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Could Virginia Tech Massacres Have Been Prevented? Strategies for Prevention and Counseling

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President Bush stated that it was the worst day of violence in the history of the United States (Bush, 2007). The massacres started on Monday morning of April 16, 2007. By afternoon, thirty-three people were dead including the gunman, Cho Seung-Hui. The disgruntled and mentally deranged student opened fire in a dormitory and a classroom building, killing at least 32 people and injuring many others (Smith, 2007). In order to examine prevention strategies, this timeline of Virginia Tech's massacre is provided:

7:15 a.m. – Virginia Tech police department receives a 911 call from the fourth floor of West Ambler Johnston Residence Hall, a co-ed dormitory with 895 residents on the south side of the campus. Police received calls about two people, a man and a woman, shot dead inside a dorm room. Unfortunately, the police believed that the deaths were an isolated incident, domestic in nature.

7:30 a.m. – The university and Blacksburg police officers begin follow up on leads concerning a person of interest in relation to the double homicide in the building.

8:25 a.m. – Virginia Tech administrators including the president meet to assess the situation and determine how to inform students about the killings.

9 :00 a.m. – The Virginia Tech police briefs university officials on the investigation of the residence-hall shooting.

9:26 a.m. – Virginia Tech sends the following message to students and faculty members:

A shooting incident occurred at West Amber (sic) Johnson earlier this morning. Police are on the scene and are investigating. The university community is urged to be cautious and are asked to contact Virginia Tech police if you observe anything suspicious or with information on the case.

The university also posts a news release about the incident on its Web site and transmits a similar message through campus phones, such as its weather phone.

9:45 a.m. - The campus police officers receive a 911 report of more shootings at the university's engineering building, Norris Hall, which is half a mile across the campus from Ambler Johnson. When police officers arrive at Norris Hall, they find the doors chained from the inside. They heard sounds of gunshots on second floor and found the gunman, Cho, who has taken his own life. In four classrooms and in a stairwell they find 30 dead and many others injured.

9:50 a.m. – Virginia Tech administration send the following message to staff and students, with the subject line “Please stay put”:

A gunman is loose on campus. Stay in buildings until further notice. Stay away from all windows.

10:16 a.m. – The university sent an e-mail notifying cancellation of all classes and asked students who are not on campus to stay away. Students were asked to remain where they are, lock doors, and keep away from windows.

10:52 a.m. – The university sends another e-mail notification of the Norris Hall shootings:

In addition to an earlier shooting today in West Ambler Johnston, there has been a multiple shooting with multiple victims in Norris Hall. Police and EMT are on the scene. Police have one shooter in custody and as part of routine police procedure, they continue to search for a second shooter. All people in university buildings are required to stay inside until further notice. All entrances to campus are closed.

12:41 p.m. – Charles W. Steger, president of Virginia Tech, issues a public statement that the university was struck today with a tragedy of monumental proportions. The university will set up counseling centers and all classes have been canceled for the following day, and the university will contact the families of victims as their names become available (“Timeline of a massacre,” 2007).

Since the Columbine school shootings, American schools, colleges and universities have been plagued by new attacks and threats (“UGA Student Jailed,” 2007). In the aftermath of Virginia Tech shootings on Monday, April 16, 2007, bombs, threats and other incidents filled the post-Virginia Tech landscape. Taking no chances, four more colleges, University of Cincinnati, University of South Carolina at Columbia, State University of New York College of Agriculture and Technology at Cobleskill, and Terra Community College in Ohio, have reacted aggressively to threatening incidents that otherwise might have passed quietly (“Bombs, Threats, and Other Incidents,” 2007). Threats shut down

colleges in Mississippi and Washington, Delta

State University and Yakima Valley Community College (“Threats, Shut Down,” 2007). These incidences and the resulting unrest in our educational institutions, both public and private, have been reported in the mass media (ABC News, April 29, 2003; Time, 2001) highlighting the growing tendency of students to engage in interpersonal violence. Violence is a problem not only in urban and suburban institutions but also in rural institutions, with more adults, adolescents and children being both perpetrators and victims (Chandras, 1999). Typically, the perpetrators have been young, typically disgruntled, Caucasian males (only a small proportion of incidences involve female students, Pennsylvania, March 7, 2001). Smith (2007) listed a chronology of major shootings on American college campuses in recent years:

