Colleges Wade Into Survival Training for Campus Shootings

A new video offers tips on how to react when shots are fired

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Students

Run here during a fire. Seek help for alcohol poisoning. Call this number if a roommate threatens suicide.

For years students have received instructions for all sorts of emergencies. But should they also learn what to do in the rare event that someone starts shooting?

This month a company in Spokane, Wash., plans to release Shots Fired on Campus, an instructional DVD with strategies for preventing and surviving a gun rampage. About 50 colleges have ordered the video, and its creators expect to sell several hundred more this fall.

The market appears ripe. Since the massacre at Virginia Tech last year, colleges everywhere have prepared for "active shooter" scenarios. As last February's fatal shootings at Northern Illinois University affirmed, however, even the most rapid police response may come too late for some people who first encounter a gunman.

That's why some campus-safety experts say colleges must better prepare those who do not wear badges. In April the International Association of Campus Law Enforcement Administrators published "The IACLEA Blueprint for Safer Campuses," in response to the Virginia Tech incident. The group recommended that colleges train students and faculty and staff members in how to respond to such emergencies. Among the training methods it recommends are residence-life programs, orientation sessions, and print and digital materials.

Although colleges everywhere have developed training programs for their employees, many stop short of asking students to think through how they might react if they heard gunshots in their building.

That's a mistake, says Randy Spivey. "Since Virginia Tech, there's been a lot of focus on law-enforcement response strategies and notification procedures," he says, "but very little on what to do if you're that person in the event."

Mr. Spivey used to run hostage-survival programs for the U.S. Department of Defense. Now he is executive director of the Center for Personal Protection & Safety, a company that specializes in prevention of workplace violence. About six months ago, his business released Shots Fired — When Lightning Strikes, a training video that recreates an office shooting. More than 300 colleges have licensed the DVD for their use.

Requests for a campus-specific version led the company to create Shots Fired on Campus, which sells for $495. For another $1,000, colleges can buy media files of the video to put up on their Web sites.

The 20-minute video, filmed at Eastern Washington and Gonzaga Universities, begins with a student hiding behind a tree and calling 911 on her cellphone. "I'm on campus … " she says. "There's a guy here shooting."

The dramatization includes footage of a man carrying a duffel bag into a campus building, then removing a handgun
and a rifle. In a classroom, students look up, startled, when they hear the distant pop of guns. During a shooting "you'll need to take direct responsibility for your personal safety and security," says a narrator. "You must develop a survival mind-set."

**Shots Fired**, which includes interviews with law-enforcement experts, shows viewers how they might live through such an ordeal by running, hiding, or barricading a door. It also depicts how, by spreading out and working together, a group of people might overpower and disarm a shooter.

The video does not tell viewers what to do, however. "We're giving them a mental permission slip," Mr. Spivey says, "to think about the options they have."

'Delicate' Message

Shawn Burns thinks those options are empowering. This spring Mr. Burns, chief of police at West Texas A&M University, gave 65-minute presentations on campus shootings to some first-year students — something he had never done before.

After showing *Shots Fired* to small groups, Mr. Burns asked students to think about what they could do if a shooter had just entered their building. Could they jump out the window safely? Could they block the door with tables and chairs, maybe tie it shut with a belt? Could they throw their books or shoes at a gunman as a last resort?

Such exercises, he believes, plant a seed that would help students react quickly in a worst-case scenario. "We know that at Virginia Tech some students took proactive measures and survived the attack," he says. "We also know some of them didn't."

Although students tend to find the presentation reassuring, it carries a "shock factor," Mr. Burns says. How can colleges make sure that factor is not too great?

"It's delicate," says Lt. James T. Watkins of the University of North Carolina at Wilmington's police department. "The delivery is really important. You don't want to freak students out."

Recently police officers at Wilmington led several workshops on surviving campus shootings. A total of 1,500 faculty and staff members and students participated. The sessions, which do not include a video, are less a how to than a pep talk. "I'm not going to stand up there with a gun on my hip and tell you to overpower a shooter," Mr. Watkins says. "But I'll tell you I'm not going to get on the ground and be executed."

Several colleges that have purchased *Shots Fired on Campus* plan to show it to some, but not all students. The University of North Florida plans to incorporate the video into resident-assistant training before inviting members of student organizations to view it.

Clemson University plans to put the video on its network, so anyone on the campus can view it online. Johnson W. Link, chief of police, says he and his officers will also show it during presentations on campus safety, so they can answer questions. "This is a message people don't want to process," he says.

**A Matter of Balance**

Legal experts speculate that a training video with specific survival tips could prove controversial in the aftermath of a fatal shooting. "Plaintiffs' lawyers would scrutinize it through the least forgiving lens," says Peter F. Lake, director of the Center for Excellence in Higher Education Law and Policy. Nonetheless, Mr. Lake says, he sees value in discussing survival skills.

Such training may have benefits, as long as it does not distract from preventive efforts to identify and help troubled students, says Alyssa S. Keehan, a risk analyst with United Educators Insurance, a major insurer of colleges. "If a college wants the community to feel prepared," she says, "the training given should not promote unfounded fear
about campus shootings."

After all, such events, while devastating, are rare. Robert S. Flowers, vice president for student affairs at Hobart and William Smith Colleges, says there is limited time to tell students about a host of potential threats. "We have to balance that," he says. This fall freshmen on his campus will watch a video about fire safety, but not one about shootings.

Still, Gwendolyn J. Dungy, executive director of National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, predicts that *Shots Fired on Campus* will continue to sell. "People are grasping at anything that could be a resource," she says. "Nobody wants to look as if they didn't prepare."

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