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## THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

**Commentary: The Contagion of Campus Bloodshed**

*By James Alan Fox*

The gun smoke had barely cleared from the lecture hall at Northern Illinois University where last week a former graduate student had executed five students before killing himself when local and national scribes began speculating about a new trend in mass murder American-style. The *Chicago Tribune* Web site, quick with coverage of the tragedy some 75 miles away in DeKalb, noted that the shooting spree was the largest on a college campus since the Virginia Tech massacre. Meanwhile, the Associated Press disseminated a list of more than a dozen campus shootings occurring since 2000.

Are college students indeed the latest mark for heavily armed avengers? The 1980s witnessed a string of shootings by disgruntled postal workers, inspiring the term "going postal." The '90s featured a flurry of multiple murders at middle and high schools nationwide, as "Doing a Columbine" became shorthand for a schoolyard threat. Will this decade be remembered as the time when the ever-popular "College Survival Guides" shifted focus from tips on how to study for a midterm to advice on where safely to sit while taking the midterm?

Epidemic thinking can tragically become a self-fulfilling prophecy by fueling a contagion of bloodshed. The overpublicized acts of two alienated students at Columbine High in part inspired the Virginia Tech shooter to outperform his younger heroes. As the death toll rose that fateful Monday morning last spring in Blacksburg, on-air news anchors tracked the unfolding drama as ignominious records began to tumble. Shortly after announcing that the shooting had become the largest campus massacre ever, eclipsing the 1966 Texas Tower sniping, television commentators declared, with nearly gleeful enthusiasm, that it had surpassed in carnage all other mass shootings in the United States at any venue. For the remainder of the day, viewers were told repeatedly that the Virginia Tech massacre had been the biggest, the bloodiest, the absolute worst, the most devastating, or whatever other superlatives came to mind. Notwithstanding the cruel absurdity of treating human suffering as any sort of achievement worthy of measuring in such terms, little positive can be derived by highlighting such records. But there is one significant negative: Records exist but to be broken. Unquestionably, the overwhelming majority of Americans who watched the news about Virginia Tech or Northern Illinois would have identified with the pain and suffering of the victims, their families, and the entire campus communities.

However, a few would instead have identified with the power of the perpetrators. Imagine, for example, the reaction of some disgruntled student watching one network's newscast last week in which a computer simulation was shown of the gunman at Northern Illinois blasting away at a classroom of students.

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The source of contagion extends well beyond the mass media, however, landing right at the steps of college campuses everywhere. In the wake of recent high-profile tragedies, college administrators have made campus safety and security a priority. Not only are colleges feeling compelled to divert scarce resources away from important academic needs over to security technology, but an overemphasis on protecting the campus from active shooters can do more harm than good.

Extended dialogue with students and their parents about safety rather than scholastics as well as efforts to transform open campuses into locked fortresses send two perilous messages. Not only do they advance the overblown image of students as walking targets, thereby reinforcing rather than calming fears, but they may also challenge a few to prove themselves powerful and invincible.

At the same time, efforts to upgrade security beyond what is reasonable based on the limited risk would hardly provide a pleasant campus climate. What student wants to attend classes in an armed camp?

It is reasonable, of course, for colleges to develop contingency plans and seek sensible ways to ensure a safe campus. But as with any tragedy like the ones at Virginia Tech and Northern Illinois, our society often embraces and even demands extreme responses to extreme and aberrational behavior. Such actions, in hindsight, aren't always prudent.

Consider the measures that many colleges and universities are taking to avoid becoming the next Virginia Tech or Northern Illinois. Though sounding good, they are not necessarily sound.

**Safety first:** Admissions counselors are quick these days to point out safety features of their campuses. For students and their parents, choosing the right college may depend on balancing security and scholarship. Still, the smart strategy is to focus on the traditional selection criteria academic quality, range of majors and social life rather than simply security. For if safety becomes the top priority, then the only choice may be an online degree or no college at all.

**Lockdown:** This is the new catchphrase on campus security, often raised in parental inquiries about safety procedures. Leaving aside the impossibility of truly locking down a sprawling campus, most college shootings take place in one location. Plus, shooting sprees typically end so quickly that locking down students in dorms and classrooms and turning away off-campus students wouldn't help.

**Security guards:** Beefing up the campus security force can have a short-term impact by making students feel safer, particularly in the wake of a widely publicized college shooting. But in the longer term, what will universities do to pay for the additional security? Raise tuition? Cut back on faculty? Reduce the number of classes?

**Profiling students:** In the aftermath of a shooting, we inevitably search for clues that may have alerted the campus to a student who was profoundly suicidal and bent on revenge. Yet, predicting rare events, such as a campus shooting, is virtually impossible. Thousands of college students exhibit warning signs yellow flags that



turn red only after the blood spills. Overaggressiveness in trying to identify and coerce a troubled and belligerent student into treatment can potentially intensify feelings of persecution and precipitate the very violent act that we're attempting to avert. Moreover, as with the shooter at Northern Illinois, the warning signs are not necessarily obvious, if even present.

**Right to carry:** As many as a dozen states are considering proposals that would permit properly licensed students, faculty members, and administrators to carry concealed firearms on campus. Supporters argue that the death toll at Virginia Tech, for example, might have been lower had students other than the gunman been armed. There is no telling, of course, whether more lives would have been lost in uncontrolled crossfire, or whether more episodes of gun violence would result. Still, at least one Nevada college, a campus where many students own guns for sport, has been considering a plan to train the faculty to shoot. For faculty members, however, marksmanship should be a matter of A's and B's, not guns and ammo.

Of course, if the risk of campus bloodshed were indeed significant, then "playing it safe" would be the wise approach. Notwithstanding recent episodes, for the 18 million college students in America, the odds of being murdered on campus are so low one might need a course in college math to calibrate them.

From 2001 through 2005, 76 homicides were reported at American colleges, based on a database of incidents assembled from the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Department of Education, and various news sources. Leaving aside cases involving faculty members, staff members, and other nonstudents as victims, the count of undergraduate and graduate students murdered at school numbered 43—fewer than 10 per year, on average. When compared with virtually any metropolitan area, a student's chance of falling victim actually decreases once he or she steps on campus. Most reported cases of campus homicide, moreover, involved interpersonal disputes among friends and acquaintances or drug deals gone awry, not the unprecipitated act of a vengeful sniper.

Ironically, heightened levels of fear, despite being out of proportion with reality, can sometimes motivate important and long-overdue changes that have wide-ranging impact. The Postal Service, for example, was pressured by its bloodstained image to upgrade its approach to employee relations and grievance handling. The Columbine era forced public schools finally to take seriously the widespread and insidious problem of schoolyard bullying.

The renewed focus surrounding mental-health services, student "centeredness," and ensuring that faculty members do not abuse their power over the lives and careers of students (and graduate students in particular) are reasonable and responsible areas for change. Whether these improvements will prevent future episodes of campus bloodshed remains questionable; but they will likely enhance the well-being of millions of college students across America.

Finally, what about the ongoing contagion of campus bloodshed that seems to many Americans to be out of control? Like other so-called epidemics of decades gone by, this latest surge should eventually run its course — that is, unless we nourish it through anxiety, panic, and hyperbole.



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