College Campuses Are No Longer Ivory Towers

A review of

ending Campus Violence: New Approaches to Prevention

by Brian Van Brunt


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Reviewed by

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A violent multiple shooting takes place almost monthly in the United States. Despite this frequency, we continue to be shocked by events such as the shooting of Congresswoman Gabby Giffords or the recent rampage at an Aurora, Colorado, movie theater. Too many of these violent gun attacks occur on college campuses. Not everyone remembers the University Tower shootings at the University of Texas in 1966, when one assailant killed 16 people and wounded 32 others, but the Virginia Polytechnic Institute shootings that resulted in 32 killed in 2007 and the Northern Illinois University shootings that left five people dead in 2008 are fresh in almost everyone’s mind.

These horrendous events on college campuses make it clear that college campuses are no longer ivory towers, that is, safe havens from the vicissitudes of life outside the confines of the campus. Enough violence has taken place on college campuses that college administrators and staff are compelled to establish programs designed to prevent violence and to cope with an event if it occurs.
Ending Campus Violence: New Approaches to Prevention is intended to assist student affairs professionals, including college counselors, psychologists, social workers, and campus administrators, in managing aggression and violence on their campuses. The author, Brian Van Brunt, director of counseling at Western Kentucky University and former president of the American College Counseling Association, bases his approach to preventing campus violence on his professional experience, as well as on the extensive research he has conducted on homicide violence on college campuses.

The book contains extensive lists of risk factors identified in the research literature, a discussion of how to identify aggression and violence, and descriptions of 96 cases of school and campus homicide attacks dating from a 1764 Indian attack on a schoolhouse in Pennsylvania to a 2011 threat at a Des Moines, Iowa, community college. Appendices include risk assessment guidelines, sample threat assessment items, descriptions of mandated educational programs for at-risk students, and a sample consent form to use when asking a student to engage in counseling.

Three major themes are stressed throughout the book: (a) Each violent event that occurs on a college campus is unique; there is no one template that fits all, and therefore prevention strategies require responses specific to that situation; (b) each threat is best viewed and responded to from multiple perspectives; and (c) a team approach is the best organizational strategy to prepare for and prevent campus violence.

Team Approach to Preventing Campus Violence

Van Brunt suggests establishing three teams: a threat assessment team (TAT), a behavioral intervention team (BIT), and a risk assessment team (RAT). He recommends that the teams include a balance of staff and faculty, with representatives from student affairs, law enforcement, and counseling directors who serve as the core and others who represent residential life staff, academic administrators, student activities staff, athletics, human resources, and legal counsel.

According to the author, team leaders need to have the authority to compel students to complete psychological and threat assessments, to address academic issues, and to remove a student from the university. Though the combined acronym of TAT/BIT/RAT is referred to throughout the book, the role, responsibilities, and possible courses of action of the TAT team are detailed to a greater extent than are those of the BIT and RAT teams. Van Brunt also describes specific psychological instruments and interviewing strategies for what he calls “mandated psychological assessment of violence” (p. 69).
Case Studies for Analysis

The book is replete with case studies, descriptions of threat situations, and brief histories of incidences of campus violence. All examples could be used for discussion in formal classes or in workshops for campus team members. Ten detailed case studies—scenarios of potential threats ranging from the behavior of a scorned woman, a stressed-out war veteran, to students talking about violence in a classroom setting—illustrate the usefulness and the necessity of multiple perspectives. Each case study portrays a potential threat scenario theme that Van Brunt observed in the course of his research.

Nine experts comment in detail on each scenario. They represent the perspectives of a rampage school-shooting expert, a counselor, a faculty member, a forensic risk expert, a student conduct staff member, a student affairs administrator, a law enforcement member, a behavioral analyst, and a lawyer. These experts are highly qualified. The behavioral analyst, for example, is Mary Ellen O’Toole, who is a Federal Bureau of Investigation expert in criminal, violent, and aberrant behavior. The other experts also have substantial credentials in their related fields. The in-depth commentary of these experts will be highly stimulating and provocative for readers, who may be members of teams on their own campuses. Unfortunately, there is no case summary that suggests a specific course of action at the end of each case study, but each is followed with discussion questions appropriate for a class or for a group of team members.

Van Brunt does an excellent job of presenting a structure for a team approach to preventing students’ behavior from crossing the line and resulting in violence. But just how “new” are Van Brunt’s suggested strategies? Numerous books and government publications on campus violence also list and analyze risk assessment strategies, and many suggest a team approach. However, the detailed analysis of the case studies in Van Brunt’s book makes it an excellent text for courses in campus administration for academic or student affairs administrators, for psychologists preparing to counsel students on campus, and for students in law enforcement and law programs. Considering its emphasis on campus homicides, the book is comprehensive and up to date.

Two Important Topics That Are Omitted

Other Forms of Campus Violence

Two important topics are slighted, however, and information on these topics must be sought from other sources. Violence on campus is not limited to shootings. Most books published in recent decades that focus on campus violence include a much broader definition of campus
violence. Two decades ago, Roark (1993) included a broad range of violent activities in her definition of campus violence; these included rape and relationship abuse. Siegel (1994) presented examples of how campuses responded to violent tragedies that included rape, murder, suicide, and even a hurricane. Nicoletti, Spencer-Thomas, and Bollinger (2001) used the concept of a virus as a metaphor for violence on campus as an organizational theme and present case studies illustrating how the virus metaphor can be used to examine hazing, hate crimes, rioting, and sexual assault. Paludi (2008) also examined campus violence from a broader perspective than homicide or gun violence by discussing bullying, harassment, and stalking.

Cyberbullying is another form of violence that is increasing in campus settings as well as in schools (Fox & Burstein, 2010). Plans for dealing with cyberbullying need to be considered in any prevention plan. Li, Cross, and Smith (2012) describe cyberbullying from a global perspective and discuss policy, environmental, and education strategies for containing and preventing cyberbullying (see PsycCRITIQUES review of this book by Burnes, 2012).

Coping With the Aftermath of Campus Violence

Another aspect of campus violence neglected or given short shrift by Van Brunt is dealing with the aftermath of campus violence and the need to focus on how the campus community is affected. How does such a crisis affect students, staff, administrators, and family members? Two decades ago, Stone (1993), who at the time was the director of the University of Iowa’s counseling center, chronicled how the campus staff handled the psychological challenges after shootings on that campus.

Like Van Brunt, Hemphill and LaBlanc (2010) also used a student affairs framework to look at campus crises caused by a campus shooting. Using well-known violent campus homicides as a historical base, the authors discussed prevention from a mental health perspective, giving particular attention to how student affairs staff can help campus members cope with a campus crisis and how to heal the campus after the trauma.

Resource for Classes and Workshops

Thus, Van Brunt’s book is not the only resource available on campus violence, though it is a highly researched one. It has the advantage of being authored by one individual rather than being an edited volume, which can be fragmented and repetitive. The detailed analyses by the nine experts of the case studies are an invaluable resource for academic classes or workshops. But those needing resources for classes or workshops should also consider
supplemental readings such as those referenced in this review and seek out government reports that go beyond campus homicides to consider other forms of violence such as sexual violence, bullying (including cyberbullying), and hazing. Such readers will also want to add publications that describe coping strategies that suggest strategies to help heal the campus from these and other campus tragedies.

Yes, college campuses are no longer ivory towers, isolated from the realities that challenge society as a whole. In many ways, today’s college campuses are mirrors of society rather than havens from society. *Ending Campus Violence* can be a valuable resource, among others, for college staff who seek to prevent campus violence and to help their campuses heal when tragedies do occur.

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### References


