



prologue.

Openness is a blessing and a curse for those charged with campus safety.

A federal building daycare center in Oklahoma City. A high school in Colorado. An Amish schoolhouse in Pennsylvania. Virginia Tech. Places where children should have been safe—but in only moments of mind-numbing horror, they were not.

The Virginia Tech massacre brought terrorism home to the nation's campuses, and the search for answers escalated. A lapse in awareness? A lack of preparedness? A breakdown in communications? Too slow a response? Colleges and universities reviewed, debated and evaluated their ability to react, and better yet, to prevent assaults on the safety of their communities.

Even as media attention moved on to the next crisis du jour, a National Campus Security Summit convened at the University of Central Oklahoma in Edmond, attracting more than 500 higher education officials from 24 states. Attending were representatives of the University of Oklahoma, who had many months before initiated a major upgrade of their emergency capabilities.

The University is fortunate that the qualifications of its first responders were elevated years ago. While most visible in handling crowd control and VIP security, OU's state-certified police department receives the same training and meets the same standards as any police department in Oklahoma. Unlike many campus police forces, OUPD's 35 armed, full-time officers patrol the Norman campus 24/7, with 20 to 25 additional full- and part-time community services officers providing site-specific security and two bomb sniffing dogs available as needed. The OU officers, who receive annual continuing education in both law enforcement and mental health issues, are part of a joint, fully trained and equipped SWAT team with Norman police.

However, OUPD is not the only agency to respond when campus safety is threatened. Student Affairs, Public Affairs and the President's Office all have roles to play and must be alerted, as must the student, faculty and staff population. In this electronic age, the task of communicating with the decision makers, as well as the community at large, falls primarily to the Office of Information Technology.

Awareness of the critical need to upgrade the ability of the University to communicate in times of emergency came not as the result of an act of terror, but from an act of nature—Hurricane Katrina—when land lines went down and cell phone systems overloaded. At OU, IT officials launched a search for an offsite provider with the capability to connect thousands in a matter of minutes.

System testing was under way before Virginia Tech and completed within days afterward. From a technical standpoint the test went well. Voice notification—phone or text messaging—reached 83 percent of registered numbers within 10 minutes, the remaining 17 percent in another 20. That translates into 41,000 numbers dialed, since students, faculty and staff may register up to six numbers. The trick, of course, is convincing each individual to keep his or her registration current. IT is working this summer to bring the other OU-affiliated campuses—Oklahoma City, Tulsa, Lawton and Claremore—in line with the new emergency response system.

The test alert was also sent to individual computers, but in such a mobile society, text messaging, the ever-present language of the young, is by far the most effective method. Even in class, students keep their cell phones on vibrate to check their texts. Land-line phones, placed in classrooms to enable professors to call for

assistance with IT problems, also work in other direction when OUPD needs to contact the classrooms.

While swift and effective response is vitally important, so is the ability to anticipate and deal with potential threats to campus safety. The Office of Student Affairs oversees a student life component staffed to identify these threats and intervene where necessary. When there are persons of concern within the community, counselors and other University personnel must determine whether they are a disruption, as is usually the case, or an actual danger to themselves or to others. A first-class counseling service is available for such referrals, one that recognizes that students have rights that must be observed, but also that an immediate threat requires immediate action.

Student Affairs carries on a continual effort to educate the campus community in prevention techniques—fostering a general awareness, reporting suspicious activity, guarding personal safety. Card swipe boxes in the dormitories, for instance, are much better than keys, enabling the University to immediately turn off the card of anyone who has been removed from the dorms without having to reset the entire system. But any system is only as good as the students who use it, and they must be convinced not to admit those without cards.

The openness of the university campus, especially a state-supported one, is one of its greatest strengths; all sorts of people are welcomed to OU for all sorts of legitimate purposes. But from a security standpoint, its openness also puts its inhabitants in jeopardy. Absolute safety cannot be guaranteed in any setting, but there are many ways to minimize risk, and the University of Oklahoma is exploring them all. —CJB