are too emotionally charged, focus too much attention on the events occurring during the shooting incident (as opposed to the stages leading up the shooting), and are the least representative of the myriad campus violence issues deserving of attention. Because the ordinary is not newsworthy and because it is too often the news that drives change, the calls to action that emerge after each high-profile incident tend to overemphasize issues from the last memorable event rather than seeking prospective solutions for the broader range of problems. Moreover, special interest groups often claim the incident as an example of their *raison d'être* and emphasize their issue as the solution to the problem.

## **The Nature of Campus Threats and Violence**

As in any community, violence on campus includes not just homicide, but also rape and other sexual assaults, aggravated and simple assaults, robberies, abductions, stalking, intimidation with weapons, threatening words or behavior, harassment, bullying, taunting, verbal abuse, inappropriate communications (e.g., anonymous, obscene, defamatory, threatening), sabotage, property destruction (e.g., bombing, arson, vandalism), various forms of privacy invasion, and a wide range of self-destructive behaviors.

In 1985, the first time I addressed your organization, I presented the results of a survey of 85 colleges and universities regarding their experience with offensive behaviors. At that time, we found a reported prevalence of 8 incidents per thousand students per year of threats, sex offenses, and harassment. At that time, lethal incidents (homicide and suicide) occurred zero to three times per year at any particular school. The other dramatic incidents involved the behavior of the seriously mentally ill, including what would today be regarded as stalking. Although the offenders were mostly students and visitors to the campus, a few were faculty and staff.<sup>1</sup>

Though the latest newsworthy case focuses attention on a particular category of offender, no prevention program can be complete without recognizing that those who commit campus violence include current and former students, faculty, employees, contractors, vendors, and their domestic partners, family members, and acquaintances, as well as others who visit the campus but have no relationship to the school. Moreover, the settings of campus violence span the range of learning, work, residential, recreational, and other campus locations, and, legalities aside, the safety expectations of parents and students extend to off campus housing, fraternities, sororities, and commercial establishments frequented by members of the campus community.

The diversity of offenses, offenders, and settings makes campus violence prevention nearly as difficult as the prevention of violence in the community at large. Campuses have several great advantages over the community at large, however, among which are the low base rate of violence, the intellectual and other resources of the average member of the community, and the centralization of some kinds of authority in the hands of the administration. It is this centralized authority that makes it possible for

---

<sup>1</sup> Dietz PE: "Offensive Behavior on College and University Campuses: Preliminary Results of a Survey of Institutions Belonging to the National Association of College and University Attorneys," National Association of College and University Attorneys Workshop: Protecting the Ivory Tower: Campus Crime and the Use and Misuse of Campus Facilities, Washington, D.C., February 23, 1985.

educational institutions to take advantage of the lessons learned regarding violence prevention in other institutions over the past 20 years.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, my colleagues and I conducted a series of studies of assassination, mass murder, assaults, stalking, threats, harassment, and other offensive behaviors. We studied these behaviors in penal institutions, in mental hospitals, in the U.S. Capital, in the entertainment industry, in the workplace, and in colleges and universities. Although these studies are best known for having called attention to the phenomenon now known as stalking, the more important discovery, in my view, was that in all of these contexts, a constant finding was that serious misconduct is foreshadowed by milder forms of misconduct and other inappropriate behaviors. This finding is the cornerstone on which I founded the first company devoted to preventing violence in work settings, which celebrates its 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary today. It was in the summer of 1987 that we began to systematically apply what we had learned from research to the applied purpose of preventing violence in large organizations.

This effort began by assisting organizations that had already identified a particular threat and sought help in neutralizing that threat. Although this effort has been uniformly successful, far too many of the cases brought to us in the early years were extremely dangerous and very far advanced before surfacing in a call for help. (Sadly, this happens even now among institutions who have not taken sufficient preventive measures.) We began to look at the history of these cases to see whether intervention at an earlier stage would have been possible, and we found that every single case of a perceived threat had been foreshadowed by other, less serious, inappropriate behaviors. Where the person posing the threat was a member of the organization, others in the organization (as well as those external to it) had observed the earlier signs, but had usually ignored them. Where the person posing the threat was external to the organization, the signs had not always been observed by members of the organization but were instead known primarily to the families, neighbors, and officials of the communities in which they lived. Where the threat level was highest, this had often arisen through misguided efforts to intervene with the tools at hand: the police, the courts, and the public mental health system. These observations both confirmed our gentle approach and allowed us to develop the second generation of preventive measures in which everyone in a position of authority in the organization received an appropriate degree of training on their roles in observing and reporting behavior, and a small cadre of senior managers was trained in how to manage the cases reported to them. We discovered that such training rapidly increased the number of cases reported and that cases were, as hoped, reported at earlier stages in their development. This led to the third generation of preventive measures, in which every member of the community received an appropriate level of training.

