The Ripple Effect of Virginia Tech

Assessing the Nationwide Impact on Campus Safety and Security Policy and Practice

A report from the
Midwestern Higher Education Compact

AIG Higher Education Risk Solutions

Lexington *Insurance Company*
Market Leadership Powered by the Spirit of Innovation®

MHEC

About the Midwestern Higher Education Compact

The Midwestern Higher Education Compact (MHEC) is a non-profit regional organization established by compact statute to assist Midwestern states in advancing higher education through interstate cooperation and resource sharing. MHEC member states are Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, Ohio, South Dakota, and Wisconsin.

MHEC seeks to fulfill its interstate mission through programs that:

• Enhance productivity through reductions in administrative costs;

• Encourage student access, completion, and affordability;

• Facilitate public policy analysis and information exchange;

• Facilitate regional cooperation;

• Encourage quality higher education programs and services; and

• Encourage innovation in the delivery of educational services.

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Dear Colleague,

I am pleased to provide you with the report *The Ripple Effect of Virginia Tech: Assessing the Nationwide Impact on Campus Safety and Security Policy and Practice*. This report is the result of a nationwide survey conducted in March 2008 of student life officers and campus safety directors to assess the impact of the tragic events at Virginia Tech on campus safety and security policy and practice.

The events of April 16, 2007, were followed by a flurry of activity on campuses across the nation as colleges and universities conducted internal reviews of emergency procedures, notification systems, and policies related to student behavior. Many campuses have implemented new or enhanced processes and technologies to improve communications and the mobilization of emergency resources and first responders. The shootings also spurred renewed discussion and debate about gun safety and weapons regulation, mental health counseling, and the often difficult balance between student privacy and the need to share certain information with parents, medical professionals, and law enforcement agencies.

Subsequent shootings at Delaware State University, Louisiana Technical College, and Northern Illinois University have raised further questions about how such crimes can be prevented and whether colleges and universities are sufficiently prepared to respond to incidents of violence and other emergency situations. This report provides a snapshot of how colleges and universities are addressing these issues and the changes that have resulted from safety and security audits conducted at institutions across the country.

We are grateful to AIG Higher Education Solutions[sm] and Lexington Insurance Company for their support of this initiative. AIG/Lexington is the underwriter for MHEC's successful master property program, which currently serves over 100 campuses in 13 member states of the Midwestern Higher Education Compact and the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education. The program insures over $58 billion in values and has saved states and institutions over $40 million since its launch in 1994. The goals of the program are to secure broad insurance coverage and services to meet the special needs of its participating member institutions; to reduce program costs; to stabilize rates over time; and to provide group dividend returns when loss experience is favorable. Participating institutions and their campus representatives also benefit from networking and educational opportunities available through program membership, representation on committees, and an annual loss control workshop. AIG/Lexington has been a true partner as the primary insurer of the program, and MHEC is most appreciative of its continued support.

Sincerely,
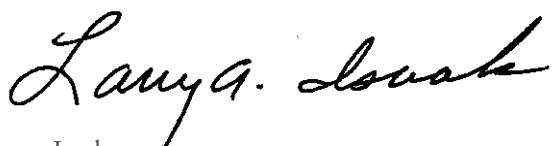
Larry Isaak
President
Midwestern Higher Education Compact

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Introduction

In the wake of the April 16 tragedy at the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University (Virginia Tech) colleges and universities across the country reviewed their emergency procedures and response systems and pursued new and enhanced processes and technologies to improve communications and mobilization. The shootings also spurred renewed discussion and debate about gun safety and weapons regulation, mental health counseling, and the often difficult balance between student privacy and parental and community "need-to-know" (Rossi and Jordan, 2007; Shuchman, 2007). Task forces, committees, special panels, and commissions to review campus safety policies, procedures, and practices have been convened at the institutional, state, and even federal level (Lake, 2007; Nash, 2007; "Report to the President," 2007; Vu, 2007). Indeed, college or university leaders who did not engage in some form of public effort to review the safety-related physical, administrative, and policy infrastructure of their campuses risked accusations of negligence or even malfeasance.

Understandably, the Virginia Tech tragedy led students, parents, lawmakers, and the media to ask whether a particular institution or campuses in general were "safe." In response to this question, a university professor of criminal justice wrote in *USA Today* that between 2001 and 2005 fewer than 10 students a year on average were murdered on college campuses. Given nationwide college enrollment of 17.5 million in 2005, the professor asserted that "the chances of being murdered on campus are about as likely as being fatally struck by lightening" (Fox, 2007). Homicides that do occur on college campuses tend to be the result of domestic disputes, drug dealings, or other circumstances where the assailant and victim are known to each other—a pattern similar to what is seen in general society. Nonetheless, horrific events of significant scale with ubiquitous and relentless nation-wide media coverage—Virginia Tech, Northern Illinois, Columbine, Red Lake, Nickel Mines, Jonesboro—exert a powerful impact on the psyche and basic instincts of students, parents, policymakers, and the general public, leading to the understandable questioning of the relative safety of a specific campus or of educational facilities in general.

> The objective of any institution is to create an environment that is as safe as possible given the realities of the external environment and the inability to control the actions of all people at all times.

Of course, no college or university can ever guarantee that its campus is 100% "safe" because "safe" is a relative concept. The objective of any institution is to create an environment that is as safe as possible given the realities of the external environment and the inability to control the actions of all people at all times. The American Council on Education (1985) recommended more than 20 years ago that an institution should "marshal those forces within its control so as to provide that its students and employees are able to enjoy on campus at least that average degree of security enjoyed by similar situated citizens of the surrounding community" (p.1).

No amount of money, technology, and human resources can guarantee members of a university community that they will never fall victim to a crime. At the same time, colleges and universities are by their very nature open-access environments where people move between and among buildings and outdoor spaces in a manner akin to the free flow and exchange of ideas, discussion, and debate that is a *raison d'etre* of the academy. Writing for the National Association of College and University Attorneys, Burling (1991) asserted that "only by conceding that colleges and universities cannot protect every student every minute of the day, and that some kinds of violence are unforesee-able, can universities continue to provide the education they were established to offer" (p. 18).

Any demand for absolute safety is irrational in statistical terms; the question of what exactly is "safe enough" is a value judgment more than anything else (Karmen, 1984). Yet it is not a stretch to suggest that in the wake of Virginia Tech the public *does* in fact expect institutions to foresee most forms of violence and to enact measures to ensure that violence does not manifest itself on campus.

However, tensions arise when attempts to enhance the safety and security of the campus are in conflict with the community's desire for convenience and easy access to facilities. Students often resist what are thought to be unreasonable impositions of authority and control, and community members often express concerns about privacy and the intrusiveness of measures such as background checks and surveillance cameras (Smith, 1988; Wills, Hines and Johnson, 1994). Measures to improve campus safety are also subject to benefit-cost analyses and the law of diminishing returns. While many would argue that colleges and universities should spare no expense in an effort to improve the safety of their campuses, the pecuniary and practical realities force administrators to assess when the point is reached where the marginal rate of return on investments fails to justify continued expenditure of financial and human resources.

An examination of case law reveals three general principles underlying institutional responsibility and liability in the area of campus safety. The first is *special relationship*, whereby institutions are expected to possess both a commitment to the safety and general welfare of their students and an obligation to provide appropriate levels of security to promote their safety (the "duty of care" doctrine). This special relationship is different from *in loco parentis*, but courts have drawn parallels with landlord-business invitee and landlord-tenant relationships. The second principle is *foreseeable risk*, whereby colleges and universities have a duty to provide protection from foreseeable injury or criminal acts; and 3) *contractual obligation*, whereby institutions are expected to follow through with any commitments, both explicit and implicit, made with members of the community in regard to their enhanced duty to protect said members (Burling, 2003, 1991).