- 1. Virginia Tech.**, April 16, 2007: At least 33 dead as of Monday afternoon, including the gunman; 26 injured. The gunman opened fire in a dormitory and a classroom building, killing at least 30 people and injuring many others.
- 2. Shepherd University**, September 2, 2006: 3 dead, including the gunman. Douglas W. Pennington shot and killed his two sons, who were seniors at the university, and then himself.
- 3. Case Western Reserve University**, May 9, 2003: 1 dead; 2 injured. A 62-year-old alumnus, Biswanath Halder, killed one student and injured two others. He surrendered after a seven-hour standoff.
- 4 . Appalachian School of Law**, January 16, 2002: 3 dead, 3 injured. Peter Odighizuwa, a 43-year-old law student from Nigeria, shot and killed the dean, a professor, and a student, and injured three others.
- 5. University of Arizona Nursing College**, October 28, 2002: 4 dead, including the gunman. A 40-year-old failing student shot and killed three instructors before killing himself.
- 6. University of Arkansas at Fayetteville**, August 28, 2000: 2 dead, including the gunman. James E. Kelly, a 36-year-old graduate student recently dropped from a doctoral program, shot and killed the professor overseeing his work before killing himself.
- 7. San Diego State University**, August 15, 1996: 3 dead. Frederick M. Davidson, a 36-year-old engineering graduate student shot and killed three professors while defending his thesis.
- 8. Pennsylvania State University at University Park**, September 17,

1996: 1 dead; 1 injured. Hiding in bushes outside the university's Hetzel Union Building, 19-year-old Jillian Robbins fired shots at passersby, killing one and injuring another.

9. Simon's Rock College of Bard, December 14, 1992: 2 dead; 4 injured. Wayne Lo shot and killed a professor and a student, and wounded three other students and a security guard, before surrendering to the police.

10. University of Iowa, November 1, 1991: 6 dead, including the gunman; 1 injured. A Chinese physics student enrolled in a Ph.D. program, Gang Lu, shot and killed five people and left another permanently paralyzed after his doctoral dissertation did not receive a prestigious award. He killed his adviser and co-adviser, the student who won the dissertation award, the physics-department chair, and the vice president for academic affairs.

11. California State University at Fullerton, July 12, 1976: 7 dead; 2 injured. Edward C. Allway, a custodian at the university, shot and killed 7 people in the basement of a library, and injured two others. Later, it was discovered that he suffered from paranoid schizophrenia.

12. Kent State University, May 4, 1970: 4 dead; 9 injured. Four students were killed and nine others were wounded by members of the Ohio National Guard as they protested the United States' invasion of Cambodia.

13. Jackson State University, May 14, 1970: 2 dead; several injured. Two students were shot to death by local and state police officers during a protest of the United States' invasion of Cambodia.

14. South Carolina State University, February 8, 1968: 3 dead; 27 injured. After rising racial tension over efforts to desegregate local bowling alleys, South Carolina Highway Patrolmen opened fire on a crowd of protesters.

15. University of Texas at Austin, August 1, 1966: 16 dead, including the gunman; 31 injured. Charles J. Whitman shot and killed 13 people and wounded 31 others before he was shot dead by police. The night before, he also shot and killed his mother and his wife. Later, it was discovered that he suffered from a brain tumor that was affecting his limbic system, part of the brain involved with emotion and motivation.

Around the United States, dozens more copycat threats were reported in the media (McGregor, 2007). Surprisingly, these adolescents came from middle and working-class families (Chandras, 1999, 2001) shattering the myth that violent students come from

desperate, impoverished families. These tragedies prompt inescapable questions: What are the causes of this disturbing trend? How does one reach that point? What is happening in American families and the larger society to cause adolescents to resort to such violence? What had the parents and school personnel done or not done, to add their schools to the growing list of communities where adolescent anger turned schools into battlegrounds? Alienation, frustration, anger, mental illness and psychotropic drug use may all be the factors in creating a violent situation. In almost all cases, the guns are either stolen, bought or taken from the family members without their knowledge.