A nuance often missed in understanding the principle that serious misconduct is foreshadowed by milder forms of misconduct and other inappropriate behaviors is that the foreshadowing events are not always disciplinary violations or even "bad" behavior. Sometimes they are socially awkward behaviors, withdrawal, changes in behavior, or other signs that should and sometimes do lead to benevolent counseling or mental health attention. We refer to this general category of behaviors, which can be seen as violations of widely shared social norms but not official norms, as signs of a "troubled person," whereas we refer to the behaviors that violate official norms of performance or behavior as signs of a "troubling situation."

An example of inappropriate behavior that violates social norms but not necessarily the codified official norms occurred in the form of two anonymous letters that a female staff member found slipped under the door of her college office. As is often the case in unfolding stalking cases, she did not report the first letter until the second arrived, when she began to perceive a threat:

Letter #1:

Dear Ms. \_\_\_\_\_,

I don't know your name but we have seen each other quite a few times recently. . . . Please don't think this is some kind of joke or a prank of some kind, I decided to approach with writing because, well, it's concise, and yes, I'm shy with ah, women, or should I say a woman! such as yourself. I hope you please forgive me, I so much have wanted to talk to you and someday maybe I will. However until then I'll respectfully adore you.

Undercovered  
and yours  
- Secret Admirer -

P.S. I havent ingnored the fact that I may love you.

Letter #2:

Dear friend,

To me You're my living lost legacy. I do hope you don't mind me writing you letters. I hope you'll keep it secret between us, for I wish not to submit my true Identity. Have you cordially received one of my previous letters? I could clear the meander pattern I'm winding if it doesnt bother you that I'm a secret-admirer of you, and that I am curious about how you feel about this altercation, on the contrary, this is a developing continuing, narrative discourse, that follows and serves as a continuation of the previous one. May you benefit from this fact that I now possess a liking in you, and will effortlessly produce, with vigor, a intended effect to get you to like me and maybe even have a secret love-affair. I have seen you with a boy-

friend, so I know you have someone besides me who loves you. Do you think I'm wasting my time & ink? If so please replay with a note and deliver it to Student Info Center or the Security Command Center sealed in a envelope. Use this alias name: Hasaan Iamel. Of course that's not my name but I'll pick up your reply letters at the S.C.C. and will look forward to being your pen-pal. I will reveal myself if you approved.

I hope you don't think I'm sick. I don't go on writing letters to strangers I don't know. Oh! Never in my life I've become so obsessed with writing letters signed "Secret admirer." Who knows there may be flowers next, or even some candy, or Trashy lingerere, sent all the way from Beverly Hills CA. I do have class, but not if you blow the whistle on me. . . . You may want to have a "fling of a thing" or some encounter together someday like a friendly evening, or maybe some pen-pal fun. So please write me, you've seen me before, I'm probably Jumping to conclusions thinking you may like me, being that you gave me more than first that friendly smile you possess. May I'll give you a never-ending compliment on your personal capacity to acquire, possess, and exercise definitive influence on me that may some day determine the circumstances, or conditions you control in my life. This is not your everyday practical joke, I seriously think I want you and if you get the feel for desire or the need for love the way you never had it, write me, instruct and construct a means of direct collaboration.

I would now like to give you a few hints regarding my Identity. I'm 6'1" 220 lbs. (ex-Pro football player), I have brown eyes that will convert you and let you know that you could be that right girl for me. . . . I'm a song-writer musician, (Piano, Saxophone, singer). I have a degree in English and Ive attended to one of the most prestigious, accredited schools ranked 2nd academically in the U.S. (so I'm no dummy). . . . I am a southern gentleman with class, intelligence and street-smarts. My interests are commodites in the stock-market, fresh real-estate, fast women with no Brakes!! and a real zeal for fancy foods, (I'm a good gourmet cook!) I have many skills besides creative writing . . .