Institutions attempt to address their legal and ethical responsibilities through combinations of policies and procedures that can be categorized as avoidance strategies, crime prevention through environmental design, and risk management tactics (Karmen, 1984). **The events at Virginia Tech—only the most recent in a series of horrific tragedies in educational settings over the past several years—have forced colleges and universities to reflect upon their responsibilities and retool their efforts to promote campus safety in what has been perhaps the most intensive, open, and strategic manner ever attempted.**

With the support of AIG/Lexington Insurance Company, the Midwestern Higher Education Compact surveyed college and university student life officers and campus safety directors across the country to assess how institutions of higher education responded to the Virginia Tech tragedy. The data provide a snapshot of the changes in policy and practice that have resulted from their efforts.

SURVEY METHODOLOGY

A link to the online survey instrument was sent via e-mail to all individuals listed in the 2006 edition of the *Higher Education Directory*® as chief student life officers and directors of security/safety. *The Higher Education Directory*® is a comprehensive listing of administrative personnel at degree-granting colleges and universities across the nation that are accredited by the Council for Higher Education Accreditation or another accrediting agency recognized by the U.S. Secretary of Education. The directory is produced annually by Higher Education Publications, Inc. Data were collected over a two-week period in March 2008.

The chief student life officers and security/safety directors were sent links to separate surveys. However, based on the job titles noted by individuals completing the chief student life officer survey, it became apparent that many of the original recipients forwarded the survey link to individuals on campus with direct responsibility for safety and security initiatives. As a result, the focus of analysis is on the data from this survey, with the respondents representing a mixture of personnel from student affairs and campus safety. The data analysis is based on survey responses from 331 institutional representatives.

Profile of Respondents

Region
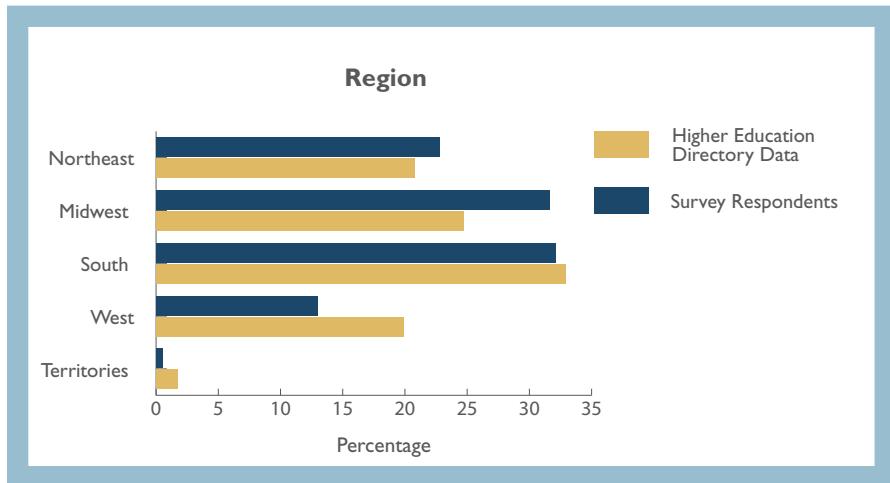
Respondents to the survey were distributed geographically in a manner similar to institutions included in the *Higher Education Directory*®. The Midwest was overrepresented in the respondents, which may be due to enhanced familiarity with the Midwestern Higher Education Compact by institutions in the region. Institutions in the West were somewhat underrepresented by survey respondents.

Percent of Respondents by Location
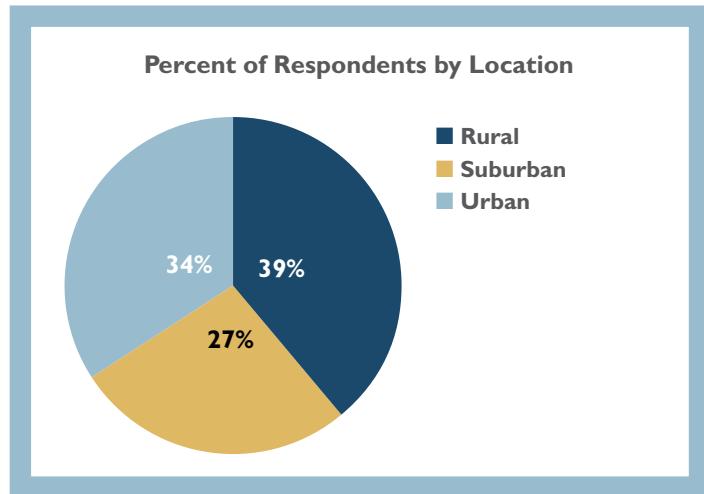
Respondents were distributed fairly equally among rural, suburban, and urban locales. Rural colleges and universities represented 39% of respondents, urban 34%, and suburban 27%.

Respondents to the survey were distributed by institutional control and type in a manner similar to institutions included in the *Higher Education Directory*®. Public 4-year institutions were somewhat overrepresented while private 2-year institutions were significantly underrepresented, which may be due to the small size and the concomitant absence of personnel identified as "Chief Student Life Officer" and "Director of Security/Safety" at many of these institutions, as well as the location of many within single buildings and/or office parks rather than on more traditional campuses. Approximately 1/3 of survey respondents identified their institution as part of a larger college or university system.

Respondents and Institutions by Control and Type

Institutional Enrollment
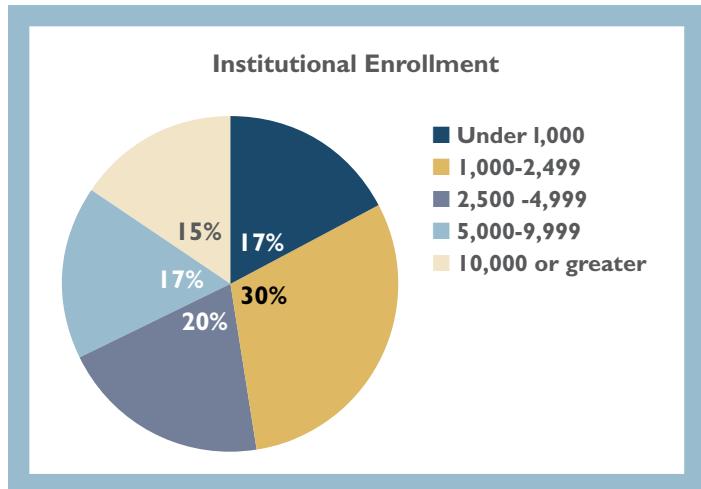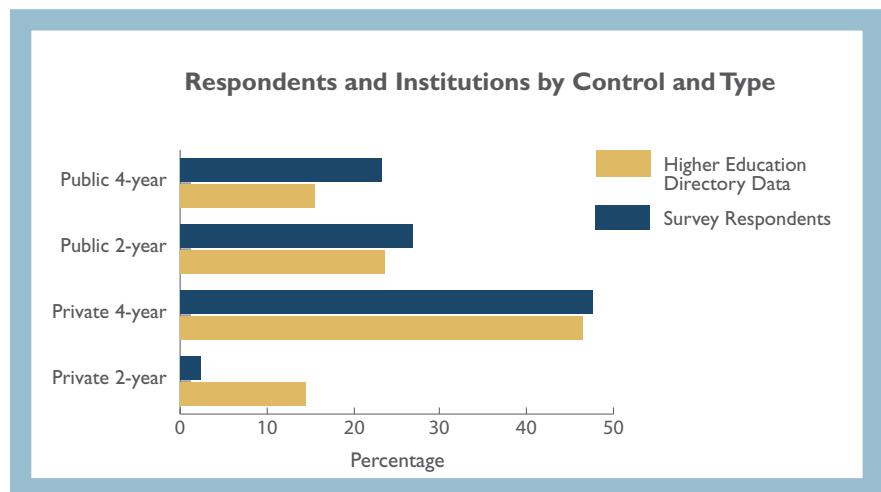
The greatest proportion of respondents represented institutions with enrollments between 1,000 and 2,499 (30%). The remainder was fairly evenly distributed, with 20% of institutions reporting enrollment between 2,500 and 4,999; 17% under 1,000; 17% between 5,000 and 9,999; and 15% with enrollments of 10,000 or greater. (Percentages do not total 100 due to rounding.)

