

Colleges and Guns: What Should Higher Education Leaders Do?

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About the Author

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“No student shall, within the precincts of the University... keep or use weapons or arms of any kind...”

This campus gun ban was passed on October 4, 1824, by the board of visitors of the University of Virginia. The six board members included two of the most famous names associated with American civil liberties: Thomas Jefferson and James Madison.

Last May, when Georgia’s Governor Nathan Deal vetoed a “campus carry” bill that would have authorized the carrying of concealed weapons on the state’s public college campuses, he cited as a “great historical precedent” for his decision that two of the principal authors of the Declaration of Independence and the United States Constitution saw no conflict between a campus gun ban and the Second Amendment.

To drive his point home, Deal, a Republican, also quoted the late Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia, who, in his 2008 opinion in *District of Columbia v. Heller*, stated that “like most rights, the right secured by the Second Amendment is not unlimited,” adding that the Heller decision

should not cast doubt on the constitutionality of “laws forbidding the carrying of firearms in sensitive places such as schools and government buildings.”

We have witnessed a long list of deadly shootings in such “sensitive places” in recent years, including mass shootings at Virginia Tech (2007), Sandy Hook Elementary School (Connecticut, 2012), and Umpqua Community College (Oregon, 2015). During the 2015-2016 academic year alone, eight shootings on U.S. college campuses claimed 28 lives.

But while everyone agrees on the need to make schools and campuses safer from gun violence, radically divergent approaches have emerged. After the Sandy Hook massacre of 20 first graders and six teachers, I joined nearly 400 college and university presidents in speaking out in favor of gun safety legislation. (See <http://collegepresidentsforgunsafety.org> for more information.) Our open letter to policymakers championed several widely supported gun safety measures and argued for keeping campuses and classrooms gun-free.

But others have called for a different response. Since the Sandy Hook massacre, movements to approve “campus carry” (also known as “concealed carry”) legislation have been launched in over a dozen

states. This year, Texas became the eighth state to pass a campus carry bill. The state's new law, which allows licensed gun owners to carry concealed weapons in public university buildings and classrooms, went into effect on August 1, 2016, 50 years to the day after Charles Whitman shot 49 people and killed 17 in a sniper-style attack from the tower of the University of Texas at Austin.

How should higher education leaders respond to our nation's fractious and polarized debate about guns? The Texas law's most vocal opponents included retired Navy Admiral William McRaven, Chancellor of the University of Texas System. McRaven, who served as commander of U.S. Special Operations Command (2011-14) and describes himself as a "big Second Amendment guy," argued that his experience as an educator had persuaded him that allowing concealed weapons will make campuses less safe. The state's private colleges and universities were given the right to opt out of the legislation, and only one of 38 adopted the new law. Faculty across the state passed resolutions against campus carry, and Nobel Laureate Steven Weinberg, a professor of physics at the University of Texas at Austin, announced he would ban guns from his classroom, even if he ends up in court for doing so.

One ray of hope appeared in a December 2015 *Washington Post* editorial co-authored by two former adversaries: Jay Dickey, former Republican Congressman from Arkansas, and Mark Rosenberg, president of the Task Force for Global Health.

In the late 1990s, Dickey championed a law that forbade the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention from using federal funds "to advocate or promote gun control." At the time, Rosenberg was director of the CDC's National Center for Injury Prevention and Control and was eventually fired because of his commitment to gun-violence prevention research.

Since then, Dickey and Rosenberg have evolved from fierce opponents to allies and friends. Today, they both believe that federal funding for research into gun-violence prevention should be dramatically increased. Citing the example of how scientific research helped reduce motor vehicle deaths and saved hundreds of thousands of lives—without getting rid of cars—they argue that gun-violence research can be designed to "preserve the rights of law-abiding citizens and gun owners" while also making us safer.

The public health toll of guns is undeniable. More than 32,000 people die in firearms incidents, and more than 67,000 are injured in the United States each year. Firearm injuries result in more than \$48 billion in medical and work loss costs annually. Young people are profoundly affected by firearm violence. In 2014, firearms were the instrument of death in 88 percent of teen homicides and 41 percent of teen suicides. And while non-firearm related injuries resulted in death in only 1 of 760 cases, almost one in four youth firearm injuries were fatal.

A public health approach can help us figure out ways to reduce gun-violence injuries and deaths while safeguarding gun-ownership rights. As higher education leaders, we should support such evidence-based solutions and join Dickey and Rosenberg in advocating more federal funding of gun-violence prevention research.

We can also create more opportunities for dialogue and debate about the Second Amendment, civil liberties, and public safety, and encourage our students to listen to voices on all sides of this distinctly American debate.

In the end, though, we must take a stand on "campus carry." Here, I side with Jefferson, Madison, and Admiral McRaven. As presidents and trustees, we have a fundamental obligation to protect the safety of

our campus communities and the culture of free inquiry in our classrooms. At a time when we are navigating complex issues and risks—from student activism to mental health concerns to sexual assault and alcohol abuse—let’s not add more guns to the mix. America can respect the rights of gun owners while keeping our classrooms and campuses gun-free.

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