



Learning from College Shootings

Notes on Crisis Management

(February 28, 2008)

Shootings on college campuses that have led to a substantial number of deaths and injuries have now taken place at Virginia Tech and Northern Illinois University. There is concern that further instances of multiple-victim violence may take place at U.S. colleges and universities. The following are general observations on issues likely to occur and practices likely to be useful if such violence does take place, drawn from first-hand observation and from extended conversations with leaders at both Virginia Tech and NIU, and at other sites of violence, including banks and shopping malls.

Before an Event Takes Place

Every college should have in place, at least, a basic plan for dealing with a multiple-victim act of violence. At a bare minimum, this plan should cover these three topics:

1. How does notification immediately reach the individuals or departments who need to know of the event and act on the knowledge
2. Which individuals are authorized to take what actions, and to make what communications, upon notification of the event, and without further consultation (eg, a campus "lock-down")
3. What team of individuals will manage the crisis once they have been convened

The identity of the team leader will vary from place to place (a provost, a dean, a general counsel, for example); but, the team should include the chiefs of security, law and communications, and someone with strong knowledge of campus systems and operations, plus strong links to human resources, faculty and student body leadership. The college president will be intensely involved, but should not personally manage operational details.

Four external entities bring value to a college facing these crises. Relationships established with them before an event occurs can only be helpful.

1. **The college's insurance carrier** can unlock immediately-needed funds and mobilize valuable external resources; 2. **An external law firm**, preferably one with strong law enforcement credentials, can enable internal legal and security teams to concentrate on the job at hand and defend against external forces seeking financial gain or political advantage from the tragedy; 3. **A grief counseling firm** provides essential reassurance and stability to people feeling every imaginable form of stress; 4. **A crisis management/communications firm** offers expertise and support not normally available in-house.

Immediate Communications

News of the event will spread with incredible speed via every imaginable form of communications.

Much of the information transmitted will be exaggerated or inaccurate; this is unavoidable.

It will sensitize students, faculty, staff and the community to the need to seek out or be receptive to official, accurate information. The levels of immediate communications should flow as follows:

1. **The college's emergency communications systems** (however it is configured). This will alert everyone to the danger and/or event, instruct them to avoid certain locations and, more generally, to stay out of public or outdoor spaces. It will also, later, provide them with an "all-clear signal." The speed with

- which this communication takes place is critical (and will figure prominently in news coverage).
2. **The law enforcement personnel** mobilized at the scene of the event and more generally around the campus. They will repeat and amplify the “get-to-safety” message and will convey reassurance (“**it’s under control!**”). They may also convey panic, confusion, bigotry or authoritarianism, which can contribute a greater-than-necessary level of campus anxiety or disharmony. There is a positive communications value to large and visible law enforcement presence immediately after the event. This presence should quickly diminish, but not entirely disappear, once it is certain and widely known that the event is over.
 3. **The college’s Web site.** Virtually everyone on a college campus has ready access to a computer terminal or laptop; even if they have not been instructed to do so, they will instinctively turn to the Internet. All on campus will be looking particularly for this information.
 - a. What happened
 - b. Who has been killed or injured
 - c. What do I do if I am in danger
 - d. What do I do if I am injured
 - e. What do I do if I am in need of assistance or counseling
 - f. What do I do with information that law enforcement may need
 - g. What buildings and areas are closed or safe
 - h. What changes have been made to regularly-scheduled activities
 - i. What event-related activities have been scheduled

This information should be posted to the Web as quickly as it becomes available. Throughout all of this, the college Web site will be the focus of communications. Members of the college community may turn to it several times a day; ***those managing the crisis should turn first to the Web when they have information to communicate.*** The Web should also serve as a forum for messages related to expressions of sentiment. It is appropriate to review Web submissions for inflammatory or inaccurate content, and to prevent posting of such submissions. Additional communications channels might also emerge, with their nature in response to the situation varying, given the college’s infrastructure and culture.

News Media

News reporters will begin arriving minutes after the incident is reported to police. TV crews with satellite transmission trucks will arrive within one hour, often faster. Legally, they cannot be barred from most campuses, and it’s a bad idea anyway, since doing so will lead to negative, critical or divisive coverage. ***News media has an important and useful role to play in the first 48 hours.*** Someone from the college’s communications office should be detailed as the news media facilitator, taking responsibility of providing information, helping with arrangements, introductions, etc.

