
Today's News

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Delaware State Earns Praise for Quick Response After Shooting on Campus

By [MARTIN VAN DER WERF](#)

When the police at Delaware State University received a call at 12:54 a.m. Friday that shots had been fired outside a dormitory, the emergency plan kicked in almost at once. By the time the police chief, James T. Overton, arrived on the campus at about 1:10 a.m., other administrators were calling resident assistants or knocking on their doors, telling them to keep students in their rooms.

By 2 a.m., Mr. Overton was briefing a group of vice presidents and other top administrators. He woke the president at his on-campus home to tell him of the incident. Officers wrote an official warning, made paper copies, and taped those notices to the outside doors of all campus buildings. By 5 a.m., with the suspect still on the loose, all classes and other events were canceled for the day.

A month after a panel criticized the response of Virginia Tech administrators and police officers to the shootings there last April, the police at Delaware State may have created a new template for how university officials should respond to a shooting. At the same time, the incident on the Dover, Del., campus brought the 3,500-student historically black institution back into the spotlight for a reputation it has been trying to control: an association with gun violence.

Guns are not allowed on the campus. Students who have them are immediately suspended, and may be expelled and prosecuted, said Mr. Overton. But at least one student was carrying a weapon when two groups of students converged on the campus early Friday after a late-night card game and a snack at an on-campus cafe.

The gunman fired four to six shots, the police said. Two students were struck. They have been identified in news reports as Shalita Middleton and Nathaniel Pugh, both 17, and both from Washington, D.C.

According to news reports, Ms. Middleton was listed in serious condition at a local hospital. She has been unable to speak with police officers. Mr. Pugh was also still hospitalized on Sunday. It was unclear if he had spoken with authorities.

University officials said they could not confirm the injured students' identities.

Earlier Incidents

In August, two students from the university and another who was about to begin classes there were shot to death in Newark, N.J.

Some news reports about Friday's shootings quoted students as saying that the incident took place after arguments between rival groups from Washington and northern New Jersey, as part of a dispute that

occasionally flares up on the campus. Mr. Overton said that the motive was still under investigation, and that there appeared to be no connection between the Newark slayings and the most recent shootings.

In another recent incident involving weapons on the campus, two masked men, one armed with a shotgun, entered a dormitory room last fall and stole a video game.

Two shootings on campus in 1992 led the institution to put security guards at all four roads that enter the campus. At night and on weekends, anyone entering the campus must show identification. That security system, unusually tight for a college campus, is still in place.

In the past, the university has been criticized for being too slow to respond to potentially dangerous incidents on campus. But this time, "they absolutely did their best, and did a lot of things right," said S. Daniel Carter, senior vice president of Security on Campus, an organization in Pennsylvania that monitors campus violence.

While some have complained that faculty and staff members and students living off the campus were not notified quickly enough, Mr. Carter said that the officers focused on what was most important -- those on the campus.

"When you have an at-large shooter on your campus, the lesson is you've got to secure your facilities," he said. Even if a person with a gun has no other targets, "they're armed, they're dangerous, and they may not be making the best decisions."

The police at Delaware State were still searching Sunday for the suspected gunman in Friday's shootings. "We strongly believe it is a student," said Mr. Overton.

Lessons Learned

The shootings were the first on an American college campus since Seung-Hui Cho, a student, killed 33 people, including himself, at Virginia Tech in April. A panel that studied the shootings said the police and administrators should have considered closing the Blacksburg, Va., campus after Mr. Cho shot his first two victims, in a dormitory. He shot the other 30 in a classroom building some two and a half hours later.

Since the Virginia Tech tragedy, police departments, on campuses and off, have been consumed with trying to ensure that their emergency-notification procedures are updated, said Raymond H. Thrower, Jr., director of public safety and security at Gustavus Adolphus College, in Minnesota, and president of the International Association of Campus Law Enforcement Administrators. More campus police departments, he said, are doing more exercises with other local police departments so each gets comfortable with the work styles and priorities of the others.

At Delaware State, the police found, in a review of procedures after the Virginia Tech shootings, that their contact numbers for administrators and other police and crisis-management agencies were out of date, said Mr. Overton. They have since been updated. All of the institution's 14 armed police officers and 13 unarmed security guards were trained in August in how to respond to active shootings.

"What we learned is you have to get the word out quickly," he said.