After studying the characteristics and backgrounds of these adolescents, the following profile was constructed and may represent the characteristics of the shooters:

1. Mental problems (Depression; schizophrenia, anger, etc.);
2. Obsessions with guns and weapons;
3. Substance abuse;
4. Bullied and demeaned by other students;
5. Family pathology;
6. Lack of positive relationships with others;
7. Lonely and feel rejected by others.

Some of these characteristics may fit with any of the attackers. University and school personnel should pay particular attention to these indicators and take necessary action before violence happens (“Va. Tech gunman writings raised concerns”, 2007).

Prevention and Counseling Strategies

There is a dearth of understanding of students by parents, instructors, counselors, and other helping professionals (Perry, 2001). Three key elements that are necessary to combat violence are communication, a positivetrusting relationship and early identification and action in assisting students with mental health problems (CNN News, 2007).

Early Identification Strategies

Colleges and universities may use early identification and counseling of students with mental health problems. In outreach, counselors seek out those who fit the profile and assist them to resolve their problems before violence occurs. The Brazelon Center for Mental Health Law (Wasley, 2007) lists best practices for colleges and universities in

dealing with students having mental health problems. The Center emphasizes encouraging students with mental health problems to seek counseling early and follow up on their condition. Colleges and universities should make accommodations for students who suffer from depression, anxiety, personality disorders, or other mental health problems.

Outreach

Outreach is a technique that utilizes college and community professionals of various backgrounds for help with troubled students. By adopting equitable and fair policies in dealing with students with mental health problems, colleges and universities can help limit their liability under the Americans with Disabilities Act, which requires them to make “reasonable accommodations.”

Advocacy

With Advocacy, the counselor acts as an emissary for the student and asks the assistance of Consultants in providing technical assistance to faculty, parents, administrators and staff and other counselors to identify and remedy problems associated with combating violence. For example, the consultant might recommend a training program in anger management for the students at a college or university.

Many colleges and universities have taken measures to identify students who show early signs of mental health problems. There are red flags and behavioral indicators that counselors and other people with training can identify. In the case of the Virginia Tech shooter, Cho Seung-Hui, no action was taken when he was taken to a mental health center in 2005. Periodically, Cho demonstrated disturbed behavior and he was referred to the university’s Office of Judicial Affairs, the outcome of which was confidential (CNN News, 2007).

Federal Privacy Laws

Members of the U. S. Senate discussed whether changes in federal privacy laws might help colleges and university officials prevent Virginia Tech-like tragedy from happening again. Changes should be made in two federal laws pertaining to the dissemination of information about students: the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act, commonly known as HIPAA, and the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act, or Ferpa. These laws strictly limit a university’s ability to share health, disciplinary, and other records of students with other organizations, or even with a student’s parents (Vance, 2007).

Crisis Management

Another strategy that could be utilized in colleges and universities is crisis management.

It involves strategies of close surveillance of troubled students on campuses. The strategies may include installing metal detectors, communicating trouble spots on campus, telephone A hot lines @ to report crisis situations, sending e-mail, telephone broadcast systems, online postings, public-address systems and text messages to students and faculty, and strictly enforcing laws for criminal acts on campus (Lipka, 2007).

Mediation

Mediation has been successfully utilized by families, churches, courts and other community agencies. Colleges are encouraged to use mediation on their campuses between students and college personnel. Counselors can educate students to resolve conflicts and disputes through mediation.

Conflict Resolution

Conflict resolution skills training programs brought results and aimed at peer mediation, conflict resolution and anger management (Breunlin, Cimmarusti, Bryant-Edwards, & Hetherington, 2002). It may include violence prevention curriculum and promotion of nonviolence for adolescents (Orr, 2001).

Conclusion

In light of the Virginia Tech's massacres, counselors, faculty and other personnel should be ready and able to meet crises and prevent when they occur on campuses. Immediate counseling facilities should be available to students and other personnel. It is important to empower students to discover alternative ways of perceiving problems in order to handle them constructively and amicably. Colleges and universities should develop nonviolent environments in which students and faculty can settle differences through discussion, mediation, and compromise. A broad, comprehensive set of immediate policies and procedures must be in place in every institution for prevention as well as immediate response, and must involve faculty, staff, and all other employees. There are many challenges and opportunities faced by colleges and universities.

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