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Shootings at Virginia Tech alter security at many campuses

April 16, 2007, a day to remember

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Today marks the two-year anniversary of the Virginia Tech campus shooting that killed 32 students and faculty and left several others injured.

The events of April 16, 2007, have altered the way campuses ensure safety and security of their students. It's not uncommon to hear security officials say, "Since the events of Virginia Tech ..." when describing advances in campus safety.

Officials at the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay, St. Norbert College and Northeast Wisconsin Technical College said they have taken a hard look at their campus safety measures since Virginia Tech, pushing for new initiatives to quiet any questions of "Could that happen here?"

Each campus deals with safety a bit differently.

UW-Green Bay, for example, has armed police officers on campus. St. Norbert and NWTC rely on private security and students to keep their campuses safe.

In the past year, the three campuses have developed a partnership to work together on crime and similar issues they all face.

"I think that's actually improving all three area colleges," said Jim Skorczewski, director of campus safety at St. Norbert College. "So that's really a good thing."

Tim McNulty's first day as the safety and security supervisor at NWTC was April 16, 2007.

"I pretty well knew what was going to hit us in the face that next morning after Virginia Tech," he said. "Between parents, students, media, we knew what was coming. We knew we needed to get a plan in place to make everybody feel at ease."

The college has installed security cameras at each of its sites, including Sturgeon Bay and Marinette, implemented electronic door access that requires key cards and added distress buttons around campus where students can get help.

McNulty said security officials promote reporting from students; if anything suspicious is seen, they urge students to tell the security department.

NWTC does not have sworn officers on duty, instead relying on 11 student security officers, who are required to be criminal justice or corrections students.

"It really has turned out to be a good thing, because these students know the students because they go to class with them and they see them in the cafeteria and they see them in the hallways," he said. "A lot of students are really our ambassadors for security."

The college — which has more than 37,000 students enrolled districtwide, 6,400 of them full time — also has emergency phones in each parking lot where students can contact the local police department or a safety information line.

No alcohol allowed

NWTC doesn't allow any alcohol on its property and does not face some of the issues experienced at St. Norbert or UW-Green Bay, where students live on campus. The community college's criminal activity typically includes theft, minor vehicle accidents or student arguments, McNulty said.

"We're pretty lucky," he said. "We have a great student body."

That doesn't mean it's as secure as McNulty would like, but he says no campus really is.

"If there was a pot of gold we could go into, I'd love to increase security even more," he said. "Not to the point where students feel like they're in an armed institution, but I like the idea that I don't like to be seen, but I want them to know we're here."

The community college hopes to implement by mid-May a system that would send more efficient electronic information to local police in case of emergency, McNulty said. That way, if a student calls 911, police will know their exact location on campus.

Since Virginia Tech, in which students didn't hear about the shootings until several hours later, efforts to alert campuses for emergency situations have come to the forefront as technology improves. The campus hopes to implement in June 2010 a mass notification system that could alert students of school closings or tornado warnings by e-mail or text message, McNulty said.

The private campus

In the last year at St. Norbert College, the professional staff of security officers has gone from two to five, and the relationship between St. Norbert and the De Pere Police Department has improved through monthly meetings.

"This all comes back to Virginia Tech, if there's an event on campus that you need to notify people about, how do you do that?" Skorczewski said. "The college made the decision to use this thing called Connect-Ed and what it does is, we can go on a computer or by phone and get a message out to perhaps avoid an area, lock down the campus, whatever the events may be."

The campus of about 2,200 students then can receive those messages within about 15 minutes of the notification being sent out.

The college also has behavioral intervention teams in place, an effort it's been working on for about a year, Skorczewski said.

Similar to NWTC and UW-Green Bay, this initiative puts an emphasis on students reporting criminal activity or suspicious behavior around campus. After the Virginia Tech shooting, a number of students came forward stating they noticed unusual behavior from the gunman.

"There was no central place for all that information to come," he said. "So now, we're trying to collect that data and information ahead of time and be proactive with issues."

Students can anonymously report issues through a Web form sent to the safety office.

On-campus housing can mean underage drinking and sexual assault, but it's not as frequent as other larger college campuses, he said.

"Alcohol is the drug of choice; there are still issues," Skorczewski said. "But it's not overwhelming and perhaps not even to the level that people think it might be."

At UW-Green Bay, alcohol violations have ranged from 72 incidents in 2005 to 168 in 2007. St. Norbert had 181 referrals for liquor law violations in 2005 and 179 in 2007.

Ashley Treml, a junior at St. Norbert, said she's always felt very safe on campus.

"It's a small city, and people are very friendly, and it's a small campus," she said. "Safety's never really been an issue, for me at least."

The public campus

An e-mail sent to students and faculty at UW-Green Bay earlier this week served as a reminder of the two-year anniversary of the Virginia Tech shooting and offered tips on how students can report suspicious behavior.

With a student population of about 6,100, it's essential students help report criminal activity or behavioral concerns to campus police, said Randy Christopherson, UWGB director of public safety and chief of police.

"The key is working relationships," he said, "and getting people to share information."

The events of Virginia Tech, and other school shootings since, led most campus security officials to check their safety policies and look for places that need updates or improvements, he said, adding that UW-Green Bay was about where it needed to be.

24-hour patrols

UW-Green Bay employs sworn officers who have the power to arrest. University police and security officers patrol facilities and campus grounds 24 hours a day.

In addition, campus police educate students and employees on security procedures and how to protect themselves. Crime prevention and personal safety programs are available to students throughout the year. A Web site devoted solely to campus emergencies has been around for about a year.

Emergency phones, marked by bright blue lights, are placed throughout campus to connect students directly to university police.

While the campus doesn't see many criminal cases, there are incidents of sexual assault every year, Christopherson said. Officials have made an effort to increase reporting of these crimes and educate students.

Underage drinking is another issue on campus, but one that has declined in the last year or so, Christopherson said.

"Our policy is, with first-offense underage drinking, we don't want to bog down the court system," he said, adding prevention efforts and more aggressive programming have brought those numbers down a bit.

UW-Green Bay's emergency notification system has been operating since 2002, alerting students through university e-mail, on-campus computers and a public address system in all academic buildings. A text message system should be operational by the end of the semester.

Damien L'Huillier, a senior, said the campus security does a good job of letting students know how to be safe, as well.

"We have good advice from the safety department," he said. "At the beginning of my semester, they came in my class and just told us not to go alone at night outside, for example."

Stephanie Suchecki, a sophomore at UW-Green Bay, said she feels moderately safe on campus, however, she believes it's up to the students to make sure they're as safe as possible.

"It's more about acting your age, because we're adults here so we should be conscientious of where we're going, what we're doing," she said. "And making sure we have a cell phone with us or a buddy with us if we're going out late at night."
