

Expanding Partnerships to Keep Campuses Safe: A time for collaboration



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College police forces face mounting challenges. While [campuses remain safer than they've been in years, even decades](#), college-safety officers must contend with a host of emerging issues, including [a burgeoning student mental-health crisis](#), crime in neighboring areas, and disruption from political demonstrations.

They must also confront a disconnect between a public that believes overall

crime is on the rise, [despite downward trends](#), and a need to ensure that students from marginalized groups feel psychologically safe on campus.

Recent student protests nationwide over the Israel-Hamas conflict, as well as calls in recent years to abolish or disarm campus police, have underscored the need for college-safety leaders to develop and maintain strong partnerships with students, other law-enforcement agencies, and campuses' immediate neighbors.

Other factors, including [a persistent dearth of recruits for police jobs](#), make the matter even more pressing. Campus-safety leaders must often rely on help from outside police forces as they deal with understaffing issues.

Last winter, a *Chronicle* [survey](#) that was underwritten by AT&T looked at campus safety through a broad lens and found that college leaders believe that [college police officers](#) — there are 13,000 of them in the nation — maintain good relations with people on and off campus. More than 90 percent of the survey respondents said that their college’s students, faculty, and staff members view their campuses as safe and secure. They also said police enjoy a good relationship with the campus community. One in three said their college had conducted campus meetings about safety concerns.

Most surveyed leaders also reported an expansion of efforts to work more closely with local communities and other police forces to prevent crime on campus and surrounding neighborhoods.

The campus protests over the Israel-Hamas war in the spring of 2024 undoubtedly altered some perceptions that emerged in the survey, casting many campus-safety issues into stark, often troubling, relief. The protests fractured colleges, pitting groups of students and members of the campus community against one another. With concerns growing over disruption and the presence of outside agitators, some college leaders said they had no choice but to call in law enforcement. But both those who [did](#) so and those who did [not](#) faced heavy criticism. Colleges will be wrestling with the difficult questions surrounding these protests for years to come — and will need to work even more diligently to build relationships and create partnerships.

Though collaborations involving campus police have rarely been the subject of study, a [report](#) by the Coalition of Urban Serving Universities found that successful

partnerships are data-driven, people-centered, and “focused on improving the quality of life, not just crime reduction.”

Emerging partnerships — ones that involve dealing with mental-health crises, student concerns about housing and neighborhoods, and the need for more collaboration between law-enforcement agencies — seem to reflect that thinking.

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Partnering with students

In the wake of George Floyd’s death and the protests that followed in 2020, many institutions started programs in an effort to improve how students and police view each other. Several institutions started “engagement groups,” linking campus officers with students and others.

At Arizona State, for example, administrators formed the ASU Public Safety Community Forum, a regular meeting of students, faculty, and staff members who work to improve communication and foster collaboration on campus-safety issues.

“There’s value in having an intentional method for talking with students regularly,” says Steven J. Healy, chief executive at the Healy+ Group, a firm that advises institutions on safety issues. “Colleges need to continue developing these programs. It can’t be a once-per-year meeting, or a conversation that only happens during a time of turmoil.”

Such meetings promote transparency and familiarity, he adds. They allow students to share security concerns and offer suggestions about how to make campuses safer.

As protests recently swept the nation's campuses, police at several colleges relied on the stronger relationships their departments had fostered with students to keep tensions low.

When protesters set up 35 tents at the University of Denver (DU), campus-safety officers called on their experience with students to defuse tense situations during the demonstrations.

"A student who knows me from past discussions, and who was in the encampment knew they could talk with me," says Michael Bunker, DU's chief of campus safety.

"Student ambassadors have been wonderful for making people feel safe. You don't always need a sworn police officer to handle a call."

Both before and after the events of October 7, DU safety officials held 40 listening sessions, talking with 650 faculty members, staff, and students. Officers have held regular dinners, inviting students to eat and talk. The result: better relations with protesters, and a new policy that allows campus officers to carry guns only in the event of an active shooter.

Some institutions have asked students to promote safety more actively. Virginia Commonwealth University started a "student ambassador" program in January 2023.

Wearing a different uniform than university police, six part-time students and one full-time student are paid to patrol VCU's two campuses, walking students to their cars at night and taking note of burned-out street lights and people who might not belong on campus.

"We've gotten extremely positive feedback from students," says John Venuti, VCU's associate vice president of campus safety. "We know that some members of marginalized groups are uncomfortable around armed police. Student ambassadors have been wonderful for making people feel safe. You don't always need a sworn police officer to handle a call."

Getting students involved in safety can make them feel more empowered, while boosting campus vigilance.

"It helps to allow students to take some responsibility for their own safety," says Diedrick Graham, vice president of culture and strategy at the Healy+ Group. "Institutions that include students in the safety process are more likely to gain their trust."

Turning to student peer assistance

VCU's student ambassadors help safety officers in another important way: They frequently join them in responding to calls from students in mental distress.

