University Leaders Grapple With a Tragedy

By LIBBY SANDER

DeKalb, Ill.

At even the best-prepared universities, there is no playbook for handling the crush of tough decisions that comes after a mass shooting rocks an otherwise quiet campus.

The police tape eventually comes down. But the decisions remain, often with few guideposts.

The key, said John G. Peters, president of Northern Illinois University, is to keep focused on the basics.

"The world wants answers to questions, and answers are always slow in coming, and confusing," Mr. Peters said in an interview with The Chronicle Sunday afternoon in his office. Dressed in gray slacks and a black sweater, with a red and black ribbon pinned to the shoulder, and his eyes red from fatigue, Mr. Peters talked about his university's response to the fatal rampage last week.

The castlelike building that houses the president's office was the scene of a media frenzy after Steven P. Kazmierczak, a former Northern Illinois student, burst into a crowded lecture hall and opened fire on a class of 140 or so students. He shot 21 people, killing five, before turning the gun on himself. The investigation is ongoing, and the police have yet to find a motive.

In interviews this weekend, Mr. Peters, faculty members, and administrators said their university was as well-prepared as it could have been for the crisis that unfolded here last week, on a campus tucked amid cornfields an hour west of Chicago. But even the best-laid plans don't cover everything, they acknowledged.

"One of the things I've realized is that not having an answer is not an option," said Brian O. Hemphill, vice president for student affairs. "We're talking about people's lives, and them being able to move forward from this point."

Managing a Crisis

Mr. Hemphill's office was bustling on Sunday morning, where a dozen or so volunteers answered phones and handled random assignments. Almost everyone wore NIU sweatshirts or pins.

One volunteer sat at a table gluing together strips of red and black ribbonâ€”"Huskie red and black"â€”to make pins. But even that small task involved an unanticipated obstacle: "It's hard to find red and black ribbon in town right now," she said.

It was just a tiny piece of a larger challenge university officials have faced in the days following the shootings. For them, the aftermath has often boiled down to one thing: Details.

"The details are very important," Mr. Hemphill said. Those include contacting all of the students who were in Cole
Hall at the time of the shooting and finding accommodations for the dozens of counselors who arrived late Thursday and Friday from nearby institutions. Campus leaders have also struggled over the kind of language the university president should use when referring to the gunman—"evil" or "disturbed"? (He settled on "disturbed.") And they also had to decide which university officials would attend which funerals, as all five for Mr. Kazmierczak's victims are scheduled for this week.

The logistics can be overwhelming, officials said.

A scholarship fund was quickly created for the flood of donations from well-wishers. Classes held in Cole Hall, a large academic building that will remain closed for the rest of the year, must be reassigned to other locations. Belongings left behind in the lecture hall by fleeing students were returned to their owners. And some funeral services were made and paid for using the death benefits from a university insurance policy.

"You shift into autopilot," said Melanie Magara, the university's chief spokesperson, who has fielded inquiries from hundreds of news organizations from around the world. Decisions that seem so basic take on great significance, she said.

"The majority of these details have been very mundane, and I don't mean that in a disrespectful way," she said. "It is day-to-day, routine, detailed stuff. The huge amount of work, and much of it mundane, has been, in a way, healing and therapeutic."

**A Teaching Moment**

Administrators are not the only ones scrambling to prepare the campus for the return of students next week. Faculty members, who have been asked to return to work on Tuesday to receive three days of training from counselors, are also concentrating on the details.

E. Taylor Atkins, the director of undergraduate studies in the history department, said he hoped to use the tragedy as a teaching tool. Unlike some other disciplines, history offers lessons in human behavior, he said, and he hoped that by studying past calamities he might help his students come to grips with their new reality.

It was an approach he took in class following the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, and he intended to use it again later this month.

"We should look at this as an opportunity to put our historical knowledge to some really good use," said Mr. Atkins, an associate professor. "It could help our students to put this incident in a longer perspective."

In the English department, one associate professor, Michael Day, said he anticipated having to manage a broad spectrum of reactions from students when they returned.

"We will want to work on the balance between acknowledging some students' fears and emotions, and other students' need to get on with their studies," Mr. Day said in an e-mail message.

**Comfort Amid Chaos**

If there is one institution familiar with all the questions Northern Illinois officials face, it is Virginia Tech, where last April a gunman fatally shot 32 people before killing himself.

John Cleary, the men's golf coach at Northern Illinois, was having dinner with four members of his team Saturday night at the home of Tim McMurray, a senior associate athletic director, when he received a telephone call.

It was from the golf coach at Virginia Tech, who said that golfers there had decided to change the hats they planned to wear during competition this spring. The new hats, the coach said, would feature a joint logo of the Virginia Tech Hokies and the Northern Illinois Huskies.
Mr. Hemphill, in student affairs, said he was on the telephone late Thursday night, just hours after the shootings, talking to his counterpart at Virginia Tech.

And the head of Virginia Tech's counseling services will lead the training workshops next week for faculty members here.

"Virginia Tech has been with us," Mr. Peters said.

Other universities have reached out as well. On Saturday evening, Ms. Magara opened a large package to find a boxful of potato chips, cookies, gum, and Pop-Tarts, as well as bandages and a toothbrush. It was from the public-relations department at the University of Alabama, and included a handwritten card signed by all members of that department.

"These are complete strangers," she said. "How sweet."

What's Next?

In the blur of the past several days, administrators and faculty members said it was difficult to predict where the coming weeks and months would lead them.

Mr. Peters said the incident on his campus was just the latest in a string of events in recent years that have tested the mettle of the academy.

"We've always had tragedies," he said, referring to colleges and universities around the country. "But what has happened to us in the past few years is fundamentally changing the way we view things. We must think about security at all times. And it's hard for us."

But, he continued, "We do it, and I think our campuses are doing it very well with infrastructures that are open. That's the way we build campuses: Our buildings are as open as our discourse. And now we are obviously, for safety purposes and security, rethinking that."

Northern Illinois's fast response to the shooting has been widely praised, but Mr. Peters said that at some point in the coming months, he and his staff would "systematically" look at how the events unfolded.

"We have to sift through the results of this and make changes where necessary," he said. "It's a little hard to say we could have reacted any better."

Although he has hardly had time to take stock of everything that has happened over the past few days, Mr. Peters already had some advice for his peers: "Be serious about planning. Take advantage of the lessons learned from Virginia Tech and NIU."

But when asked what the lessons from NIU were, he paused. His face wore a sad grin.

"I'm not sure yet," he said.