

Area colleges ponder the unthinkable

LMC, SMC address the potential for campus shootings

By **JULIE SWIDWA**
HP Staff Writer

BENTON TOWNSHIP — Campus shootings will never be completely preventable.

But steps can be taken to lessen the likelihood and prepare for the unthinkable.

Area community college officials say they are doing that, though there are philosophical differences in strategy.

“It’s an area we’re paying attention to, and we’re refining our processes and procedures,” said Robert Harrison, president of Lake Michigan College in Benton Township. “And we’re

urging people to express their concerns to appropriate authorities.”

LMC’s plan includes a system by which students and staff can anonymously report concerns about another person’s behavior or demeanor.

“We have a process in place in which we can then talk to that individual. The idea is to defuse a situation,” Harrison said.

Many colleges and universities beefed up their security plans in 2007 after a student at Virginia Tech in Blacksburg, Va., shot and killed 32 students, faculty and staff.

The Oct. 1 killing of nine people at Umpqua Community College in Roseburg, Ore., has again brought the issue of campus shootings to the forefront.

Southwestern Michigan

THERE ARE PEOPLE IN SOCIETY WHO WILL DO THE UNTHINKABLE.

College President David Mathews said officials there have worked for years to beef up security.

“We’ve been seriously consumed with this since Columbine,” Mathews said.

In 1999, two students killed 12 students and a teacher before killing themselves at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colo. Shootings in the years since Columbine have included the killing of 20 children and six adults in 2012 at Sandy Hook Elementary in Newtown, Conn., and the campus killings in 2007 and this year.

“I do think our college clearly has taken a different psychological approach

Kayla Folino /
HP graphic

**-DR. DAVID
MATHEWS,
SOUTHWESTERN
MICHIGAN COLLEGE
PRESIDENT**

from Oregon,” Mathews said.

“They had a very public discussion and had been very vocal about being a gun-free campus and having only unarmed security. That strikes me as foolish.”

LMC and SMC both have contracted security guards patrolling their campuses, and also have area police on hand for special events that draw crowds.

The security guards at

SMC are armed, while those patrolling LMC are not armed.

The debate about whether to have armed security at college campuses continues nationwide.

“Some of the larger schools in more urban areas have armed personnel who are certified officers in a police force,” Harrison said. “LMC has a good safety record and we work closely with local law enforcement who regularly patrol our Napier campus and partner with us to perform drills at all college sites.”

Harrison said LMC’s board has not talked recently about whether to employ armed security guards.

“It’s never been thought necessary and other public institutions in our region such as schools and health care facilities have not set that precedent,” he said.

“We regularly send staff to public safety trainings in order to stay up-to-date on best practices.”

He said research has not proven that having firearms on campus helps to reduce potential crime.

Mathews’ chief of staff at SMC is Tom Atkinson, former Dowagiac police chief. The person in charge of student conduct is retired Cass County Sheriff’s Department Capt. Lyndon Parrish, and SMC’s coordinator of security is a reserve police officer.

Harrison said LMC also works closely with police.

“We have a number of emergency plans and we work very closely with Berrien County Emergency Preparedness,” he said. “We have drills with local law enforcement, including active

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shooter situations, and all staff and students have instructions on what to do.”

The college also has staff members who have been through Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) training. People who are CERT trained can help police and emergency responders in disaster situations.

In addition, Harrison said LMC years ago implemented an emergency alert system that can simultaneously send messages to cell phones, computers and home phones of students and staff.

In addition, the college has security cameras throughout the campus and emergency call boxes in parking lots

Like LMC, SMC has a system by which anyone concerned about someone else’s behavior can report it to a behavioral intervention team that will investigate.

“The idea is to try to prevent these cases where there were warning signs in advance,” Mathews said.

Both he and Harrison said they understand that nothing will guarantee a campus shooting won’t happen.

“But we’ve built the ability for a rapid, armed response,” Mathews said. “Nothing will completely prevent the possibility of someone doing harm. A college campus is a reflection of society at large, whether it’s domestic violence that overflows in, or other sorts of psychological things. But you need to have a

reaction time so quick that minimal damage can be done.”

Mathews said the SMC staff believes it has a responsibility to students, their parents, and the community.

“We need to do everything reasonable to make this a safe environment and part of that is addressing the unpleasant fact that there are people in society who will do the unthinkable,” he said.

“There are people on different sides of what the right response to that is. I continue to be amazed at how many colleges and universities still have their head in the sand so to speak, and have not put in place armed security. I am personally astounded at that.”

Contact: jswidwa@TheHP.com, 932-0359, Twitter: @HPSwidwa