More than 1/4 of respondents reported that their college or university did not house any students in campus residences (29%). Of the remainder, 22% have between 1 and 499 students in campus housing; 17% have between 500 and 999; another 17% have between 1,000 and 1,999; 12% have between 2,000 and 4,999; and only 4% have 5,000 students or more in campus housing. (Percentages do not total 100 due to rounding.)


Number of Students in Campus Housing
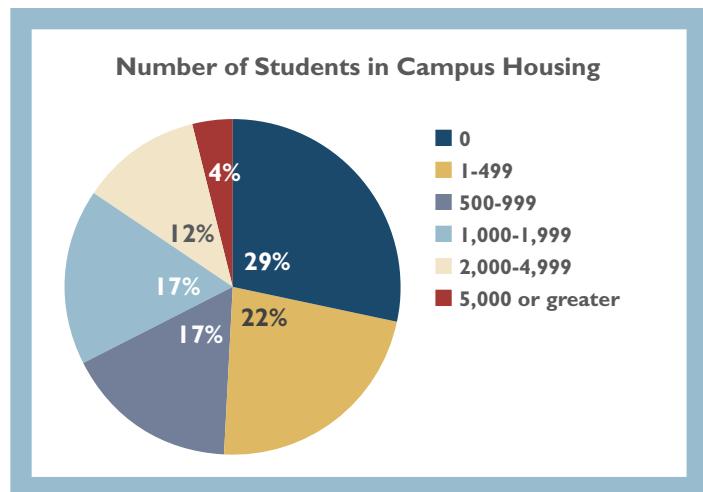
Reaction, Reflection, and Review

The initial shock of the Virginia Tech tragedy was followed in short order by a series of questions about how such an event could occur, whether it could have been prevented, and what could be done to ensure that it would never happen again. Colleges and universities around the country found themselves faced by similar questions in regard to their own campuses. Students, parents, government officials, and the general public wanted to know: Could an event of this type happen on our campus? What systems are in place to help prevent such an event from happening? If such a tragedy were to occur on our campus, how would security personnel and other university administrators respond?

The first "ripple effect" of the Virginia Tech tragedy occurred when colleges and universities around the country convened committees and task forces to answer these questions through comprehensive reviews of policies, procedures, and systems related to campus safety and security. A remarkable 87% of respondents to the survey indicated that their institution had conducted such a review. Perhaps not surprisingly given the location of Virginia Tech, respondents from institutions in the South were most likely to report having conducted a review, with 96% indicating that they had done so. This was followed by respondents from the Northeast (88%), the West (82%), and the Midwest (79%). A relationship also existed with institutional size. Institutions with enrollments of 5,000 to 9,999 students were most likely to have conducted a safety review while the smallest colleges (those with fewer than 1,000 students) were least likely to have done so.
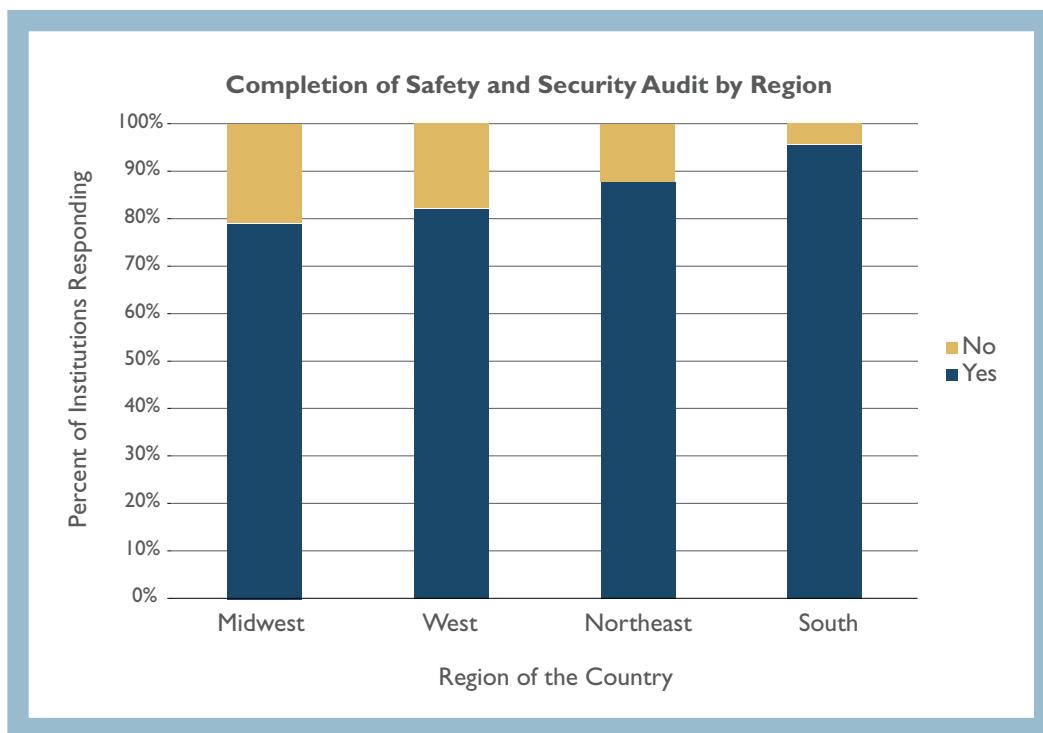
The two variables in this analysis were region of the country (institutional location) and completion of institutional safety and security audit. Region and completion of audit were found to be significantly related, Pearson χ^2 (3, n=213) = 8.781, p=.032, Cramer's Φ= .203.
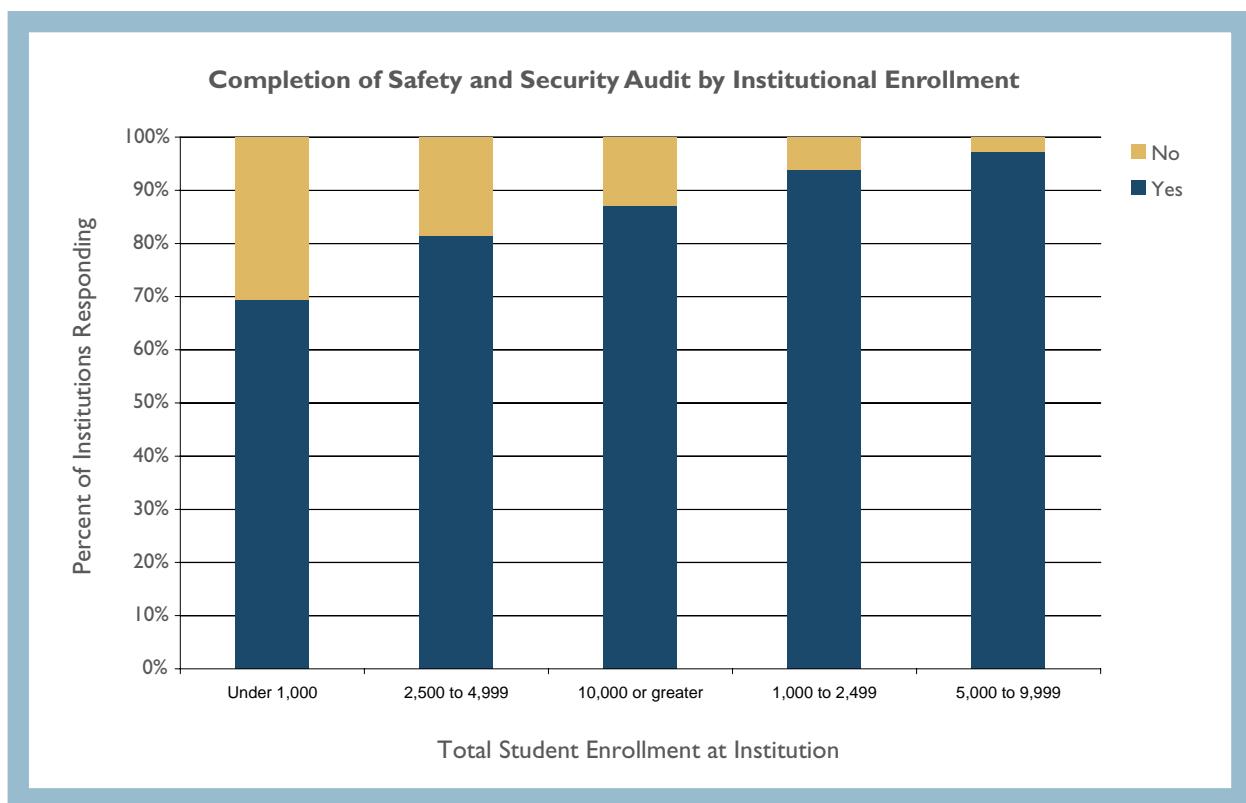
Completion of Safety and Security Audit by Institutional Enrollment