Well will you try to write me? Are you interested? Will you forgive me if this is a bad thing? . . . If there's no reply I'll assume 1) This letter didnt reach you. 2). You hate my guts & think I'm a pervert. 3). This happens every school year and you already have "100 secret letters." and/or last/least 4). You know me & and are not Interested.

Here's a list of things that should be of interest.

- 1). I'm in good shape w/ body builder body, but don't bodybuild.
- 2). Speak intelligently, rationally, and soft.
- 3). Terribly shy, but not behind closed doors.
- 4). Not Republican nor democratic, Just American!

5). favorite color: virgin white w/ graceful blues, reds.

. . . .

11). collector of weapons, autos, antique nostalgia. . . .

Now that you know about me, what about you? Are you willing to play this zig-zag of a game for FUN? Look if you think I'm crazy for doing this let me know (the way I informed) I just want to be a friend and have a buddy I can take to and have good clean fun. No drugs, no un-colithness, just plain old fashioned fun. It would be nice if I get a letter encouraging me to entice with you. I'd enjoy making you feel like a WOMAN for which I know that lately you haven't been quite satisfied. (Can tell by your eyes.) Maybe we can plan a day of leisure together, and explore the multi-realms of sexuality, Androgy People, current events, poems and songs, singing in each other's ears, words of wisdom, encouragement, and of course how good it can feel. I need you o.k. I want to know you . . . I don't kiss & tell, I'm explicit yet confined to total confidentiality. However it takes "two to tingle"!

Yours whenever you desire

Your secret admirer.

The author of the letters was identified as a campus security officer for whom English was a second language. This is a good example of a case that can be handled wisely and safely or foolishly and dangerously. Yet how many campus decision makers have the depth of knowledge and experience necessary to select the better approach?

Recognition of the mildest forms of misconduct and inappropriate behavior is prerequisite to rational prevention of the more serious forms, as the natural history of violent behavior is an escalation from milder forms of inappropriate behavior to more serious misconduct. Whether an individual who engages in low-level inappropriate behavior or misconduct escalates to more serious forms depends on a host of factors, among which are some variables over which those who seek to prevent violence have a degree of control. Among the most important of these controllable variables are the responses of the environment to the early forms of misconduct. Some responses increase the odds of escalation; others decrease the odds.

### **Why Colleges and Universities Are Difficult Clients**

We have had great success in instituting programs in corporations and on behalf of individual victims and in preventing violence for literally everyone who has called for help and taken our advice, yet our efforts on behalf of educational institutions have been frustrating.

It has often seemed to us that colleges and universities are determined to take steps to worsen the risk of violence by adhering to some or all of the principles embodied in these "13 Maxims for Maximizing Campus Violence":

- Invite people into your environment without interviewing them or verifying their self-reported backgrounds
- Don't train people to report problem peers; instead, discourage reporting by revealing who did the reporting and punishing the person reported
- Don't train RAs, faculty, or supervisors to recognize, document, or report misconduct
- Entrust life-or-death threat management decisions to untrained RAs, faculty, and supervisors, assuming that reasonable people will have the good sense to know when they are in over their heads
- Upon receiving a report of misconduct, first interview the accused
- Ask the police to investigate all threats and stalking
- Pin your hopes on mandatory mental health evaluations, and be sure to give the evaluator enough clues to reveal the identity of the informants
- Keep applications for temporary restraining orders handy to give to all victims; better yet, get an institutional restraining order so the offender won't be angry at the victim
- Look the other way as misconduct escalates, then expel or terminate without warning; better yet, don't expel or terminate
- When administering discipline, emphasize the poor character and worthlessness of the evil doer in front of as many people as possible
- Place concerns for social justice above concerns for safety
- If it occurs to you to ask for professional guidance, seek it from a popular professor in the psychology department, who may have taken a course in abnormal psychology during graduate school
- If the offender points a gun at you and makes a demand, refuse the demand and dare him to shoot

