

Security on Campus: An Academic Matter?

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This is not a research report. It is not filled with statistics documented in studies published in refereed journals. It does not provide answers to the questions raised; nor does it adequately define the questions themselves. It is merely an open letter asking concerned advisors to consider an issue that may affect the overall quality of education many students receive on today's college campus.

One colleague recently referred to the issue as a "hidden agenda" in advising sessions, in the sense that many students will not bring up the subject but probably should discuss it openly with their advisors, particularly when scheduling courses or planning study activities. The issue in question involves the impact of one's sense of safety and security on his or her involvement in various activities held at different times in different locations on campus.

As in our larger society, the incidence of crime on college and university campuses is receiving considerable public attention. Many headline news items involve murder, rape, assault, battery, theft, burglary, home invasion, and other events that jeopardize our sense of security. In addition to those crimes that appear to involve random victims, incidents of passive aggression (e.g., graffiti, cartoons, or jokes), verbal abuse, or physical violence related to racism, antisemitism, and homophobia are of great concern to many within higher education. So are rape and other crimes that victimize women students.

Women students as a group will be used to illustrate the interaction of several issues throughout the remainder of this letter. However, I urge you not to lose sight of the possibility that very similar issues may adversely affect other subgroups of students or individual students.

It is impossible to decipher the extent to which increases in reports of some crimes (e.g., those related to violence against women) reflect real increases or result from greater public awareness and educational endeavors that encourage victims to report crimes. The actual risk or the probability that a given student will become a victim of a crime is, of course, related to many factors. However, I suspect that *actual*

risks may be secondary to *perceived* risks in influencing or determining behavior, particularly if it is true that what people perceive is what exists or what is "real" to them, regardless of whether or not their perceptions actually represent "truth."

By the time most women set foot on campus, they have been informed in orientation sessions, in written materials provided by the institution, by public media, by their parents, **and/or** by other students that it is not safe for them to walk alone at night. Many schools or student groups within schools have developed escort or transportation services specifically for women students who need to get from one place to another on campus after dark. The perception of danger may be increased by women's own experiences and their tendency to share accounts of real, rumored, or purely fictional incidents. Almost every woman knows or has heard of another woman who was threatened, grabbed, assaulted, molested, or raped on a sidewalk, in the basement of a residence hall, in one of the underground hallways that connect buildings, or in other darker, more remote, or simply less-traveled areas of campus. As a result of fear that they too could be victimized, many women tend to stay in more secure areas where others are present and generally venture out into less secure domains in pairs or small groups.

So why should faculty and academic advisors be concerned about this? Isn't security the responsibility of campus police or those in administrative or student affairs sectors? Yes, it is. But it may also be considered an issue for educators who are concerned about the relationship between security and the whole notion of "equal access to educational resources." Most colleges do not close when the sun sets, as early as 4:00 or 5:00 P.M. on the shortest days of winter. Many students do much of their studying after dark. Studying often involves small group projects, tutorial sessions, review sessions, and the use of a variety of academic resources (e.g., study hall or study carrel facilities, institutional libraries, and campus computer centers). But how can students benefit if they are afraid to go to wherever helpful services are located?

Consider a study wherein students present

were counted every hour by student monitors working at various computer sites at a large university. For many reasons associated with the well-known gender gap in computing, women represented only 31% of the total user-hours recorded. But more pertinent to the current discussion was the finding that the gender difference was not consistent over hours of the day and night. The ratios of men to women came closest to achieving equity during the day but increased substantially at night, when the numbers of women remained relatively constant or actually decreased slightly, while the numbers of men generally doubled at sites located within residence halls and tripled at sites students could only access by going outside after dark.

Somewhat intrigued by these findings, I discussed them at two professional conferences, and I learned that similar gender gaps have been observed at other institutions and in other locations on campus. For example, most librarians I spoke to agreed that the gender difference becomes noticeable after dark and that, the later it gets, the more men predominate as library patrons. Only one mentioned a study involving actual counts of men and women using a library system (composed of several libraries) at different times. Because this counting process only recently began and because these gender-related data are part of a larger study, the findings are not yet available for publication. However, this librarian expressed concern that staff in several libraries reported preliminary findings (based on counts taken over several weeks) showing an average of up to three times as many men as women using library facilities at various times of night.

I then discussed these observations and research findings in a class for graduate students in higher education. The men agreed that if they realized at 10:00 P.M. that they needed a particular book, they would not hesitate to grab their jackets and run over to the library to get it. The women said that if they could find someone who would go with them, they might consider going to the library after dark. Some said they would require the same "buddy system" even to go to a library located in the basement of their own residence hall. One lived in an apartment located within walking distance of the campus. She noted that she came to campus early in the morning and took care of all her business (e.g., banking, grocery shopping, attending classes, seeing her advisor, and going to the library) during daylight hours. She emphasized, "I am

back in my apartment safe and sound by the time the sun goes down, and I do ~~not~~ come out again."

Another woman student said that her husband, a faculty member, could not understand why almost all of the men but only some of the women in his classes came to the evening review sessions he offered before each exam. She explained that when she was an undergraduate she could not go to evening review sessions unless another student in the class lived in her residence hall and would go with her. At this student's suggestion, her husband began offering review sessions from two to four on Sunday afternoons and was pleasantly surprised to find that almost all of the women in his classes were present.

When selecting courses, do more women than men avoid classes that meet in the late afternoon or evening, those that require extensive use of the library, or those wherein the homework often requires the use of a campus computer center? I do not know, but given the anecdotal evidence provided by many women students, I suspect this may be the case. For example, one woman said she had dropped a course because the necessary computer center was reserved for classes during the day and provided open access as a study facility only at night and on weekends. I suspected that computer anxiety or perhaps other course characteristics might have influenced her decision, so when she expressed concerns about safety in getting to the computer center at night, I asked if she could meet the course requirements via weekend use of the computers. She responded, "not when the homework assignment is given on Tuesday and is due on Thursday."

Perhaps it is appropriate for academic staff to express concerns about energy-saving measures that involve the removal of light bulbs inside and outside of buildings on the college campus, about inadequate lighting or overgrown shrubbery along pathways leading from parking lots or adjoining areas to the front doors of academic buildings (including libraries and other study facilities), or about decisions to install new computers in remote basement areas where *computers* may be more secure, but *students* less secure. And perhaps, as we continue our efforts to provide more and better academic facilities and services, we should consider security issues that may influence which students truly have full access to these valuable educational resources.

I do not presume to have the answers to the many questions involving security on campus. But I doubt that we will derive solutions until we recognize that problems exist and acknowledge that they may indeed affect not only the personal lives but also the academic lives of our students. In conclusion, I would suggest that if security concerns prohibit or discourage any students from gaining access to any educational resource in any location at any time, then safety

and security on campus may indeed be considered an academic matter.

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