

# The Path to Stronger and More Secure Campuses

By Joseph I. Castro

The dramatic increase in random violence on university campuses and the possibility that it *could* happen at any time on my campus have been foremost among my concerns as university president for two years at California State University, Fresno.

The possible became all too real Nov. 2, 2015, when a student used a social media site to threaten violence with an automatic weapon. Although he quickly deleted the post, another student took a screenshot and shared it. Within minutes, the threat and screenshot went viral.

Campus police officers moved rapidly to identify and arrest the suspect—with valuable assistance from the social media site—within two hours and without the threat being carried out. But for students (and their families), faculty and staff, the two-hour period felt like an eternity, causing fear and panic.

Just two days later, a student at the University of California, Merced—just 68 miles away—stabbed four people and was killed by campus police. The two incidents created compelling evidence to Central Californians of the reality of campus danger.

The threat on my campus served as a learning opportunity for senior leadership, and reflection prompts me to suggest that other university presidents reconsider assumptions about crisis response communications. Social media has changed the way campus and community members receive messages and their expectations for timely communications. Our stakeholders demand we respond accordingly during emergencies.

While each incident of random violence is unique, the lessons we learned may be instructive to higher education leaders across the nation and beyond.

## ■ **Communicate clearly, immediately and often.**

There will be temptation to take time to get your first communication “just right,” but every minute that passes without clear information exponentially increases stress for students, faculty and staff—and it leaves a vacuum for others to fill with rumors or incomplete information. Start with a simple message as soon as possible explaining what you know, what you are doing about it, and what you want

your community to do (e.g. shelter in place, lock their doors or leave immediately). Whatever your campus administrative reporting structure, those who have the ability to manage crisis most directly—such as campus security, student-service professionals and communications staff—must have direct access the president’s office.

- **Emergency alert systems and social media are essential.** Our Bulldog Alert text message system worked well. We encourage everyone on campus to join it. Social media sites like Twitter, Instagram and Facebook are staples in sharing information quickly. Email messages are important but less effective in a crisis situation.
- **Symbolism matters.** The threat to Fresno State included a picture of our library—which caused significant distress among students and staff studying and working there—but we concluded early in the investigation that the library was likely not a unique target. A police presence at the building would have dramatically lowered the stress level of those inside. I also suggest increased visibility of police officers and vehicles around campus immediately after incidents to provide reassurance of safety.
- **Learn from the experience.** Research indicates that many universities and colleges do not effectively debrief from a crisis and therefore minimize learning opportunities. Conduct a comprehensive high-level debrief and hold a campus open forum. Expect some critical feedback, but know your institution will emerge much stronger.
- **Safety and security are everyone’s responsibility.** While we have a well-trained police department, the path to a stronger, more secure campus resides in the immense *power* of our 26,000+ students, faculty and staff who—as occurred in this threat—observe and report any strange behaviors.

No campus is immune to random violence. My take-away from our close call is that all university presidents would do well to embrace change, prepare with colleagues for the worst, pray for the best, and tap into the great instincts of your community. **P**

---

Joseph I. Castro is president of California State University, Fresno.