

For a growing number of families, student safety looms large in the college search process

CAMP

US SECURITY

SAFETY SCENE

By Jim Paterson





firearms

drugs alcohol

The pattern is familiar and frequent. The day following one of the chilling reports about a school shooting, Kristina Dooley's conversations with clients about college usually change. The worries of the students and their parents bubble up.

Rick Funk says his staff see a similar phenomenon among prospective students who are considering the University of Alabama, where he is the director of undergraduate admissions. And Ashley Hanson, associate vice president of admissions at Carthage College in Kenosha, Wisconsin, said, for her, the heightened concern was clear during a campus visit the day after a shooting last year.

"During the one-on-one conversation, a parent quietly asked the familiar questions," she recalled. "Tell me about your campus safety: How will the students be taken care of if there is a threat to the campus? How will parents be notified if something were happening on campus that involves my student?"

All three say that following publicity about threats to student safety, prospective students—and parents in particular—express concern, whether it stems from a dramatic attack, statistics about campus crime, or an incident where a student is harassed or treated unfairly because of their race, religion, sexual preference, or political views. And experts say that because changes in society have made safety so prominent, people working with students considering college should have a clear understanding of those worries and what's being done about them on campus.

"The conversation has shifted," said Dooley, founder and president of Estrela Consulting in Hudson, Ohio. "Students and their families used to be concerned about drugs and alcohol. Now I'm finding even if a shooting takes place in a K-12 school, students and their parents want to know about bigger safety issues. Anyone working with them should be prepared to address them."

Concerns about campus safety and personal safety have increased over the past 10 to 15 years, Hanson noted.

"It is a reflection of how the world is changing," she said. "And that change is shaping the college search process."

STEP BY STEP

Research shows that students and parents are concerned about violence on campus. A 2018 NACAC survey showed that nearly half of the high school counselors responding reported that their responsibilities for communicating with parents about school violence had either increased or greatly increased over the past three years.

Dave Jarrat, a senior vice president at InsideTrack, a firm that helps colleges improve enrollment and student success, says data his firm collects shows campus safety is also a major concern among college-age students. He recommends colleges take three steps: survey enrolled and prospective students to gather good information about what their worries are; create environments where students and families can express concerns or ask questions about safety; and be prepared to respond with accurate, timely information.

"They really need to be proactive in discussing safety and security with prospective and enrolled students and their parents, making it clear that it's an issue the institution takes seriously and that they have resources, tools, and policies in place to support students in staying safe," he said.

hazing

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—Rick Funk, director of undergraduate admissions, University of Alabama

Admission counselors should be well-versed in safety data as well as school policies and procedures, according to Andrew Flagel, vice president for advancement and member engagement at the American Association of Colleges and Universities,

“A friend and parent shared with me a long list of very detailed questions she asks about firearms, drugs, alcohol, hazing, and sexual assault policies,” said Flagel, who has presented on issues of personal safety on campus. “Imagine her impression of the campuses where the admissions officers cannot answer such questions, especially in the wake of incidents in the past few years.”

Funk, with the University of Alabama, says professionals working with students should be honest and avoid either downplaying safety concerns or alarming students by focusing on them too much. He recommends college representatives describe basic campus safety features to prospects but respond in detail when asked and then thoroughly inform enrolled students during orientation.

“It’s a delicate balance to talk about these issues, but generally we leave it in the hands of the prospective student or their parents/guardians to frame the question and make sure our recruiters and counselors are prepared to talk about all aspects of campus safety,” he noted.

Parents and students concerned about the issue are likely to access crime data online, check social media, gather other information about safety, and ask questions, says Daniel Summers, vice president of enrollment management at Hiram College (OH). Like Funk, he believes they will express their concerns, and colleges should create an environment where they feel comfortable talking about them.

“Putting too much of a spotlight on these issues can create a narrative that can make them more important than they should be for some students, and that’s a problem in itself. Not every student is concerned about them in the same way, and counselors should be sensitive about responding to them.”

Khala Granville Ashaolu, senior associate director of admissions at Indiana University-Bloomington, agrees that admission counselors have to be deliberate about what they present—and be prepared.

“There is a way to be authentic and direct while not putting your institution under the bus,” she says. “To create balance, I often ask my supervisor for talking points before going into critical conversations on safety. This gives me a greater understanding about what has happened and what solutions are taking place to address the issue.”

WHAT THEY WANT TO KNOW

Jarrat says concerns “run the gamut, from rape and assault or shootings and bombings, to worries about drinking, drugs, natural disasters, bullying, hazing, and hate crimes.”

But Dooley says since students have grown up in an era when school shootings happen regularly and schools routinely practice lockdowns, they may assume there are threats everywhere and understand and accept that they are possible. Their parents, she says, are more likely to worry about major, campus-wide threats and serious crime.

“Students are almost numb to these big incidents and accept them as a possibility. They seem to be more concerned about personal safety issues,” Dooley said. “I have a student who is LGBTQ, for instance, and security on campus came up even before they began to identify colleges. That is the sort of worry I more often see from students.”