The dispatcher's office was told on Friday to give details to anyone who called in. Leaflets describing the incident were posted not only on college buildings, but also on the windows of a number of recreational vehicles parked on university property by racing fans in town for a Nascar event. Dover International Speedway is adjacent to the campus, and the university allows some fans to park on its property.

"Several things worked in our favor," said Mr. Overton. "It was at night, so I didn't have students headed to campus. We have a secure perimeter, so we could almost immediately stop all traffic from coming onto

campus. And since there was really almost no one at work, we didn't have to have any sort of mass evacuation."

Delaware State is set to sign a contract this week to start a campuswide emergency-warning network that will be delivered through text messages. Many other colleges across the country have already installed similar systems, or are in the process of buying them.

But the advent of that sort of technology should not make colleges too comfortable, said Ann H. Franke, a lawyer and risk-managment consultant to colleges.

"Most colleges need to get better," she said. "They need to practice."

The Delaware State incident showed that colleges need to respond quickly to shootings, but that is pretty obvious, she said. "A lot of colleges have not thought through when they should use their emergency warning networks. Should they send a message when there is a forcible rape, or an arsonist, or a hate crime on campus?"

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Officials praise Delaware State's response to shooting

Lessons learned from Va. Tech tragedy earlier this year led to swift notification of students

**From eSchool News staff and wire service reports
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Shots ring out at Delaware State University shortly before 1 a.m. Two students fall to the ground, wounded.

Almost immediately, the process of warning students to stay indoors begins.

Within hours, the 400-acre campus is locked down and, at 5:10 a.m., classes are canceled as police search for the person or persons responsible for the crimes.

Delaware State's swift response to the double shooting on its campus in Dover on Sept. 21 was a textbook example of how to handle a crisis, safety experts said.

"The idea is to contain and control," said Adam Thermos, president of Strategic Technology Group, a Boston-based college security company. "Locking down the campus and activating mass-notification systems" is the best response to a shooting on campus.

As soon as the crime was reported to university police at 12:54 a.m., Delaware State officials began calling dormitory "resident managers" with orders to corral students safely in the hallways.

Campus police chief James Overton met with administrators at 2:11 a.m., and within two more hours, officials estimate, all 1,200 people in campus housing were notified.

"I think the biggest lesson learned from that whole situation at Virginia Tech is, don't wait. Once you have an incident, start notifying the community," Carlos Holmes, a university spokesman, said.

Delaware State alerted students to the emergency with phone calls, a statement on its web site, visits to dorm rooms by advisers, and handbills posted on campus and in nearby apartments.

More than half of the school's 3,278 students live off campus and, despite widespread news coverage of the situation, many arrived at school to find its entrances barricaded.

"We directed the students not to leave the dormitory from the outset last night," Holmes said on Sept. 21. "They were very obedient. They understood the lessons from the tragedy earlier this year."

He added: "We cannot assume that [the gunman is] not on campus. As long as he's at large, we cannot assure the security of anyone on campus."

The shootings occurred as a group of students were returning from an on-campus cafe. A 17-year-old male student was in stable condition with a wound to the ankle; a female student, also 17, was shot in the abdomen and in

serious condition.

University police said they had identified two persons of interest, both students. Both were interviewed and then released, university spokesman Carlos Holmes said on Sept. 22. Police had identified no suspects as of press time.

Like many colleges nationwide, Delaware State improved its crisis-response plan following the shootings at Virginia Tech on April 16, Holmes said.

Administrators at the Blacksburg, Va., university have been criticized for not issuing a warning after two students were killed by Seung-Hui Cho, 23, in a dormitory. A panel found that their inaction might have contributed to the deaths of 31 more people, including Cho, when the gunman continued his rampage inside in a classroom building more than two hours later. (See ["Report slams Va. Tech's response to shootings"](#).)

From campus loudspeakers and sirens, to better communication between school and community police, colleges and universities have ramped up their security systems over the summer in response to the massacre.

Many now have systems that send warnings in multiple ways, including eMail, voice mail, text messages, and digital signs in public areas on campus. Alerts also can be sent to faculty and parents.

And though Delaware State didn't employ such a multi-channel notification system, university officials still managed to get their message out quickly.

"They did a lot of things right," said S. Daniel Carter, vice president of operations at Security on Campus, a King of Prussia, Pa.-based group that has lobbied for tighter on-campus crime reporting.

"They secured their facilities and kept their students in the securest areas they have."