Louisiana Shootings Underscore Vulnerability of Open Campuses

By ERIC HOOVER

On February 8, Latina Williams could have carried almost anything into one of several buildings at Louisiana Technical College. That morning, she brought a .357-caliber pistol into a nursing class.

Like most institutions, Louisiana Technical College at Baton Rouge has security guards and alarms. But perhaps nothing — short of a metal detector at the entrance — could have stopped Ms. Williams from doing what she did.

Around 8:30 a.m., Ms. Williams walked into a classroom, spoke with the instructor, and left, according to the police. A moment later, she entered the room through another door and fired six rounds, killing two students, Karsheika Graves and Taneshia Butler. Then Ms. Williams put the gun to her head and killed herself.

In the days after the shooting, investigators found no evidence linking Ms. Williams to either victim. The apparent randomness of the incident was a harsh reminder: Open campuses are as susceptible to violence as any other public place.

Ten months after the massacre at Virginia Tech, colleges of all kinds continue to weigh campus-safety concerns. How can they help troubled students? How should they respond in emergencies?

Those questions are especially complicated at nonresidential institutions such as Louisiana Technical College.

"The real challenge is, you've got people coming and going," says Peter F. Lake, a law professor at Stetson University and director of the Center for Excellence in Higher Education Law and Policy. "People may be bringing all kinds of issues onto the campus, but institutions may have less insight into who people are."

In other words, a troubled student who spends only a few hours a week on a campus may prove even harder to detect and help than one who studies, eats, and sleeps there.

That dilemma is a growing concern at two-year colleges, according to Alice W. Villadsen, president emeritus of Brookhaven College, in Dallas, and one of the editors of Hoping for the Best While Preparing for the Worst: Disasters, Emergencies, and the Community College (League for Innovation in the Community College, 2007).

"There's been a huge shift, at all institutions, in our recognition of our responsibility to the student," she says. "Instead of simply saying 'Here we are, come and get it,' we're reaching out to students in distress."

One strategy is to revamp orientation programs to include more information about student services, including mental-health resources.

Technology is another tool. Some two-year institutions, such as Lee College, in Baytown, Tex., have installed video screens campuswide, which they use to promote advising and counseling services.
Many community colleges, Ms. Villadsen says, are also doing more to help faculty and staff members recognize students in crisis.

Still, as the Virginia Tech shootings proved, identifying, or even treating, a troubled student may not prevent him from harming himself or others. Often, pegging a student as potentially dangerous is impossible.

"It's awfully difficult to stop these people," says Mr. Lake, at Stetson. "It takes an element of luck and skill."

A Plan for the Worst

Preventing some campus incidents may involve luck, but responding to them effectively requires planning. Like residential colleges and universities, nonresidential ones have enhanced their emergency-response plans since last spring.

That has been a tall order, given the vastness of many such colleges. Take the Virginia Community College system, which serves 340,000 people on 40 campuses. The system has 5.7 million square feet of instructional space in 224 buildings.

Recently the system's campus-safety committee issued a series of recommendations. One was that colleges consider both high- and low-tech means of communicating instructions to students, whether there has been a violent incident on the campus or just a broken water main.

Text messages may work well in one emergency but not another. That's why at least one Virginia institution, Thomas Nelson Community College, has stocked the campus with bullhorns.

Others, including Northern Virginia Community College, are developing radio systems to broadcast messages to AM radios within several miles of their campuses.

"There's no one size that fits all," says Jeffrey Kraus, the system's assistant vice chancellor for public relations.

In Baton Rouge this month, Louisiana Technical College activated its emergency-response plan within moments of the shootings.

About 20 students were in the classroom where the killings occurred, and several of them dialed 911. The first call was received at 8:36 a.m. Within four minutes, police officers were in the building. Instructors told students to stay in their classrooms.

Ms. Williams left few clues as to why she committed the crimes. Police officers learned that she had been living in her car and had sold or given away many of her belongings. She may have made an anonymous call to a crisis counselor on the morning of the incident, the police said.

Late last week, the Baton Rouge Police Department was continuing its investigation. "The specific motive behind the shooting and the selection of the victims remains unknown," the department said in a written statement, "and may never be known."

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