Minority students, for instance, increasingly want to know how welcoming a campus is, as well as how the administration handles any incidents that have arisen in the past.

Granville Ashaolu agrees, but she warns that while admission officials should be conscious of race and the unique experiences of prospects from minority communities when they think about safety, she also believes they should check all their own attitudes and consider the student as an individual when they assess their possible concerns.

“It’s important that admission professionals first understand their own implicit biases and educate and correct themselves, perhaps with some education around intersectionality. A student isn’t just black or gay or male. They can be a black gay male, for example, and in a world that doesn’t always support those identities, how can they find spaces and people to



Campus Safety Checklist

Dave Jarrat, who collects data from campuses and prospective students in his role as a senior vice president of the enrollment consulting firm InsideTrack, encourages students to consider:

- ❑ **The community:** What is the relationship like between the community and the college? Specifically, is there efficient collaboration between campus security and local law enforcement? Do policies differ between the campus and local police? Is the local community welcoming?
- ❑ **Moving around:** Are there safety measures in place, especially late at night, such as campus shuttles, “safe ride” services, escorts, and blue light emergency poles. Are students informed about areas or activities on campus or in the community that might not be safe?
- ❑ **Critical connections:** How effective are emergency services, including hotlines and counseling for students who may need to report a concern or seek help. How effective and accessible are law enforcement or health service response teams? Is there a simple process to report suspicious or concerning behavior? Are reports taken seriously?
- ❑ **Safety know-how:** Is the staff thoroughly trained in emergency services, including the residence hall assistants? Are students well-informed about safety resources and procedures and made to feel they can express concerns? Is safety information about crime, harassment, or emergencies clearly displayed on campus and on the website?
- ❑ **Access points:** Are all facilities secured by key cards or other tools that prevent entry by those outside the school community? How is access to the campus and facilities controlled?

—Jim Paterson

Going Beyond the Numbers

All students should investigate campus safety as part of their college search, even if it takes a little digging, said Brian Van Brunt, a private consultant on school security and executive director of the National Behavioral Intervention Team Association.

"While it may seem counterintuitive, simply selecting a school that does not have a high number of reports on violence, crime, or sexual assault doesn't always tell the whole story," he said. "Schools that invest exclusively in a bunker mentality with alert systems, safety locks, blue lights, and armed response often lack a dedication to the best practices that focus on early identification of at-risk behavior."

So what should students look for? Van Brunt's list includes a well-staffed and active counseling department, a security force using a community policing model, and an active and well-supported intervention team that can handle concerns ranging from an uptick in reports about sexual harassment to a tip that a student is troubled.

A school's policies and safety record should also be considered, according to Andrew Flagel, vice president of advancement and member engagement at the American Association of Colleges and Universities.

"I strongly encourage students to go beyond the sometimes-misleading noise in social media, and I encourage them to check out student newspapers and student affairs websites," Flagel said. "Do they see interfaith and multicultural programs? Are there clear and easy-to-find explanations of reporting processes for any incidents, and transparent explanations of how such issues are addressed? Students with the resources and time to visit a campus should look to see if that same content is on the bulletin boards and should speak to students in the dining halls and libraries. Do they feel safe, connected, and supported? If not, why not?"

Kristina Dooley, an independent educational consultant in Hudson, Ohio, tells her students not to be scared off by a campus where safety concerns are visibly reported and discussed.

"I tell kids...Don't discount a school if people are talking about these issues. I'd be worried about the colleges that say 'not our school'."

—Jim Paterson

support their life journey? We have to stop making assumptions about people based on what we see and where they are from."

Rather than assume a student needs certain information, counselors should "do a better job at listening so that we can locate the specific resources for that student," Granville Ashaolu said.


She also recommends speaking with students individually or in small groups about issues such as safety and says admission counselors should not be afraid to ask them if they have concerns. "We all need to be willing to look beyond what we see and listen to what is being said and communicated non-verbally," Granville Ashaolu said. "...I like bringing up the issue first to let students know that I am capable and willing to handle those questions. I believe the best offense is a great defense. We can't be afraid to have critical conversations. I have found that when I am willing to handle these conversations students respect me more and build trust with me."

Listening is key, said Hanson, with Carthage College. "Students coming from diverse backgrounds often will ask indirect questions about the overall diversity of the college in terms of its student body—and that directly relates to the how safe they will feel on campus," she said.

Traditional crime data may also be of interest, several experts say, and admission staff should have an understanding of it and how to talk about it without making it either alarming or insignificant. Hanson and Granville Ashaolu both note that students and families will also be concerned about safety issues within the surrounding community, which is a topic among prospects that is often underestimated by colleges.

"You can't hide crime data, so it is important to be upfront about that information and respond with specific examples about the safety measures your college has in place," Hanson said.

Such efforts will pay off, Flagel says, not just to encourage prospects to attend, but in making them feel more secure so they can "best navigate these challenges in an environment in which they feel connected and supported."

"Finding a campus where a student feels connected and supported is a key to them feeling safe," Flagel said. 

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Jim Paterson is a writer and former school counselor living in Lewes, Delaware.

sexual
assault

CAUTION

WARNING