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OPE web site illuminates campus safety Research tool helps make sense of federally mandated college incident reports

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A research tool available from the Office of Postsecondary Education (OPE) at the U.S. Department of Education (ED) is likely to become a more important resource for anyone interested in assessing campus security at a specific college or university. The tool--a web site that facilitates comparative analyses of campus incident reports--will be especially important to prospective students (as well as their parents) and faculty members who have a wide range of choices when it comes to deciding where to study or work.

Now, more than ever, college administrators, faculty members, students, prospective students, parents, and the press have questions about campus security. In the wake of the worst shooting in America's history at Virginia Tech on April 16, safety leaped to the top of everyone's list of concerns about college life. One way to gain a better understanding of campus safety is to use OPE's Campus Security Data Analysis Cutting Tool web site.

The Jeanne Clery Act requires all postsecondary institutions participating in federal student aid funding (Title IV institutions) to annually submit a security report to ED detailing campus security policies and providing campus crime statistics for the past three years. The act also requires schools to share the report with all current students and employees and to inform prospective students and employees of its existence, providing the report upon request. (For more on the Clery Act, see the accompanying story.)

OPE provides access to all crime statistics contained within these reports to the public through the Campus Security Data Analysis Cutting Tool web site. The site is more than a database. It also assists users in compiling and organizing incident statistics for study. As OPE points out, however, users should keep in mind that these statistics represent only alleged crimes and provide no information about prosecutions or criminal convictions.

Because the web site contains all Title IV postsecondary institutions, users have to sift through data on a diverse range of campuses--from huge four-year university systems such as the State University of New York to small postsecondary institutions such as the New York International Beauty School. Without the cutting tool, users could find organizing data of only the institutions relevant to their research a tedious project, but the web site makes analysis easy enough for even the most casual user.

The site allows users to access information in five different report styles:

- Data for one campus;
- Aggregated data for a group of campuses;
- A comparison of one campus to the averages of a group of campuses;
- A comparison of the averages of two groups of campuses; or
- Downloadable data for a group of campuses.

With the cutting tool, users can narrow the group under study to a precisely desired demographic of campuses. A user could, for example, see how crime statistics in and around the University of Texas compare to other four-year colleges in the Southwest that have more than 20,000 students, while excluding all that do not have an Architectural Design program.

Statistical data are organized by categories according to the nature of the incident, as well as by the location. The site categorizes incidences of alleged crimes by whether an incident qualifies as a criminal offense, a criminal offense and a hate crime, or an arrest. In the arrest category, one also may find all the disciplinary actions and judicial referrals that occurred as the result of an alleged violation of a law. Locations are broken down based on whether an incident occurred directly on campus, in a residence hall (a subset of "on campus"), at a non-campus property (a building controlled by a student organization such as a fraternity, for example), or on any of the public property within or directly adjacent to the campus.

Todd Sigler, director of the public safety department at Southern Illinois University Carbondale, calls resources such as the OPE web site a "good start towards trying to assess the particular instances of crime in an area," but he offers a caution: "You have to be careful with raw numbers." Sigler says users can trust ED's database as a reliable resource on campus safety, but he encourages anyone who uses the government site to contact the universities directly for more information.

Like Sigler, the developers of the OPE site seem to appreciate that numbers alone don't always tell the whole story, so the web site allows institutions to provide brief explanations along with their reported data. Schools can try to explain, in text, circumstances that might have led to notable changes in the reported incidence of alleged crime, such as a change in the school's incident reporting policy or an isolated crime spree. Although such brief commentaries are no substitute for fully detailed security reports, they can at least help avert severe misinterpretations of statistical anomalies that might otherwise reflect poorly on a generally safe school environment.

Sigler advises anyone interested in the safety of a given campus to investigate beyond just a school's Clery Act statistics. Understanding the data in context is vital as well, he notes:

"To presume that a college operates in a vacuum is probably misleading, and you should check to see what the crime rate is in the city where the college is located, as well as in the county."

Links:

Campus Security Data Analysis Tool
<http://ope.ed.gov/security/main.asp>

Southern Illinois University Carbondale

<http://www.siu.edu/>

Background on the Clery Act from Security on Campus

<http://www.securityoncampus.org/schools/cleryact/index.html>

eSN--"Campus massacre: Turning to technology"

<http://www.eschoolnews.com/news/showStory.cfm?ArticleID=7021>

eSN--"Campus Safety in Spotlight"

<http://www.eschoolnews.com/news/showStory.cfm?ArticleID=7100>

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