Colleges and universities tend to compare themselves to the community at large with respect to violence risk, as they fare favorably in such comparisons. This can breed complacency or denial as to whether there is a problem to be solved. When compared to businesses of comparable size, however, colleges and universities do not compare so favorably, particularly with respect to suicides, simple assaults, sex offenses, stalking, threats, and harassment. Six differences between businesses and institutions of higher learning help account both for the apparent difference in incident rates and the greater difficulty of preventing violence on campus. They are given here in order of increasing amenability to change:

(1) The relative youthfulness of the student population means that the risk of offensive behavior is higher. For serious violence, the incidence peaks in the age group aged 15-24, thus including the college age population. Moreover, the victims of harassment, stalking, and sex offenses are disproportionately younger women, found in abundance on most campuses. The youthful age of students is inherent in the educational function of most four-year colleges and is not amenable to change.

(2) Many colleges and universities include residential facilities on campus. Crime often happens in the home, and for many students, that home is on campus. Indeed, many of the premises liability cases on which we're retained as experts arise from sexual assaults or homicides occurring in dormitories and residence halls. This is one area we have seen major changes in recent decades, with much more attention paid to dormitory access control than in the past. Other organizations that provide housing—such as homeless shelters, the YMCA, summer camps, the military, the Roman Catholic Church, the Merchant Marine, and oil derricks—also experience crimes within their residential facilities. Criminals thrive on privacy, and residential facilities are one place where victims can be more easily isolated. This feature of college and university life is unlikely to change, though further advances in residential security are possible at many institutions.

(3) The open campus environment typically permits unrestricted access of almost anyone to a wide variety of buildings, libraries, classrooms, and recreational facilities. While residential areas, administrative offices, power plants, laboratories, and property at high risk of theft may be more carefully controlled, most academic institutions provide free and open access to a much greater extent than do corporations or non-academic governmental institutions.

Probably every institution could do a better job of securing some of its buildings—particularly after hours and particularly in residential areas—without compromising its educational mission or the sense of freedom enjoyed by members of the academic community. Access controls common among large corporations, however, such as visible identification, card key access to all buildings, guard desks, and escorts for all visitors, are less welcome at educational institutions, where they are regarded as unnecessary, intrusive, expensive, and inconsistent with the ideals of most members of the community.

(4) The decision-making process in colleges and universities favors thorough study, consensus building, faculty autonomy, and democratic principles. The decision-makers themselves are often risk-averse intellectuals. These traits may work in favor of the eventual development of sustainable and defensible policies and procedures, but often inhibit the prompt resolution of quickly evolving problems and emergencies, some of which need action more quickly than a committee can be convened to decide what to do.

For colleges and universities, the best countermeasure to this impediment is to delegate decision-making authority about individual cases to one or more small cross-functional teams prepared to manage cases involving the behavior of students, faculty, administration, and staff. We pioneered the use of such teams with 3M Corporation in the 1980s, helped establish and refine teams at hundreds of corporations, and introduced the idea at the

1999 FBI conference on school shooters, which resulted in a report adopting this approach.<sup>2</sup> A subsequent Secret Service report<sup>3</sup> also adopted the concept, though it recommended too many team members. Critical members of such teams include representatives of the Dean of Students, Human Resources, and General Counsel. The selection of the remaining members of the team requires considerable forethought and should reflect consideration of both jurisdiction of the team and the background, attitudes, responsibilities, and allegiances of the individuals considered.

One of the important refinements to this approach that we have not disclosed publicly until now is a procedure in which any two or three members of the team can take action in emergent situations without consulting the team as a whole. We would urge that this refinement only be adopted by teams that have been thoroughly trained on the techniques available for managing the entire range of inappropriate behaviors and the reasons for caution in relying on some of the techniques favored by untrained educational institutions.

(5) All colleges and universities emphasize their educational mission, and some emphasize liberal or religious ideals. In contrast, corporations emphasize earnings growth and the protection of human and other assets. Educational institutions are loathe to set aside their ideals of how the world should operate merely to handle some practical problem of the day, and they demand a high standard of proof before agreeing to an out-of-the-box solution that requires a change in protocol or an exception to the normal disciplinary process. In contrast, corporations rarely hesitate to put safety ahead of fairness. The hierarchy of values in educational institutions allows for emergency exceptions to due process and other fair practices, but at a higher threshold of risk than would be necessary in a company.