The first wave of news stories will be about:

- a. What happened (recreating the event, showing the scene, interviewing eyewitnesses/escapees)
- b. Immediate reaction (to actions by college/law enforcement, more interviews)
- c. Who did it (identity, personal history)
- d. Hints of stories to come

These stories will without a doubt dominate news coverage throughout the day of the event and the early morning of the next day.

The second wave of news stories will be about:

- a. The perpetrator (why did he/she do it? Could he/she have been stopped)
- b. The victims (whose identities will have been revealed by now; they have less news value than the perpetrator)
- c. Reaction (normal grief gets one story; deeper issues, like racial tensions, can last for weeks)
- d. What-went-wrong stories (perpetrator could have been stopped; college handled things badly; law enforcement handled things badly)
- e. What-it-really-means stories (gun control is all but certain to arise, but media may focus on college administration policies, social issues present on campus, too-lax or too-stringent law enforcement)

These stories will begin six to 24 hours after the event, and will subside in 24 to 48 hours unless the media finds a new story or material.

After the second wave, news coverage will dry up, except in the following circumstances:

1. Coverage of a memorial service (this coverage should be welcomed)
2. Late-emerging information about the perpetrator's situation or motivation
3. Lawsuits or protests by family and/or friends of victims
4. Calls for investigation or legislation by political figures

The event is likely the worst thing to happen to most of those touched by it, and having the event communicated to the world at large is part of the process by which they begin to deal with it. Law enforcement will also begin communicating with the news media very quickly after arrival at the scene of the event. This is part of their telling the community that "things are now under control." The college itself (preferably its president) should give a press conference two to six hours after the event, stating:

- a. What is known about the event itself
- b. What is known about victims (keeping in mind law enforcement/privacy considerations)
- c. What the college has done (suspended classes, closed buildings, closed entire campus, scheduled vigils or memorials, arranged help or counseling, etc.)
- d. Expressing a sense of community by telling people it is OK to grieve

The speaker should not speculate about why the event happened, nor about whether it could have been prevented. The speaker should not face the cameras until his/her emotions are somewhat under control – the stress is unimaginable.

A second press conference may be needed the day after the event if there is sufficient new factual information to communicate. The president need not lead this briefing, unless the news is of such importance that his/her presence is required. Because the second day's news will not be very newsworthy, the speaker should be trained not to respond to the inevitable barrage of leading and challenging questions and invitations to speculate. There is value to joint press conferences with law enforcement, since questions can be directed to those best able to answer them; however, **law enforcement can also keep public attention high, and slow the campus healing process**, by aggressively courting media attention for each step of the investigation.

News media will remain on campus as long as there is a high likelihood of printable/broadcast-able news.

News presence beyond the immediate aftermath of the event interferes with the grieving stage and delays the onset of the subsequent healing process.

Accordingly, after the first or second press conference, it is usually advisable to make announcements via the college Web site or via electronically-distributed announcements.

Campus Aftermath

Classes will be suspended until further notice as part of the immediate post-event communications, with instructions for students, faculty, staff and others to check back for information later. The direction of the suspension (experience suggests one week as a default duration) can be announced at the end of the day of the event (delaying until the following morning is not recommended unless the event takes place in the evening or night). Use of both Web site postings and physical signs or notices is recommended.

Residential campuses will be unable to send their students' home without notice, so residential facilities will have to remain open. End-of-event day communications should indicate what facilities and services will and will not be available.

The scene of the event will initially be treated as a crime scene and will be inaccessible to members of the college community. For some time thereafter – perhaps as long as a year – college community sentiment will render the scene unusable. The specific event scene will need to be repurposed and rebuilt before it can be used at all. But an entire building or campus space may be put out of circulation because of its emotional connotations. This is a logistical nightmare, but still preferable to a user revolt against too-early of a return to psychologically compromised spaces.

Decisions will also need to be made during the period of academic activity suspension as to how to deal with students who are unable to return to normal student activity when classes resume.

Grief counselors should be brought to the campus as quickly as possible. They will interact directly with members of the college community most in need of their services. They will also help to train, brief or coordinate members of the college administration who will be the first line of contact with others who need help, advice or information. Both Web site postings and physical signage should appear as quickly as possible to tell people where to go for counseling or assistance of any kind.

Students will naturally create their own forms of observance and remembrance, without instruction or encouragement. This may involve the formation of gatherings, signs and posters, charitable gestures, performances or exhibitions. These should be allowed to happen in any form that does not pose a threat to public safety. ***The memorial service will be the critical event in the transition into recovery.***

If students have left campus, it should be scheduled to take place as they return, which may be as late as a week after the event. The location and character of the service will reflect the college's own culture. Here, as in all post-event activities:

Everything that is to be done publicly must be rehearsed.

