

## The Impact of the Media on College Campuses

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The shootings at Virginia Tech have left those of us in the student affairs profession reviewing our campus safety policies and warning systems to help prevent such a tragic incident from ever occurring on our campus. Many of us have asked ourselves “What would I do?” The lessons from VT are many and valuable; one such lesson is the impact of the media on our campus culture.

### The Impact of the Media

Strange and Banning (2001) indicate in their environmental theory that the perception of a campus by those inside and outside of the campus community is a key part of how our students develop. In the case of the Virginia Tech shootings, the media has had a massive impact on this component of the VT campus; mainly, is VT a safe campus?

Imagine for a moment you are a senior in high school and have just received your acceptance to Virginia Tech; you're thrilled! Then, that same afternoon, you flip on the TV and watch the media critically analyze every step VT administration made before, during and after the shootings. The media claims that the failures of the VT administration have cost student lives – would you still go to Virginia Tech? Now imagine that same scenario as a parent – would you still send your child to Virginia Tech?

We know now that the media vastly exploited the VT administration. We've seen students, parents and alumni stand up for the heroic actions of faculty, staff and administration on that day; all claiming the VT is a safe campus and that this was one random act of violence. But have the positive voices deafened ears to the cries of the media? Or is that damage done permanently? Will VT forever be marked as an unsafe campus? It may take years for there to be a final answer to those questions.

Similar arguments could be made in relation to the media response to the Duke University Lacrosse scandal. As an incoming student would the media coverage regarding athletic privilege or questionable party situations cause you to refrain from matriculating at Duke? Of course now, just as in the VT case, we know that the lacrosse players were unfairly treated by the legal system and slandered by the media.

### Unfair Response to Virginia Tech

One particular area of criticism from the media towards Virginia Tech administration was the lack of a lockdown on the college campus and the lack of effective communication to students regarding the situation. However, an examination of the timeline of the shootings reveals that campus officials did respond to the situation as

best they could given the information they had. According to a report from CNN the timeline is as follows:

At 7:15am a shooting was reported in Ambler Johnson residence hall; police responded locked down the building and identified a person of interest. They believed the shooting was domestic in nature and sent a campus wide email at 9:36am informing students, faculty and staff about the shooting. At 9:45am shots were reported at Norris Hall as reported by 911 calls. The university responds by sending another email warning students to stay inside and emergency messages are sent to campus phones. All on campus are requested to stay inside away from windows, entrances to campus were closed (2007).

This timeline shows that VT officials did their best to communicate to students the situation and gave instructions to the best of their [college officials] ability to keep students safe. It additionally shows that no lock down was necessary at the time of the first shooting as it was believed to be isolated and that when the second shooting occurred, the campus was effectively placed on a lockdown.

#### Protecting Your Campus from the Media & Suggested Reading

We must all hope that we will never be a part of a tragedy like that of Virginia Tech, but we all must face the reality that someday we will have to deal with the media for one reason or another on our campuses. Perhaps an athletic scandal, a residence hall fire, persistent theft; whatever the reason, we must be prepared.

First, get to know your campus policy on the media. Odds are you're not the person that should be talking to reporters, so find out who should. Second, stand your ground. Reporters can be very pushy and can get you to say things without you realizing it. Say "no comment" and stick to it, refer them to the proper media outlets. Third, train your student staff on dealing with the media. Most students have no idea that they should not be speaking with the media; make sure they know the name of the contact person who deals with the media.

For more information in dealing effectively with the media the following literature is suggested:

Stewart, Sally (2004). *Media training 101; a guide to meeting the press.*

Lovre, Cheri (2006). *Media relations for schools, including crisis communication.*

#### Conclusion

We must be aware of how the media impacts our campus culture, not only for those within the communities but for those outside of our campus communities. The unfortunate fact is that we cannot attempt to predicate or control how the media may interpret any one of our campuses on any given day. We owe it to ourselves, our

colleagues and our students to be prepared to handle the media and protect the perception of our campuses.

#### References

Banning, James H., & Strange, C. Carney (2001). *Educating by design: Creating campus learning environments that work*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

Virginia tech shootings timeline (2007, April 17). Retrieved August 8, 2007, from <http://www.cnn.com/2007/US/04/17/timeline.text/index.html>