Ambassadors receive 40 hours of crisis-intervention training, as well as some instruction in ways to de-escalate tense situations. The goal is to include a student peer in response teams that handle such calls.

"We want to meet the caller where they are and offer them the resources they need," Venuti says. "Only 4 percent of mental-health calls within higher education call for a trip to the hospital or for policing. A trained student can really help in that situation."

VCU has also recently expanded its capacity for handling such calls by growing its partnerships to include the VCU Medical Center's pediatric trauma center.

College police forces and safety offices nationwide have been beset by a surge in mental-health calls. The *Chronicle* survey found that college leaders view the rise in mental-health issues as the biggest threat to campus safety, and by a wide margin.

Institutions are partnering with other entities to deal with the crush of calls from students on the edge.

At Temple University, which has seen a recent spike in such calls, safety leaders are working with the College of Public Health and the Philadelphia Police Department to develop a program that would feature peer-to-peer counseling and evaluation by graduate students in social work during emergency responses.

The partnership would also look for ways to help unhoused people on the periphery of campus who have mental-health problems. A similar partnership pairs Ohio State University safety officers and community mental-health agencies to help addicts, the unhoused, and the mentally ill on and around campus.

New takes on community partnerships

Partnerships between college police and community groups have a lengthy history. Institutions recognize the value in maintaining good relations with their neighbors, joining them in efforts to prevent crime and providing a safe environment for students living on and off campus.

“We want to create an atmosphere where people are looking out for each other.”

In recent years, colleges have discovered new ways to lean on community help, including asking businesses, homeowners, and health-care entities to join in the effort to improve safety.

Ohio State’s Office of Student Life expanded a long-running “community roundtable” two years ago to include Columbus city officials, homeowners, landlords, and students.

“The idea is to get people talking about housing-code enforcement, street lighting, door locks, and other safety issues on the

edge of campus, where a lot of our people live. We’ll provide lunches to bring people in,” says Monica M. Moll, director of public safety at Ohio State. Between 70 and 90 people attend regularly, she adds.

“We’re looking to get all kinds of residents to buy into safety,” says Dave Isaacs, a spokesman for the Office of Student Life. “If we do that, someone who sees that a light is out will be more likely to report it. We want to create an atmosphere where people are looking out for each other.”

Ohio State also partners with local businesses to share data collected by surveillance cameras. And liquor stores near campus will often, at the behest of campus-safety officials, voluntarily curtail the sale of bottled beverages during football game days to reduce the odds of vandalism and violence.

Temple offers incentives to partners who work to prevent crime. A university program reimburses local businesses and residents up to \$2,500 for improving lighting or adding surveillance cameras and locks. More than 300 cameras have been added since the program started two years ago.

College researchers in criminology and sociology have expanded safety partnerships in recent years to include health organizations, digging deeper into the factors that underlie or help predict violence in urban areas.

A research project at University of Memphis’s Public Safety Institute, conducted in concert with a local hospital, explores domestic violence and gun violence in the hope of finding ways to help people develop healthy relationships that could prevent those crimes, including on campus.

“Initially, the goal was to help make an impact on crime in surrounding communities,” says Amaia Iratzoqui, an associate professor of criminology and criminal justice at Memphis. “Now, we feel we can have an impact on campus crime as well.”

“Law enforcement is finally realizing that violence is a public-health issue,” adds Keith Humphrey, chief of police at the University of Memphis. “We’re much more open to learning why violence is happening and what we can do to prevent it.”

Closer ties with other police

Ongoing campus protests, concerns over hate crimes, and a lack of new police recruits are forcing college police forces to make some hard decisions about budgeting and staffing. The need to collaborate with other law-enforcement agencies continues to grow.

In some cases, campus police are being asked to take on more patrol responsibilities outside of campus, such as at the University of Pennsylvania, Temple, and the [University of Minnesota](#).

More often, college-safety leaders are seeking outside help, signing memorandums of understanding with local, state, and federal agencies to aid them in preventing crime and making students safer.

Those agreements typically lay out which department will have the authority to investigate a case and make an arrest, and exactly where they have that authority.

Many institutions now feature daily or weekly meetings between police forces, during which they discuss local crime trends and prevention strategies.

Following a post-Covid spike in gun violence around campus, Ohio State initiated monthly meetings with a host of local law-enforcement agencies to coordinate their efforts.

“We felt the need to add more layers,” says Moll. Several police forces have worked in tandem to improve street lighting, add surveillance cameras, and install license-plate readers on and off campus.

Federal regulations, including Title IX and [the Clery Act](#), “make it clear you need to maintain relationships with other agencies to deal with, say, sexual assaults off campus,” she adds. “As the technology of crime fighting and prevention changes, these types of partnerships make even more sense.”

At the University of Denver, safety leaders recently created a partnership with the FBI.

“After October 7, we needed to understand more about the nature of hate crimes,” says Bunker. “The FBI has come here to meet us and let us know what we need to know to protect some of our most vulnerable students.”

*“Expanding Partnerships to Keep Campuses Safe: A time for collaboration”
was produced by Chronicle Intelligence.
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