Emotions run so high that participants will break down the first time they do whatever they are asked to do.

Victims and Their Families

Families of the dead and injured will be notified by law enforcement as soon as their identities are known. As soon as feasible thereafter, a college representative should contact the families to offer them assistance in coming to, and staying at or near the campus, and in dealing with whatever personal business they will need to transact. They will need to be told immediately that all costs of transportation, housing, etc. will be paid for them. Educational administrations are ill-equipped for this sort of disbursement; special provisions will need to be made without delay.

Families should be housed as far as possible from the news media, who are likely, in search of something to report, to provoke statements or situations that will be painful to the families and/or harmful to the college. For the same reasons, college staff assigned to assist families should stay close to them while they are on or near campus, and should try to manage or mitigate unwanted media contact. The families will be in shock; usually, important information will need to be repeated on multiple occasions in order to be remembered. ***Families will tend to bond with whomever from the college they first connect to.*** Family handlers should meet first with the families before senior college executives are introduced.

Families of the deceased should also be notified of the availability of grief counselors, college-paid insurance, or any other services or benefits available to them. The notification can wait until after the families arrive at the campus. It is appropriate to pay for funeral services for families that cannot afford them. Best practice is to ask families what immediate financial needs they have, and then to write checks immediately. In these circumstances, families tend to be modest in their requests and grateful for all assistance. It is appropriate for the college president to meet with these families – after

a family handler relationship has been established. The college president should also attend funeral services for the deceased; only if great distance or simultaneous funeral scheduling makes this impossible should someone else represent the college.

The injured may be placed in multiple area hospitals. Family wishes must be respected as to public disclosure of identity, location, condition, etc., though information will probably leak out in time. Indeed, while the names of the dead can and will become public, the release of the names of the injured is governed by HIPAA regulations. The college may find that it has many inquiries, but cannot name hospitalized patients because of these regulations. Families will need help in dealing with health care decisions and in dealing with health care bureaucracies. Offers to meet immediate financial needs are appropriate to these families as well.

Entities from Outside the College Community

In addition to the news media, various individuals and constituencies can be expected, or sought, to play a role in the campus crisis and its aftermath. They include:

1. **Law enforcement.** In addition to the campus police or security force, the event may be investigated by local police, state police, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, the Department of Homeland Security, or others. The campus police may find themselves simultaneously managing a campus crisis, investigating a crime committed on campus, and being the subject of others' investigations into the causes of the event. An appropriate outside law firm can facilitate coordination between enforcement agencies and insulate campus officials from the immediate distractions of external investigations. This protection will become doubly important if plaintiff's attorneys appear on the scene representing or seeking to represent victims or their families.

2. **Politicians.** Local, state and national political figures may seek to make official visits to the campus and to speak at vigils, town hall meetings or memorial services. Some will genuinely want to help; some will simply want photo opportunities at a high-visibility location. Politicians cannot generally be denied access to open portions of a public campus, but access to college leaders and opportunities to address campus audiences are at the discretion of the college administration. Politicians with real ties to the college should be welcomed within the context of the grief-then-recovery-then-normalcy structure of post-event resolution. Those without such ties should not be allowed to take actions that will disrupt the resolution process. Non-political celebrities seeking to thrust themselves into the grief and recovery process should be treated similarly – accept low-profile gestures of respect and sympathy from those with legitimate ties to the college, and discourage all others.

3. **Neighbors.** The city, town or surrounding neighborhood of the campus will feel deeply involved in the event, and will likely want to help, either through official, local-government channels or through spontaneous gestures, either from individuals, from churches or other organizations. People may appear unannounced on campus and ask how they can help. The college official handling relations with the local community must reach out to local government officials and be constantly available to local organizations and individuals, to coordinate and channel their efforts and to express appreciation.

4. **Social Networks.** Colleges today are image factories. Pictures of the event, its scene, its victims, its aftermath, and subsequent activities will all appear instantly on YouTube and other social networking sites. Students use Facebook (and to a lesser extent MySpace) to communicate with one another; students on other campuses, especially those that have had their own tragedies, will reach out randomly to students where the event has taken place. This is normal student behavior, and may contribute to the recovery process. It will be useful, but not urgent to sample these social networks to get a feeling for the sentiments that are being expressed.

These notes were prepared by James MacGregor and Rhonda Barnat of The Abernathy MacGregor Group in February 2008.