

SECURITY EXECUTIVES

Failing to learn the lessons of tragedies past

BY JOEL GRIFFIN ON OCT 2, 2015



A group of young women console each other during a vigil on Oct. 1, 2015 in Roseburg, Ore. after a shooter opened fire at the Umpqua Community College, killing several.

Photo credit: (Chris Pietsch/The Register-Guard/Zuma Press/TNS)

At least 10 people were killed and another seven were wounded last week in a shooting on the campus of Umpqua Community College located in southwestern Oregon. The gunman, identified as 26-year-old Chris Harper Mercer, was killed in a shootout with responding police officers. Mercer is [not believed to be connected to the college](#) as either a student or staff member at this time.

According to preliminary reports, the shooting appears to have taken place across multiple classrooms in separate buildings on the campus. It has also been widely reported that Mercer [specifically targeted Christians](#) during his rampage and at one point asked students to stand up and proclaim their faith.

While there are still many unknowns about the shooting and motivations of the gunman, school security expert Patrick Fiel, owner of PVF Security Consulting LLC, believes what is clear is that colleges, by and large, still have not learned their lessons from past massacres and some are still stuck in the mindset of "it can't happen here."

"The matter of the question is not if it's going to happen, it's going to happen, the question is when and where and are you prepared?" said Fiel, who formerly served as executive director of security for the Washington, D.C. Public School System.

Fiel said the issue of unlocked classroom doors continues to be an issue on campuses despite the fact that it has been revealed as one of primary vulnerabilities in some of the most horrific school shootings in U.S. history, including Virginia Tech and Sandy Hook.

"I'm a firm believer that while students are in their classrooms, that door should be locked," added Fiel. "That way if there is a shooting, the shooter is going to be running from door to door to door. They don't sit around and kick on doors, they are on a mission."

Although the question will arise of how to stop someone in a campus environment who has permitted access, Fiel said the fact remains that locking classroom doors would help minimize loss of life.

"Even if they guy got into the classroom as a student and just lost it and started shooting; that I could understand. But when you have free access and you go around and around shooting, there's a problem," said Fiel.

Paul Timm, president of Chicago-based school security consulting firm RETA Security, said that having robust mass notification systems in place can also help immensely in these types of situations.

"You want to have a really excellent mass notification plan and that means not just a canned service... but social media and Twitter, in particular, has become dominant in so many of these incidents in being able to reach people quickly," Timm said.

Joe Olson, the former president of Umpqua Community College, also told the [Associated Press](#) that the school only has one unarmed security officer on duty at a time. While he's not an advocate for armed private guards on campuses, Timm said that he is in favor of having a greater presence of law enforcement personnel at college but it's a move that could prove costly.

"The whole issue with that is expense. Even in K-12 you would like to have a uniformed police officer in every building, but the likelihood of that ever happening is slim," said Timm. "I think that it is more likely that it would happen in higher education and for sure if there is law enforcement presence I want them to be armed."

Despite the arguments for greater gun control measures and making mental health services more readily available which are already being espoused by pundits and lawmakers, Fiel believes the focus should be on helping colleges and universities to implement better security measures.

"Let's talk about security funding and assessments and technology for schools that can make a difference," Fiel added.

Fiel admitted that while schools certainly can't stop everything, he said that they can be better prepared to mitigate their risks.

"Parents need to get involved. They are the ones paying for these educations. And I think there needs to be legislation involved," said Fiel. "Right now, there is really no one going there to analyze exactly what happened to talk about it from a security professional's perspective of what we can do and lessons learned. There should be a team that goes out there to really give the opinion, not about incident itself, but give the opinion of how we can help the other college campuses and provide best practices."

While investigators are still looking into the shooter's background, several reports suggest that he [may have foreshadowed his acts online](#). Whether or not those reports pan out to be true, both Fiel and Timm believe that colleges should foster an environment of greater awareness on their campuses and encourage students and faculty members to relay anything they see on social media that could be construed as potentially threatening.

"If they had notified somebody, then someone could have intervened," said Fiel. "We want students to be involved; however, we don't want them involved after the fact."

"We do know that in many of these incidents, there is leakage before it occurs, so one of the questions would be what do we do to intervene or what mechanisms do we have in place for intervention?" said Timm.

Experts say that there also needs to be a greater emphasis placed on training and conducting drills in preparation for active shooter scenarios.

"We really need to be much better at having faculty and students take ownership of public safety. I don't mean walking around and patrolling, but I wonder if any of these people had ever been in an emergency drill. I wonder if there were noises about threats that had been made that could have been reported. None of those in themselves make the difference, but any of them help reduce the risk."

While many of these shootings tend to simply fade from memory over time, Timm believes that this incident will likely spur most colleges to take action.

"I think we will see changes in law enforcement in being more present on campuses. I think that colleges will try to train and drill more with faculty and students. I think that that is absolutely going to happen and anyone that is not doing that is making a huge mistake," added Timm. "And I think we will continue to see better access control measure in place. We've already begun that with dorms."

