Evaluating Campus Safety Messages at 99 Public Universities in 2010

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ABSTRACT

In 2009, the U.S. Department of Education published an Action Guide for Emergency Management at Institutions of Higher Education (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). In 2006, the Virginia State Crime Commission issued a prescient “Final Report: Study on Campus Safety (HJR 122)” regarding Virginia’s colleges and universities (Virginia State Crime Commission, 2006). Gray (2009) provided results from a “Columbine 10-Year Anniversary Survey”, which reviewed recent campus safety improvements of 435 K-12 and university respondents. From the three documents, prescribed campus safety activities were identified that could be consistently found in the stated programs and policies on university websites. Of these activities, 18 separate criteria upon which a university’s online emergency preparedness/safety/security messages could be evaluated through content analysis were conceptualized (coding: 1= school has criterion, 0= does not), to estimate the quality of the overall preparedness message of each institution in the small sample (n = 99) of universities, representing all 50 states in 2010.

Keywords: All-Hazards, Campus Safety, Campus Security, Mass Notification, Preparedness

INTRODUCTION

This academic arrived at Longwood University in Farmville, Virginia in 2008, in the Criminal Justice Studies program. The attention given within the Commonwealth of Virginia to campus safety and security issues, given the shootings at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University (Virginia Tech) in April 2007, quickly became palpable due to Longwood’s status as an institution in the same state educational system as Virginia Tech. Consequently, this research was the product of personal academic and professional curiosity, beginning with the salient question: are universities in the United States doing everything they should in preparation for their next emergency?

Quarantelli (1997) and Perry and Lindell (2003) recommended similar guidelines for a general disaster planning process, while Templeton et al. (2009) and Fields (2009) suggested steps for creating college campus emergency plans. These recommendations, when combined with recent National Incident Management System (NIMS) or Incident Command System (ICS) protocols fostered by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), suggested an emergency planning process and written plan for
a college campus that incorporates the following: data (e.g., threats, supplies, infrastructure); formal step-by-step procedures for each organizational sub-unit; relevant laws, regulations, and mandates; inter- and intra-organizational cooperation using both committees and a quasi-military chain-of-command for communication purposes; use of new technology; a focus on good decision-making in a politically charged environment during different scenarios based on past precedent; ongoing training and revision; and a willingness to be flexible and ignore past precedent. With all these potential variables, how is any leader at any college supposed to develop a single emergency plan, revamp the planning process, or know that she/he is doing everything possible to protect her/his campus? One possible solution is the same as it was decades ago: find the appropriate federal manual, state policy or program, or practitioner journal, and use the documents as templates for one’s own organizational planning and programmatic needs.

For example, in 2009, the U.S. Department of Education (ED) published an Action Guide for Emergency Management at Institutions of Higher Education. In 2006, the Virginia State Crime Commission (the Commission), at the request of the Commonwealth’s General Assembly two years earlier, issued a prescient “Final Report: Study on Campus Safety” regarding Virginia’s colleges and universities. Within the report was a list of twenty-seven “best practices” used by schools studied by the Commission. Gray (2009), in Campus Safety Magazine, provided results from a “Columbine 10-Year Anniversary Survey”, in which the publication evaluated the campus safety improvements of 435 K-12 and university respondents.

The premise behind this study’s research methods was to create a nationwide snapshot of college campus safety practices that could provide valid comparisons to this researcher’s institution. Therefore, the small sample (n=99) used in this study includes only publicly-funded, four-year universities or colleges. To create a national sample, and to allow for comparisons between large and relatively small schools (Longwood has a total enrollment of approximately 4800), each state’s “flagship” university and its smallest university (based upon undergraduate enrollment) are used in the sample.

Using the ED (2009) manual, the Commission’s (2006) report, and Gray’s (2009) survey, a list was created of prescribed campus safety/security/emergency preparedness activities that could (in this researcher’s estimation) possibly be found in the form of stated programs and policies on university websites in 2010. After a preliminary review of a handful of university web sites, using the list of prescribed safety activities as a guide, 18 distinct concepts were identified that commonly appeared in the form of online written safety/security/preparedness statements. Using the 18 concepts, or criteria (listed in Table 2), an index score was created to evaluate the overall stated emergency preparedness/safety/security messages of each institution in the sample in the summer of 2010.

GOVERNMENT EMERGENCY PLANS BY THE BOOK

In many ways, the public preparedness/response/management message in the United States, from post World War II to post-9/11, has not changed. Although U.S. federal entities are now prescribing an all-hazards approach to their emergency preparedness activities, this multi-threat approach/paradigm/model is not new, particularly when one looks at examples of the preparatory recommendations in federal manuals and other publications from the 1950s to present. Despite constants that exist in preparedness messages to the U.S. public over time (e.g., have a medical kit and appropriate shelter), emergency manuals and plans do evolve over time. They are re-written depending upon the known possible cataclysmic dangers posed from internal sources within territorial borders and from external or foreign sources, and depending upon lessons learned from ongoing evaluations of written statutes, policies, and procedures when plans are put into practice.

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Improving Agent-Based Simulation of Major Incident Response in the United Kingdom through Conceptual and Operational Validation