

# Richmond Times-Dispatch

## Parents and Students Should Question Colleges

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FAIRFAX-- If you have a son or daughter heading off to college this fall or are making campus visits with a high school student, you probably have a long checklist of questions for school officials. You want to know about academic standards, class availability, tuition, room and board, and perhaps even sports and social activities.

This year you need to add a question -- how would the school deal with its own version of the Virginia Tech shootings?

The sad reality is that many colleges and universities are not prepared to handle that type of emergency. Campus security ranges from sophisticated university police departments that rival those of a good-sized city, to unarmed contract security guards and the expectation that local police will be on hand to help if needed.

Part of the problem is the constant tug-of-war for available funding, with security and emergency-planning sometimes losing out to other priorities. Part of the problem is that campus security is busy with everyday issues such as alcohol abuse, theft, and other petty crimes. But college communities need to get past the idea that really bad things won't happen on their nice campus.

In today's world, nobody is immune, and everybody must be prepared. In the coming weeks we are going to be hearing a lot about campus security.

Several campus security bills are pending in Congress. Some states have their own proposals. And the state commission on the Virginia Tech shootings will be issuing its report.

These are all good steps, but the bottom line is parents and students still must insist that they know how their campus would deal with an emergency.

COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITY officials need to be able to meet National Incident Management Standards, which provide a consistent nationwide template to enable all government, private-sector, and nongovernmental organizations to work together during domestic incidents.

In emergency planning, the law enforcement community constantly looks at how to do four things: prevent, respond, mitigate, and recover. Parents should be asking campus administrators about the same four issues. And don't be afraid to make explicit requests, because many schools do not volunteer information about crime, security, and emergency risks and plans for fear of scaring students or parents away.

Start with a simple question: "What systems do you have in place to protect my child in the event of an emergency such as the Virginia Tech shooting?"

It's important to insist on a detailed answer. Shortly after the Virginia Tech shootings, the American Council on Education published a list of questions school leaders should ask themselves. Parents and students should expect answers to the same questions:

- HAS THE SCHOOL done a full assessment of potential catastrophic risks, and does it have plans in place to address those risks?
- Does the school have an appropriate emergency team in place? Do team members regularly participate in emergency preparedness exercises?
- Does the school have multiple means to communicate with students, faculty, staff, and visitors in the event of an immediate, ongoing emergency situation? Do plans exist to direct people to a safe location?
- What communication and coordination networks exist among campus security leadership, local law enforcement, political officials, first responders, and health officials, both on an ongoing basis and in case of emergency? Is there a specific integrated emergency response plan? Do all the agencies who might be involved in an emergency run drills on campus to prepare?
- Is the training of campus security personnel appropriate to potential risks?

If you're sending your child off to college this year, do your homework. Make sure that if something bad does happen, the incident and the students get the attention they deserve.

You can always hope the campus will never need to use its emergency plan -- but you want the plan to work if it is needed.

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