The two variables in this analysis were student enrollment (institutional size) and completion of institutional safety and security audit. Size and completion of audit were found to be significantly related, Pearson $\chi2$ (4, n=210) = 16.503, p=.002, Cramer's Φ= .280.

The chief executive of the campus (president or chancellor) was the most frequently identified individual to order the review of campus safety and security with nearly 3/4 of respondents (72%) indicating that orders came from this office. After the campus CEO, respondents identified the chief executive of the multi-campus system, the institution's governing board, and the state governor as the source of the directive in roughly equal proportion (approximately 10% each). The great majority of campus safety reviews were internal, with 90% of respondents indicating that a review was conducted by a group of individuals comprised mostly or exclusively of members of the college or university community. On a related note, 14% of respondents indicated that their institutions had hired the services of external consultants to assist with campus safety and security related initiatives.

In addition to an institutional-level review, system-wide and state-level reviews of campus safety and security were ordered by system heads, legislatures, and governors. While the most widely known and followed review was ordered by Governor Tim Kaine in Virginia, state-wide college and university safety task forces and committees were established by governors in California, Florida, Illinois, Kentucky, Louisiana, New Mexico, Ohio, Oklahoma, and West Virginia, among others.

The survey asked representatives from institutions where safety audits were conducted to indicate which of the issues on a predetermined list were included in the review. Of the nine topics on the list the subject of emergency notification/broadcast alert systems was named most often, with 95% of respondents indicating that the issue was addressed. Policies related to securing campus facilities in the event of an emergency were identified by the second highest percentage of respondents (89%), followed by a general review of campus police or other security department operations (88%).

Nearly 9 of 10 respondents from institutions that conducted comprehensive safety and security audits indicated that the review had resulted in changes in safety/security related policies, procedures, or systems on campus. One of the more notable areas of change has been the pursuit of emergency notification systems that enable text messages to be sent to students' mobile phones. Nearly 3/4 of respondents to the survey whose institutions did not previously possess such technology indicated that they had implemented or planned to acquire such systems. This move and related efforts will be discussed in greater detail later in this report.

Topics Included in Safety Audits	
Emergency notification/broadcast alert systems	95.1%
Polices related to securing campus facilities	88.9%
Campus police/security department operation	88.1%
Protocol for responding to crimes on campus	77.5%
Relationship with local law enforcement	76.6%
Policies related to student mental health	70.9%
Relationship between/among university offices/departments	68.0%
Policies related to weapons on campus (including concealed carry)	57.0%
Relationship with outside providers of medical/psychiatric care	37.7%

Student Privacy vs. Need-to-Know

The Virginia Tech tragedy brought into the spotlight the often difficult task of balancing individual privacy rights with the need to communicate with appropriate authorities when a student exhibits disturbing or threatening behavior. The law commonly known as FERPA, or the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974, not only protects the privacy of student education records but also gives parents and legal guardians certain rights with respect to said records. Parents who claim their child as a dependent for federal tax purposes retain these rights even after their child reaches the age of 18. Parents have the right to request and inspect student records, and institutions may legally disclose student records to parents regardless of whether parents specifically request the information. Institutions can also legally disclose student records to selected third parties without parental consent in certain cases. For example, institutions can communicate with appropriate officials in the case of a health or safety emergency. The definitions of "appropriate officials" and of "emergencies" are open to interpretation, and colleges and universities have historically erred on the side of not disclosing information to third parties out of concern for students' privacy and an interest in complying with federal law.

In the Midwestern Higher Education Compact (MHEC) survey 56% of respondents indicated that their college or university had reviewed its responsibilities and obligations under FERPA in response to the events at Virginia Tech. Nearly 3/4 of these respondents indicated that their review was conducted within the context of a larger campus safety audit. In 20% of cases the FERPA review was conducted in part or in whole by external legal advisors or counsel. In one quarter of cases the FERPA review brought about changes in policies or procedures related to communication of student information, either internally (e.g., among campus offices) or externally (such as with parents/guardians or law enforcement agencies).

> The Virginia Tech tragedy brought into the spotlight the often difficult task of balancing individual privacy rights with the need to communicate with appropriate authorities when a student exhibits disturbing or threatening behavior.

A number of respondents indicated that the review helped to clarify their institution's latitude to share information both internally and externally in cases where it is warranted. Others noted that the review resulted in an expanded or more clearly defined set of circumstances in which the institution would initiate contact with parents and appropriate authorities. One survey respondent noted, "We are in the process of adjusting some notification policies and plan to include release of information forms at orientation programs so parents can be more efficiently notified in a variety of situations." Another reported that the review of FERPA-related issues resulted in a "higher expectation of faculty and staff to share information when concerns about a student arise—a more clear understanding of what we can and cannot share with others."

The scope and shockingly brazen nature of the tragedy at Virginia Tech motivated colleges and universities across the country to take action to prevent a similar event from happening and to improve their ability to respond quickly and effectively in the event an incident were to occur. Most educational institutions made similar efforts to assess and improve their disaster preparedness in the wake of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Many campuses have also made changes following natural disasters, such as Hurricanes Katrina and Rita in 2005 and extensive flooding in parts of the Midwest in 1993 and 1997.

> One survey respondent noted that the review of FERPA-related issues resulted in a "higher expectation of faculty and staff to share information when concerns about a student arise—a more clear understanding of what we can and cannot share with others."

A notable proportion of respondents to the survey reported having used documents and standards established by government agencies and industry groups as guides in evaluating and improving safety and security and their institution's ability to mitigate and recover from a disaster. Examples include the Federal Emergency Management Agency's *Primer to Design Safe School Projects in Case of Terrorist Attacks* (FEMA 428) and *Building a Disaster-Resistant University* (FEMA 443); the National Fire Protection Association's *Standard on Disaster/Emergency Management and Business Continuity Programs* (NFPA 1600); and the ASME Innovative Technology Institute's *Risk Analysis and Management for Critical Asset Protection* (RAMCAP).

Prevention, Mitigation, and Recovery

As noted earlier, nearly 9 of 10 respondents from institutions that conducted comprehensive safety audits indicated that the review had resulted in changes in policies, procedures, or systems related to safety and security. Campus officials identified changes that were made in a number of areas, including: emergency notification systems; training and protocol for identifying and reporting disturbing or threatening student behavior; fiscal and staff resources devoted to campus safety; security enhancement systems and equipment; screening of applicants for admission and employment; and policies and protocol related to student mental health.

After the Virginia Tech tragedy colleges and universities considered how they could communicate with students and other members of the campus community more quickly in the event of an emergency. Emergency notification was an area where officials at Virginia Tech were criticized for a perceived failure to warn members of the campus community in a timely manner about the murders in a residence hall that were followed by the mass shootings in a classroom building.

