

Centralia College Seeks Balance of Safety and Freedom for Higher Ed

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Centralia College

Steve Ward sees a lot of similarities between Umpqua Community College in Roseburg, Oregon, and Centralia College, where he serves as a vice president for finance and administration.

He finds the shootings that happened at Umpqua, coupled with threats of violence and the lockdown and evacuation at Centralia High School on Friday, particularly disturbing.

After learning of the threats made to Centralia High, Centralia College did not go into lockdown. Rather, administrators sent messages to students and faculty via email and a mobile phone warning service called e2Campus.

"We picked up our vigilance. It interrupted an entire day for us. ... I know we would like to be able to continue business on a consistent day-to-day fashion, but whoever happens to be on campus needs to be able to respond," Ward said.

College President Robert Frost was off campus on Friday. On Thursday, he told Live 95 and KITI the Roseburg incident hit particularly close to home in more ways than one.

"We're heartbroken over the incident. I have former graduate students and colleagues that worked at Umpqua," he told the radio station. "So we're just extremely tense and nervous right now, worried about our friends. Community colleges are one big family, and these are our own."

The challenge for higher education institutions is balancing an open-door and open-mind philosophy with ensuring the safety of everyone on campus. Schools can do their best to monitor students for warnings signs of violent behavior, but Ward said there's only so much administrators can do without turning schools into something out of a dystopian novel.

“Can you imagine the impact that would have on a college campus? That all of the students’ movement is tracked, big brother watching over you and having police and police dogs walking around?” he asked. “The problem is bigger than the universities and colleges, the problem is societal. ... All we can do as educational institutions is react.”

The similarities between Umpqua and Centralia College are many. The schools have about the same number of students (between 3,000 and 4,000) and operate in communities of about 20,000 people along the Interstate 5 corridor. Both schools have had few violent incidents occur on campus.

Under the Clery Act, all universities and colleges are required to report incidents of violent crimes to the federal government. Centralia College reported less than 10 incidents of burglaries or assaults from 2012 to 2014, and the majority of those happened in non-campus buildings or property. Umpqua’s campus was similarly peaceful.

As gun violence continues to plague American schools, Ward said he believes professors will have to be trained as emergency first responders as well as educators. Centralia College staff has had training with the Centralia Police Department on how to handle an active shooter on campus.

The lesson given by law enforcement is to run from the shooter, fight if you have to, and hide as a last resort. Student bodies in college settings don’t get the same kind of lockdown training as K-12 students. However, Ward thinks there will have to be some kind of training given to incoming students.

He cited a recent report originally published by The Washington Post that 294 mass shootings — which the paper defined as incidents where four or more people in the United States died from gunfire — have happened in the 274 days of 2015.

“That’s why I’m telling you it looks like our profession is going to require training for these scenarios,” he said.

Unlike many high schools, the college doesn’t have a police officer on campus. It does have security, but they only patrol the grounds after hours.

Several students on campus interviewed by The Chronicle said they had heard about what happened at Umpqua. But all interviewed said they still felt safe on campus.

“Personally, I don’t feel worried,” said 17-year-old Emily Wills. “It feels like there’s nothing to be done to prevent them. These things are happening more and more, we can just hope and pray it doesn’t.”

Another student, Israel, who only wanted to use his first name, echoed her sentiments.

"You can't be paranoid about everything, but it is something of great concern, definitely," he said.