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Tragedy Forces Local Schools To Review Policies

By: Bradley Vasoli, The Bulletin

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Philadelphia - Shockwaves from the worst shooting spree in U.S. history are being felt on campuses far from Virginia Tech University, especially in the Philadelphia region. As a result of Monday's shootings at the school in Blacksburg, Va. that killed 33 students, including the shooter, and wounded dozens of others, several colleges and universities in the Philadelphia area are now reviewing their security policies and procedures. Many college officials and law enforcement professionals stress the need for better communication. Gene Dooley, Chief of Police in East Whiteland Township, Chester County and former Director of Security at Rutgers University-Camden noted that surveillance of outsiders is a high priority for many campuses, but surveillance, alone, would not have stopped the massacre last Monday, because the killer was himself a student. Dooley pointed to Rutgers' efforts to take into account students' reports of disturbing behavior among their peers as one method of preventing security threats that originate on campus.

"When they thought something was extraordinary, they would let us know," Dooley said. "When we thought something was extraordinary, we would let them know." Such reciprocal feedback created "an island of safety in a very dangerous environment," he said. Drexel University, one such institution hoping to improve communications during emergencies, is currently in a heightened state of alert as a result of the Virginia Tech incident, according to Senior Associate Vice President of Public Safety Bernard Gollotti. All of Drexel's security policies are undergoing comprehensive reviews.

Security mechanisms already abound on Drexel's three campuses, with 300 security cameras and 100 emergency call boxes, as well as security officers who patrol on foot, on bikes and in cars. The university also utilizes a system created by a company named Drakontas that allows officers at the scene of an incident to communicate with the dispatch center through a handheld device. Gollotti noted that while large-scale violent crimes on campus have not recently been reported at Drexel, assaults on students off campus have concerned his office.

St. Joseph's University has, for several months, been enhancing its own security mechanisms, increasing bike and foot patrols and installing more emergency phones. University officials are

also working toward a system of emergency text messaging to students' cell phones. A recent armed robbery at St. Joseph's food service office by a part-time employee has been one impetus for the increased scrutiny of the university's security system. Harriet Goodheart, Assistant Vice President for University Communications at Saint Joseph's, feels that the Virginia Tech murders will serve as another alarming wake-up call. "The monstrous proportions of it just give you pause," she said.

Many urban universities rely heavily on large university police forces, made up of sworn-in officers with arrest powers who patrol the campus and the surrounding areas. The University of Pennsylvania and Temple University are two such examples. Penn retains a police force of 116 sworn-in officers and Temple a force of at least 129 sworn-in officers, according to their respective public safety departments. Both universities' security policies have been under continuous review.

"I feel very good about our state of security," says Temple's Executive Director of Campus Safety Services Carl Bittenbender. He noted that Temple's security budget exceeds \$12 million per year.

Universities like Temple, Penn and Drexel have a "tremendous presence on the streets," said Upper Darby Police Superintendent Michael J. Chitwood, who spent over 20 years as a detective in Philadelphia, and after that as the police chief of Portland, Maine. Chitwood began his career on a "foot beat" at Penn in 1964 when campus security was much more skeletal. He said the security policies have vastly improved on Philadelphia's various campuses since then. "Visibility is what people want," Chitwood explained.

Virginia Tech's response to the shootings has provoked questions and criticism from students, parents, security experts and the media. Many consider the university's response as too sluggish and unfocused. Local police and university officials were somewhat measured in their criticism. Joseph Daly is the chief of police in Lower Merion Township; his jurisdiction covers Bryn Mawr College, Rosemont College, Harcum College and part of St. Joseph's University. Daly noted that the size of the Virginia Tech campus made the school's response particularly difficult to coordinate. "The fact is 2,600 acres is a big place," he said. "I don't know if anyone is actually prepared for something of this magnitude."

Lori Bauer, Director of University Relations at Arcadia University, also suggested campus size as a major factor in managing threats of violence. With only 3,600 students, both graduate and undergraduate, Arcadia's unimposing size and sense of community are helpful in keeping students safe - and making them feel safe, as well, Bauer said. "Generally we're a very secure campus."

In one of the more creative designed to improve campus security communications in the area, Rosemont College will ring the bells of its Immaculate Conception Chapel to signify the Rosemont community of any potential on-campus threat.

"The news of yesterday's tragedy at Virginia Tech has had an impact on the entire nation," Rosemont President Sharon Latchaw Hirsh wrote in a letter to students, faculty and staff. "I

know I speak for all of you, when I say that the Rosemont College Community joins with thousands of colleges and universities in deep sympathy for the staff, faculty, students, alumni, parents, and friends of Virginia Tech."

Chief Daly believes that most area colleges have managed security matters competently and are likely to continue to make constructive improvements. "I think they're serious about their business," he said. "After this incident, every college in the country is going to take a very hard look at security."

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