Notification Systems

The Virginia Tech tragedy also shed light upon a student culture that has largely abandoned traditional landline telephones for mobile communication devices and that often communicates via text rather than voice. Students frequently prefer to use email addresses and social networking accounts maintained since high school rather than the email accounts provided to them by their college or university. Also made evident was the fact that broadcast messages to campus email and telephone systems can be ineffective when time is of the essence or when a significant number of community members are in classrooms and therefore away from landline telephones and computers.
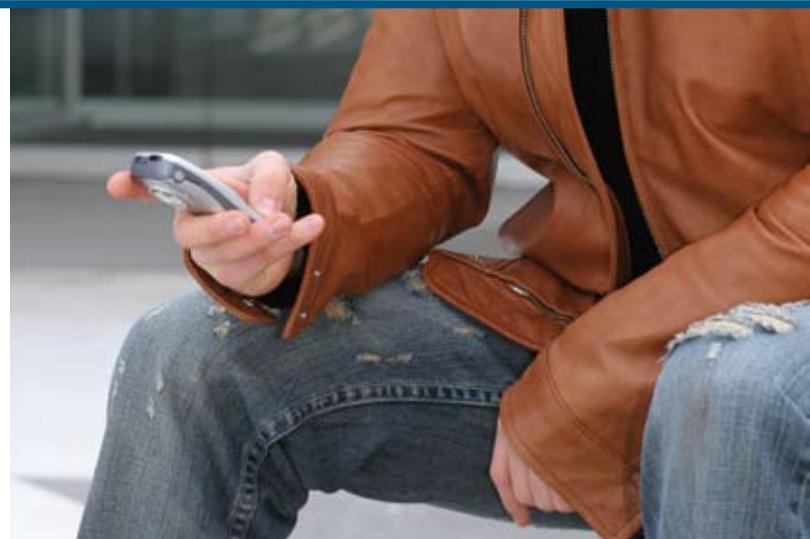
In the survey campus officials, provided with a list of possible means of communication, indicated whether each item on the list existed prior to Virginia Tech, had been given consideration since Virginia Tech, or had been implemented since the Virginia Tech tragedy. Perhaps not surprisingly, the biggest change underway on college campuses appears to be the expansion of emergency alert systems to include text messages sent to students' cell phones and other mobile communications devices. **Less than 5% of survey respondents reported that mobile phones were included in their institution's emergency notification system prior to the events at Virginia Tech while 75% of the remaining respondents indicated that they planned to acquire the technology or had already implemented systems since April of last year.**

The Virginia Tech tragedy also shed light upon a student culture that has largely abandoned traditional landline telephones for mobile communication devices and that often communicates via text rather than voice. Students frequently prefer to use email addresses and social networking accounts maintained since high school rather than the email accounts provided to them by their college or university.

Similarly, only 14% of respondents indicated that campus buildings were linked to a public address system prior to the Virginia Tech tragedy; 34% indicated that plans were underway to change that; and another 27% indicated that the issue had been discussed but no decision had been made. The two notification systems that were most frequently reported as having been in place prior to Virginia Tech were broadcast messages to university email accounts (54%) and broadcast voice messages to phones on the campus network (41%).

In a related area, nearly 2/3 of survey respondents reported that a written protocol or decision tree for determining when to issue a broadcast emergency alert exists at their institution. Of these respondents, 1/3 indicated that the protocol or decision tree did not exist prior to the events at Virginia Tech.

Emergency Notification Systems


Percent of Respondents
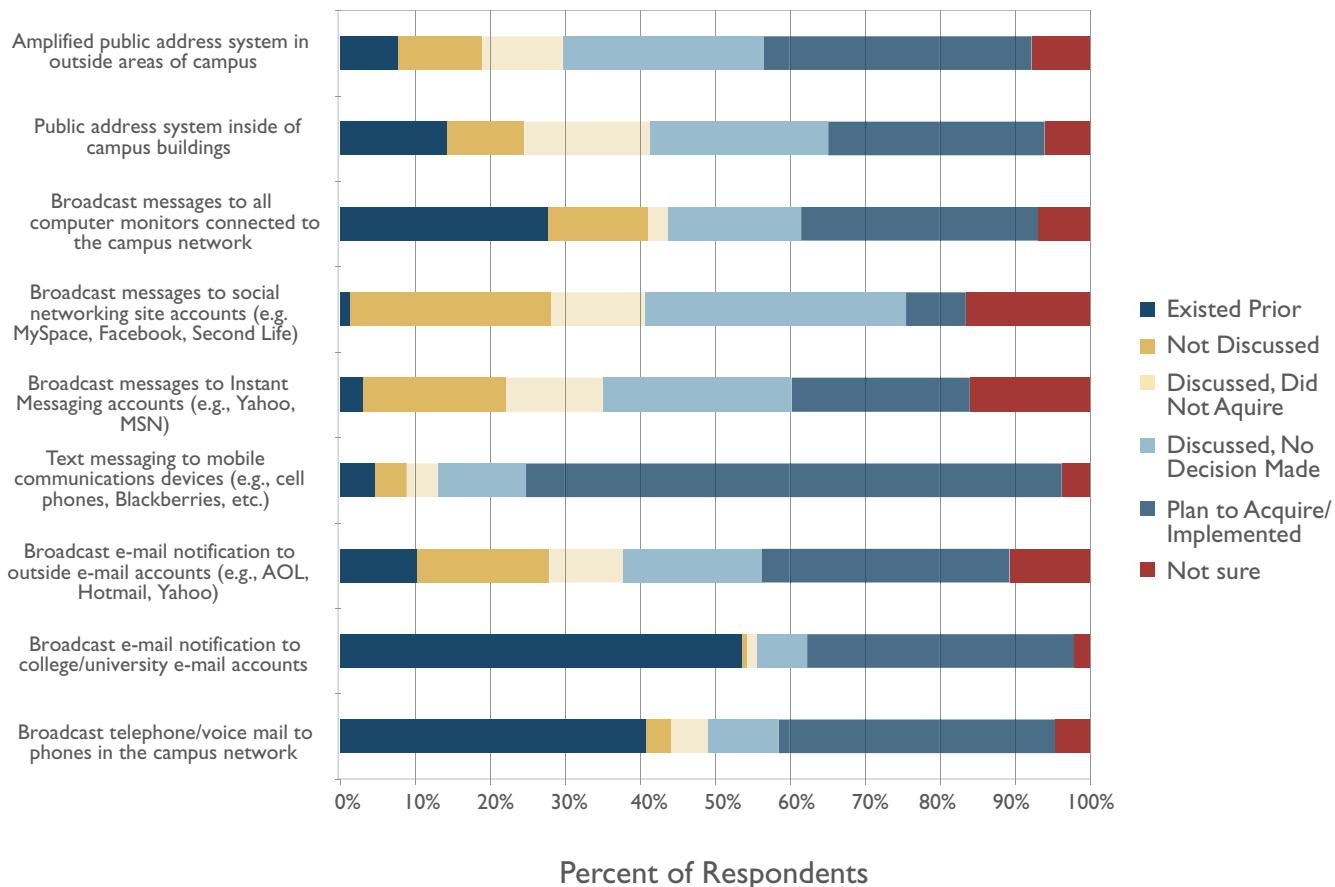
Security Monitoring and Enhancement

The administrative structure of campus security operations varies greatly from institution to institution and ranges from units comprised of non-deputized, part-time personnel to fully commissioned and armed university police departments. Some (mostly smaller colleges) contract with outside companies to provide day-to-day security services on campus. In the survey 22% of respondents indicated that their institution contracted partly or exclusively for such services.

