

**Letter from the President:
Applied Anthropologists and School Shootings:
What Can We Do?**

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One week ago, on April 16, 2007, Virginia Tech senior Cho Seung-hui killed 32 other students and faculty before turning one of his guns on himself. It was the latest and deadliest of the school shootings that have now become part of the American landscape, and the first in many years to take place on a college campus. For those of us in higher education, it reminded us that violent rampages directed against classmates and school authorities are not limited to angst-ridden teenagers. It also pointed out that despite what we have learned about these killers, their motives, and their psychological makeup in the years since the 1999 Columbine High School shootings in Colorado, we as a nation are woefully unprepared when it comes to predicting or stopping such attacks.

On my own campus at the University of Southern Maine (USM) there are no physical means to deter students from entering buildings and classrooms with weapons. Students can enter campus on foot or by car from various directions and park as close as ten feet to major classroom buildings and dormitories. There are no parking booths or attendants, and very little campus security presence of any kind at most hours. This is due in part to a general hiring freeze at our university that has left our public-safety office, as well as our academic departments, understaffed.

There is also no way for faculty or others to quickly respond to protect the safety of students or others. Classroom doors cannot be locked from the inside. There is no system for communicating from within classrooms or hallways in the event of an emergency. And there is no widespread training of faculty, staff or others in self-defense or in defusing volatile situations. It is abundantly clear from past experience that campus security and local police cannot respond quickly enough to prevent or even minimize the

large-scale killing of students by a well-prepared assailant, yet virtually nothing is done to train or equip those of us who would be first in his or her line of fire.

As in every other place where a school shooting has occurred, there is a general attitude on my campus of "It can't happen here." A university administrator implied this message in a recent e-mail, explaining that we have a USM *crisis-response team* for just such emergencies. In addition to the many bogus bomb threats over the past year, I have witnessed three incidents that truly could have led to harm on our campus: two classroom chemical leaks and a major gas-line rupture next to the campus. In all three cases, the response of campus security personnel and staff including faculty was, to put it kindly, insufficient. In one case, the instructor responsible for a leak of gaseous sulfuric acid continued to downplay the incident even as students were choking and gagging in the hallway. In another, a natural-gas leak that I could smell from nearly a mile away as I drove in did not precipitate the evacuation of classroom buildings.

In the case of the bomb threats on campus, of which there have now been about a dozen in as many months, the administration has decided to no longer evacuate buildings, but to do a cursory inspection instead. This decision was ostensibly taken to reduce the number of bomb threats by taking away the thrill that the caller(s) gained by disrupting campus activities. While the number of threats has apparently decreased, although they have not stopped, what happens if a future threat is, in fact, attached to a real bomb? Administrators have weighed the risks, and apparently decided with little direct input from faculty or students that public safety is less important than maintaining classes and meetings. Yet, we now know that Virginia Tech was similarly threatened in recent weeks, and that these threats may have

come from Cho Seung-hui.

As with the hours before the Virginia Tech massacre, public information for faculty, staff, and students is also lacking. I just visited our university's public-safety webpage, and the most recent announcement of a security risk to the campus was dated January 24, 2007. It is about a man convicted of indecent exposure who recently moved to town. Posters with pictures of this man have been posted on campus buildings for the past two months. There is nothing about school shootings, bomb threats, or anything else that might remind us of the very real threats we face every day, or how to identify, manage or prevent them.

In short, we here at USM, as no doubt at campuses across America, are woefully unprepared for future school shootings, despite the overwhelming probability that they will occur. Why am I bringing this up here? Because applied anthropologists may be among those who can contribute to more secure schools, more balanced approaches, and more effective responses to the growing risk of school and workplace violence. We are trained as observers of people and as practical problem-solvers, and this situation requires both.

For one thing, we can provide ethnographic data and analysis that administrators, security officials and others need. We may not be criminal profilers, but we do know about things like peer pressure and social networks, and why the roommates and friends of would-be shooters do not report them. We know that there are dangers to labeling people as *mentally ill* or *loners*, and that such terms can serve to further ostracize those already struggling with marginalization.

We know that some of those who see themselves as social outcasts eventually strike out against those they see as more powerful. And we also understand that knee-jerk reactions like calling for more students to have guns for their own self-protection is probably not the answer.

As applied anthropologists we can study and write about these issues, but we should also engage in them at the local level. If your university, or your company if you are in the corporate world, has a committee or task force charged with increasing campus or building security, join it. Offer your skills as a researcher and problem-solver. Offer whatever literature and perspectives our field has to offer on the subject. Conduct research on campus to get the views of your colleagues, students, and others. Suggest whatever policies you feel are needed, from increasing classroom security to improving interventions for troubled students. Bring the balanced and holistic perspective that this complex, emotionally-charged problem desperately needs. Finally, do whatever you feel you need to do to be personally prepared, should the day ever come.

Notes

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