

## Aftermath Dynamics and Management: Through the Lens of the Virginia Tech Incident

### University Incidents – Lessons Learned



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James F. McShane  
Vice President for Public Safety  
Columbia University

[www.columbia.edu/cu/publicsafety](http://www.columbia.edu/cu/publicsafety)

## Introduction



- The Virginia Tech Incident has resulted in many lessons learned by schools across the country.
- Different lessons resonate with different types of schools
  - Urban vs. Rural
  - Public vs. Private
  - Commuter vs. Residential
  - Geographic Locations  
*e.g., hurricanes, floods, etc.*
- Even as schools confront similar challenges, they may have different levels of resources available to them.
  - Mental Health Care
  - External Public Safety Support
- My comments today are offered in the context of my experience as the head of Public Safety at a private, urban, residential university.
- More focused on Incident Management than Aftermath Management.

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## Sexual Assault at Columbia Prior to Virginia Tech Incident

- Near-fatal sexual assault of Columbia Journalism Student
  - Two days prior to Virginia Tech Incident
  - 1.5 miles from campus
  - Initially reported in the media before campus authorities disclosed it to the campus community
- By Tuesday, April 17<sup>th</sup>, the campus was in an uproar because of both of these incidents
- There was a demand on campus for information from the administration.
- The University disseminated publicly available information to meet this demand.
- **Lesson:** The University Community wants to receive as much information from the administration as can reasonably and legally be provided, even if it is already otherwise available.

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## Sexual Assault at Columbia Prior to Virginia Tech Incident

- Over the next few weeks, we published a series of general bulletins on public safety initiatives
- We also disseminated specific updates on the progress of the sexual assault information.
- All of the information was well-received except for the wanted poster that was released by the N.Y.P.D. prior to the subject's apprehension.

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## Report to President Bush



- On June 13, 2007, the Attorney General and the Secretaries of Health & Human Services and Education issued their Report to the President on Issues Raised by the Virginia Tech Incident.
- Report released two months prior to the Virginia Tech Review Panel Report to Virginia's Governor Timothy M. Kaine.
- Three of the five key findings relate to greater communication and information-sharing among all persons involved in making the community safe.
- Another key finding was the need to provide appropriate services to community members with mental health issues.
- The final recommendation involves providing greater information on firearms restriction to the National Instant Criminal Background Check System (NICS).
- Most of these key findings were also found in the Virginia Tech Review Panel when it was released.

## Information Sharing: The FERPA & HIPAA Conundrum



- Both the Virginia Tech Review Panel Report and the Report to the President highlighted the confusion surrounding the scope and application of the FERPA and HIPAA statutes.
- Subsequently, in November 2007, the DOE issued two brochures which provided information clarifying the restrictions on information-sharing imposed by FERPA.
- In particular, the brochures made clear that University Public Safety officials are "school officials" with a "legitimate educational interest" and are, therefore, able to be given access to personally-identifiable information from students' education records.

## Information Sharing: The FERPA & HIPAA Conundrum



- They also made clear that Public Safety records were not subject to FERPA. This, too, has facilitated greater communication among University stakeholders.
- Brochures are available at:
- [www.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/fpco/ferpa/safeschools/index.html](http://www.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/fpco/ferpa/safeschools/index.html)

## Early Intervention And Threat Assessment



- Both reports discussed the benefits of early intervention and threat assessment.
- At Columbia, there are 25. F.T.E. counselors available in our counseling unit.
- In addition to the counseling office in the Student Center, we have satellite offices in four residence halls and in our law school.
- We believe they have been successful in addressing potential threats before they become actual ones.
- A major concern is students away from home for the first time who, in the absence of parental oversight, stop taking their medications.

## Early Intervention and Threat Assessment



- We have implemented an Involuntary Leave of Absence Policy for appropriate cases.
- Conflicting views on this practice; e.g., Va. Tech students sent home.
- Educational messages are regularly distributed by Health Services to faculty, staff & students, informing them of behavioral warnings of potential threats and advising them of appropriate steps to take.
- Many colleges have now developed formalized Campus Threat Assessment Teams.
- At Columbia, our team meets to share information and to intervene as appropriate, when factors and circumstances warrant. Members include:
  - Health Services
  - Public Safety
  - Student Affairs
  - Deans of Students
  - General Counsel

## The Growth of Text Messaging



- The Virginia Tech incident has resulted in the unprecedented growth of the text messaging industry on campuses
- Text messaging, if used properly, can be very effective in many emergencies.
- There is a divergence of opinion as to how useful this technology would be in an actual shooting. Nevertheless, virtually all college campuses have implemented some form of text messaging.
- There is often confusion between “instant” notification and federal required timely warnings.
- HEOA of 2008 creates a new mandate for “Emergency Notifications.”

## Active Shooter Protocols



- Virtually all schools have developed “Active Shooter” protocols and have distributed them to their communities.
- Are they really effective?



## Three Most Significant Lessons



- Prevention
  - Threat assessment
  - Counseling
  - Relentless follow-up
- Communication
  - Pre-crisis - Information sharing re: potential threats
  - During a crisis - emergency messages
  - Early aftermath – official statements “Speak with one voice!”
- Follow-up
  - Victim services
  - Restoration



## Conclusion

- The Virginia Tech incident has affected every campus community in this country in a variety of ways.
- Most significantly, it has highlighted the need for **all** member of the community to take responsibility for the community's well-being.
- Regardless of the specific measures implemented to achieve this, it is a worthy goal.