Campus police and security officers represent just one element of a comprehensive effort to promote safety and enhance the security of a college or university community. Campus officials, provided with a list of possible security enhancement strategies and systems, indicated whether each of the items existed prior to Virginia Tech, had been given consideration since Virginia Tech, or had been implemented. Emergency communications devices such as "panic buttons" or telephones in outdoor areas of campus were identified by the greatest percentage of respondents (51%) as having been in place prior to Virginia Tech. Related to this, 38% of respondents noted that closed circuit security cameras were in place in outdoor areas of their campus at the time of the Virginia Tech tragedy; 42% of the remaining respondents indicated that they planned to install them or had already done so in the past year. **Over 2/3 of survey respondents indicated that discussions had occurred on campus about installing systems enabling classroom buildings to be locked down from a remote location in the event of an emergency. Of this group nearly 1/3 planned to acquire such systems or had already installed them in the past year.**

Also of note is the percentage of respondents who indicated that discussions had occurred on their campus about purchasing certain security enhancements, but a decision had been made not to go forward with implementation. This was most notable relative to the installation of closed circuit security cameras in individual classrooms (indicated by 33% of respondents from institutions where cameras were not already in place) and metal detectors at the entrances to classroom buildings (indicated by 39% of total respondents).

Security Enhancement Strategies

Legend:
- Existed Prior
- Not Discussed
- Discussed, Did Not Acquire
- Discussed, No Decision Made
- Implemented/Plan to Aquire
- Not sure

Categories (y-axis):
- Formal policies and procedures for securing the perimeter of the campus
- Emergency communications devices (such as "panic buttons" or telephones) in outdoor areas of campus
- Closed circuit security cameras in outdoor areas of campus
- Means of automatic locking down of classroom/laboratory buildings from a remote/central location
- Metal detectors at entrances to classroom buildings
- Emergency communications devices (such as "panic buttons" or telephones) in individual classrooms
- Closed circuit security cameras located in individual classrooms
- Security officers stationed at the entrance to campus residence halls/apartments
- Closed circuit security cameras located in campus residence halls/apartments
- Means of automatic locking down of campus residence halls/apartments from a remote/central location

Percent of Respondents

Survey recipients also indicated whether their institutions had staged incidents since the Virginia Tech tragedy to test their emergency response systems in the event of a shooting on campus or something of similar gravity. Surprisingly, only 36% of respondents indicated that they had done so, with 43% of this group reporting staging two or more incidents. The largest institutions were much more likely than the smallest institutions to have staged at least once incident.
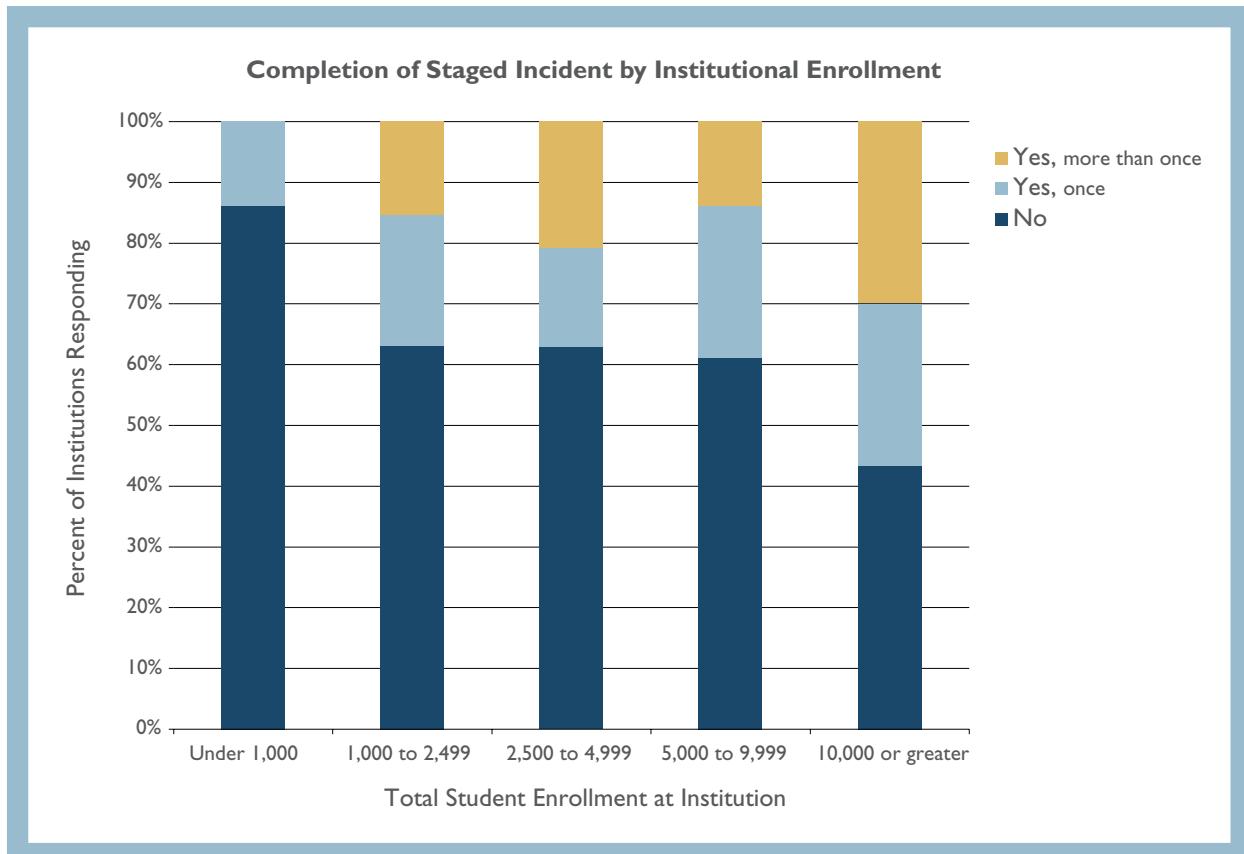
Completion of Staged Incident by Institutional Enrollment

The two variables in this analysis were student enrollment (institutional size) and completion of a staged incident(s) to conduct tests of emergency response systems (No; Yes, once; and Yes, more than once). Size and incident(s) were found to be significantly related, Pearson $\chi 2$ (4, n=210) = 17.299, p=.027, Cramer's Φ= .203. The proportions of institutions by size that staged at least one incident were: Under 1,000 .14; 1,000 to 2,499 .37; 2,500 to 4,999 .37; 5,000 to 9,999 .39; and 10,000 or greater .57.

Recognizing and Responding to Student Behavior

The events at Virginia Tech brought attention to the how colleges and universities respond to student behavior that is disturbing, threatening, or otherwise troubling. Related to this is the extent to which institutions attempt to identify prospective students whose past behavior or psychiatric care merits special attention to help ensure their well-being and the well-being of others on campus. Survey respondents, provided with a list of items that might appear on a standard application for undergraduate admission, indicated whether each item on the list was present prior to Virginia Tech, had been given consideration since Virginia Tech, or will be implemented in the near future.

Over half of the respondents (57%) indicated that a question asking applicants if they had ever been convicted of a felony appeared on their undergraduate admission application prior to the events at Virginia Tech. Nearly 40% of respondents reported that they had already been asking applicants whether they had been convicted of a non-specific crime, while 20% asked if applicants had been convicted of a crime specifically involving aggressive or violent behavior (such as assault or harassment). Only 8% of survey respondents reported that they were asking applicants prior to Virginia Tech if they were currently taking medication to treat a psychiatric or psychological condition.

The figure below illustrates that a notable proportion of survey respondents indicated in each case that the question was discussed but not acted upon. However, for every item a larger proportion indicated that no discussions had occurred about whether such questions should be added to the application for undergraduate admission. Only a very small number of respondents (7 in total) indicated that one of the questions had been added to their admission application for the 2008-09 academic year.