Overcoming this barrier to effective action requires high-level training of the right decision makers. First, they need to understand that case management cannot be left to law enforcement, the courts, or the public mental health system without increasing the risk of violence. Second, they need to understand that there is no one-size-fits-all solution, so no procedural

---

<sup>2</sup> Critical Incident Response Group, Federal Bureau of Investigation: *The School Shooter: A Threat Assessment Perspective*. Washington, DC: Federal Bureau of Investigation, undated report of July 1999 Leesburg, Virginia, Symposium.

<sup>3</sup> United States Secret Service and United States Department of Education: *The Final Report and Findings of the Safe School Initiative: Implications for the Prevention of School Attacks in the United States*. Washington, DC: United States Secret Service and United States Department of Education, May 2002, <http://www.ed.gov/admins/lead/safety/preventingattacksreport.pdf>.

manual or computer software can guide case management decisions. Instead, well-trained professionals must conduct adequate investigations, generate creative solutions, and have the backing of senior administrators to take the steps necessary to keep the campus safe on a long-term basis. This sometimes requires having a budget at hand and the authority to spend it. Large corporations have no difficulty spending \$50,000 on short notice to solve a problem that could otherwise cost multiples of this amount in enhanced security, disability payments, litigation expenses, or liability. Educational institutions struggle greatly over such decisions.

(6) In the United States, student culture, particularly among undergraduates, embodies norms and values that contribute to the development of behavioral problems and misconduct and simultaneously serve as barriers to early intervention. Most notable among these are: (a) the widespread acceptance, at most institutions, of heavy drinking, recreational drug use, recreational sex, horseplay, and other risk-taking behaviors; (b) cultural inhibitions against reporting misconduct to authority figures; and (c) cultural inhibitions against judging others as abnormal or deviant.

The key to preventing violence among students is the reshaping of these norms of student culture, and it is this task that occupies us this summer.

### **Important Steps to Prevent Campus Violence**

Despite the differences between secondary schools and institutions of higher education, some of the ideas to emerge from a detailed analysis we conducted of the mass murder at Columbine High School (on behalf of the Office of the District Attorney) still seem to me to hold promise, despite the guidance having been ignored by many who have received it. Our best idea for preventing mass murder on campus was a voluntary convention among the mass media embracing four principles:

- No photos of shooters
- Limit 24/7 coverage to the local market
- Short, factual stories only in the national market
- No cover stories outside the local market

Our best ideas for educational institutions were to:

- Teach students, staff, and faculty to report all warning signs, particularly bullying, harassment, and threats
- Train cross-functional teams to investigate and respond appropriately
- Provide expert resources for intervention where needed

Our best ideas for parents and those who stand in the place of parents were to:

- Teach tolerance without abandoning interpersonal judgment
- If a child shows warning signs, talk to the child and search the child's room
- If a child abuses a substance, possesses a weapon, or is picked up by the police, talk to the child and search the child's room
- Provide reasonable adverse consequences for unacceptable behavior

For colleges and universities, a policy permitting extrajudicial searches would require giving parents and students advance notice that on-campus living quarters may be searched for weapons and explosives without notice, but that other contraband found during such searches would be seized but not used for disciplinary or law enforcement purposes.

Notice that I have said nothing about what to do if a shooting occurs. While I believe it is good to be prepared for all eventualities, I think we make a grave mistake if we devote our limited resources toward emergency planning (known in public health as secondary prevention) rather than primary prevention that can prevent both shootings and other forms of violent and unwanted behavior. Twenty years ago, the corporate world was prepared for shooting incidents, with more than half of all companies having devised an emergency response plan. At that time, not one had a decent plan for primary prevention. Today, the largest corporations have both programs of primary prevention and emergency preparedness. As every student of public health knows, primary prevention (preventing the condition from occurring) is less expensive and more effective than secondary prevention (reducing the impact of an incident in progress) or tertiary prevention (reducing long-term impact, such as rehabilitation of those injured). If ever there were a time that colleges and universities should be motivated to catch up with their corporate counterparts in implementing sophisticated programs of primary prevention, this is it.