Admission Application Items

Percent of Respondents

Legend:
- Existed prior
- Not discussed
- Discussed/Not added
- Added
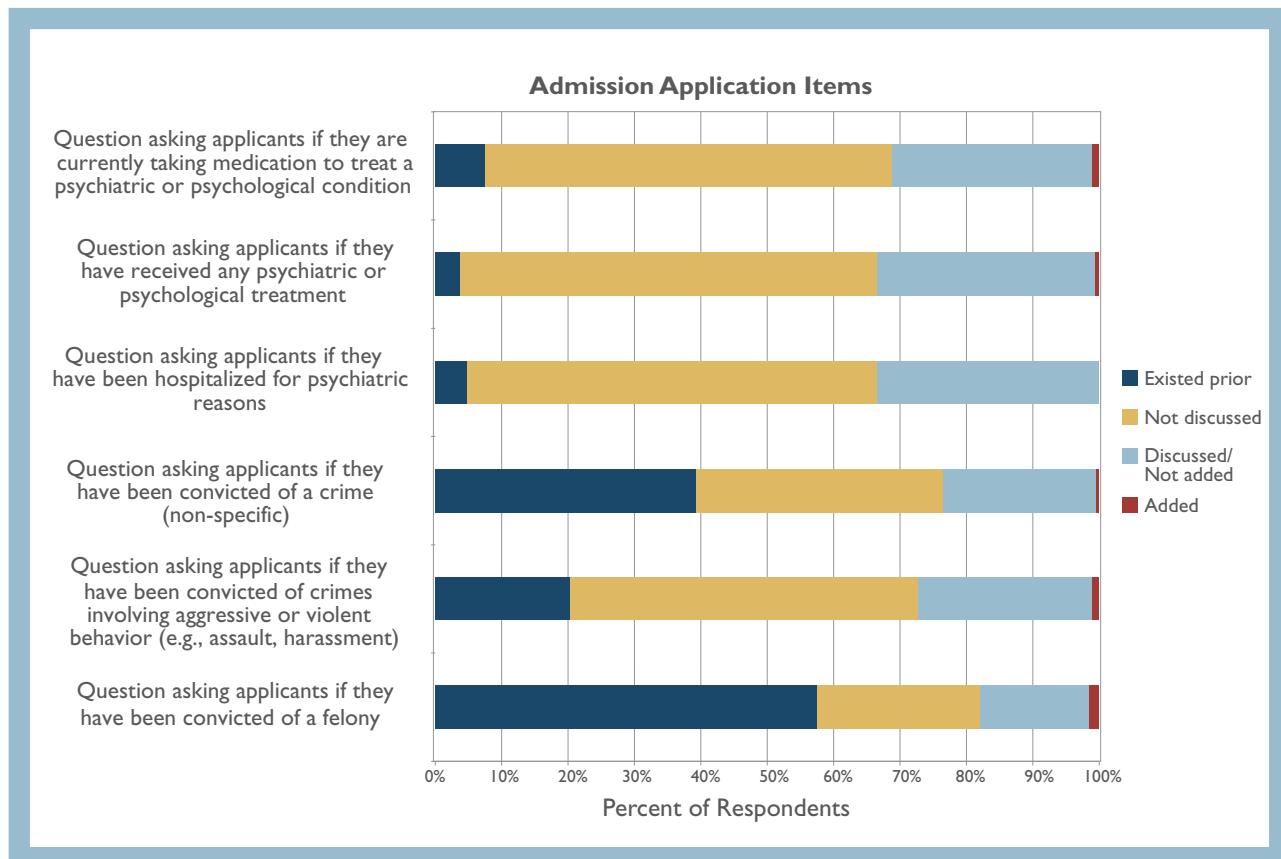
Respondents also indicated whether campus personnel had discussed conducting or were preparing to conduct background checks of applicants for admissions. Over half the respondents indicated that the idea had not been considered while 14% reported that the idea was considered but rejected. An additional 15% indicated that the idea had been discussed but a decision had not yet been made. Only 3% of respondents reported that background checks were being conducted in the 2007-08 admissions cycle. Less than 2% indicated that plans were in place to start conducting background checks at some point in the future.

Undergraduate Admissions Application Background Checks
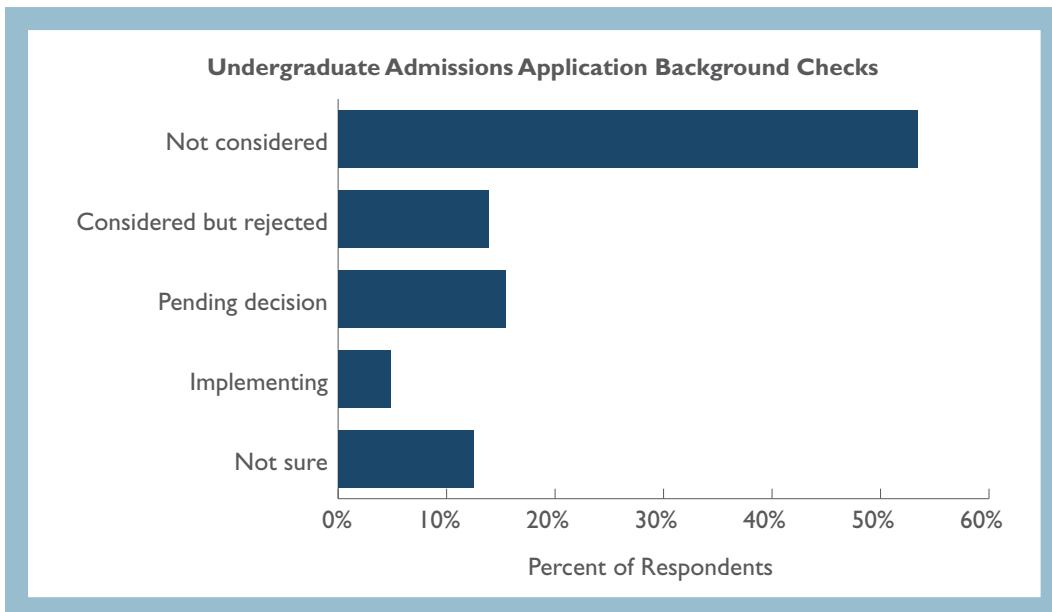
Perhaps not surprisingly, colleges and universities are making additional efforts to educate incoming students and their parents about campus safety and are providing additional training and support to faculty and student staff to recognize and report unusual behavior. While most colleges and universities devote some portion of summer or fall orientation programs to campus safety issues, the survey revealed that a notable proportion developed information sessions specifically devoted to campus safety and security after the events at Virginia Tech. In addition, almost half of the survey respondents indicated that they had increased the amount of training provided to residence hall student staff on safety and security issues.

College and university faculty have also received additional attention. Over 2/3 of survey respondents indicated that they provide training for faculty and staff to recognize disturbing, threatening, or potentially threatening student behavior. An even greater proportion (82%) of respondents reported that formal procedures or protocols exist on their campus for faculty and staff to communicate concerns about student behavior, and 65% of respondents acknowledged the existence of a "care team" or similar group of faculty and/or staff that meets regularly to discuss troubled and potentially troubled students.

Colleges and universities have also revised and brought additional clarity to policies regarding student behavior. For example, 24% of survey respondents indicated that their institution had revised language in the student handbook related to disturbing or threatening student behavior, and 38% reported that their institution had conducted general awareness campaigns to help students recognize such behavior in others. Related to this, 16% of respondents indicated that in response to the events at Virginia Tech their institution had created formal mechanisms, such as a special telephone line or website, for students to report unusual behavior.

Colleges and universities have also made efforts to create or revise institutional policies and procedures related to involuntary withdrawal of students for psychological reasons and for monitoring students returning to campus after psychiatric hospitalization. In the latter case, 44% of survey respondents reported having procedures in place prior to the events at Virginia Tech.
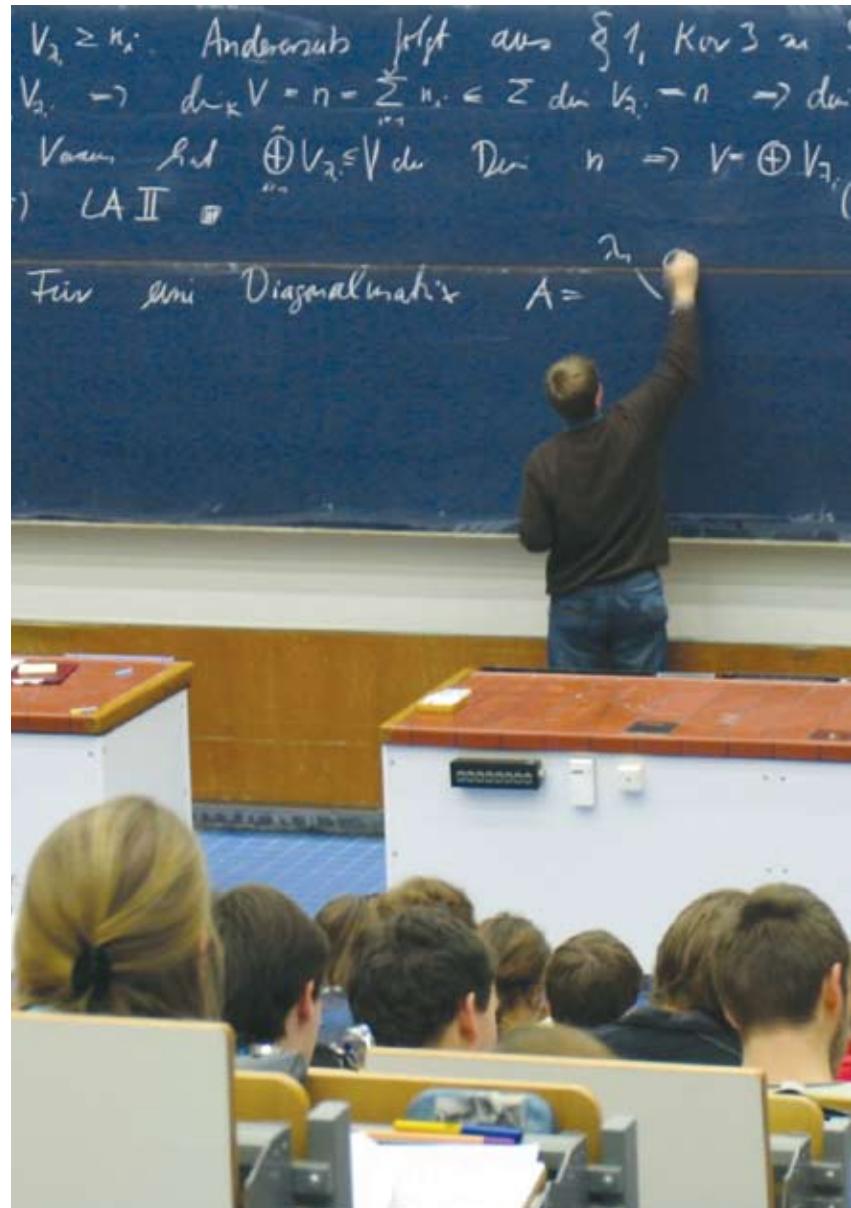
Budgetary Impacts

As discussed in the introduction to this report, most measures to improve campus safety are subject to benefit-cost analyses and also the law of diminishing returns. While some measures may be relatively inexpensive to implement, such as faculty training and the increased visibility of police and security officers in academic buildings, the cost of others can run into the hundreds of thousands of dollars. While it is easy to suggest that colleges and universities should spare no expense in an effort to improve safety, the practical realities force administrators to make decisions within financial parameters and according to the relative rate of return expected from different investments in hardware, equipment, and personnel.

In the survey, 35% of respondents indicated that their 2007-08 institution-wide budget for safety and security related items (including personnel, equipment, and services) had been increased as a direct result of the events at Virginia Tech. At the same time less than 10% of respondents noted that their institution had received some level of outside funding to help cover the cost of safety and security related efforts, initiatives, and purchases. Slightly more than 1/4 of respondents indicated their institution had added at least one non-student staff person whose duties were related to safety and security (e.g., police, security personnel, counselors, student life staff, communications, or risk management).

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Epilogue

Tragedies often bring people together in new ways, strengthening existing relationships while highlighting our shared human experience and the commonalities that unite us in the immediate aftermath of a tragedy and beyond. The MHEC survey asked respondents to comment on the nature of their relationship with municipal law enforcement, local and regional media, and state-level agencies both before and after the events at Virginia Tech. Without exception respondents indicated that the relationship of their institution with municipal law enforcement and with state-level agencies had improved since the events at Virginia Tech or had remained about the same. A similar pattern of responses was seen in describing the relationship with local and regional media outlets. Many campus respondents noted that their relationships with law enforcement agencies had always been strong. One respondent stated, "We have always enjoyed a relatively positive relationship with local law enforcement. The improvement came because we had invited them to meet with our crisis management preparedness team prior to Virginia Tech, and they now also recognize the relevance of having a good working relationship. We are now planning more joint table top and simulation exercises."

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The tragedy at Virginia Tech also raised many questions and renewed debates about gun violence and weapons regulation. The events brought increased exposure to groups such as Students for Concealed Carry on Campus, which argue that the impact of such incidents could be prevented or minimized if students and faculty were allowed to carry guns on campus. In contrast, the Virginia Tech tragedy has emboldened groups and individuals who oppose extending concealed carry rights to college campuses. The focus of others has been on improving efforts to track and screen potential weapons buyers to prevent individuals with mental illness or a history of violent or threatening behavior from accessing guns.

As of the writing of this report, all but two states (Wisconsin and Illinois) have enacted laws providing citizens the right to carry concealed weapons (with varying restrictions and caveats). However, with very few exceptions state laws or institutional policies prohibit concealed weapons from being carried on public college and university campuses. Only in Utah does current state law specifically require public universities to allow concealed weapons on campus. **However, legislation has been proposed in no fewer than 15 states since the events at Virginia Tech to either authorize or require that concealed weapons be allowed at public colleges and universities. In the MHEC survey 19% of respondents indicated that discussions had occurred on their campus about allowing concealed weapons in the aftermath of Virginia Tech.**

Another major issue brought into the spotlight in the aftermath of Virginia Tech is the treatment of mental illness and the capacity of colleges and universities to provide adequate follow-up support for students receiving psychiatric care. One survey respondent summarized this dilemma by stating, "Mental illness is a tough situation to handle on so many levels—the legal aspects alone are restrictive—and so unpredictable, and until we learn to deal with mental illness on a societal level (treatment, medication, understanding of it as an illness/disability, media representation, the glorification of violence, teenage socialization, acceptance issues, etc.), I believe the tragedies will continue. It is a sad commentary on the times in which we live."

Like ripples in a pond that eminate outward from a source of disturbance, the impact of the Virginia Tech tragedy has reverberated throughout the country in significant ways. The fact that nearly 9 in 10 colleges and universities conducted some sort of assessment of their ability to prevent or effectively respond to a campus shooting or other acts of violence is testimony to the profound impact of the events of April 16, 2007. The myriad strategies to improve safety and security that have been studied, pursued, and implemented since that date illustrate the effect of the Virginia Tech tragedy on campus policies and operations.

Of course, many dilemmas remain unresolved while we struggle—both within the higher education community and in society as a whole—with difficult issues raised by Virginia Tech, including weapons regulation, individual privacy vs. community safety, the treatment of mental illness, the inability to predict and prevent random acts of violence, and the extent to which institutions can realistically protect community members from all harm. One survey respondent summarized this dilemma in stating, "My concern is that we think it is the responsibility of the campus to protect students from the insanity that the world has created. Students/parents are going to end up paying for a problem that doesn't belong to them exclusively. This isn't just a campus problem but something larger." The ripple effect of Virginia Tech is likely to continue through discussions and debates on college and university campuses, in state legislatures, and in the courts for years to come.

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