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**Background on the 2007 Virginia Tech shootings and gun policies** On April 16, 2007, a Virginia Tech senior shot and killed thirty-two people and wounded seventeen others on the university’s campus. In the wake of this horrific event — the most deadly mass killing by a single shooter in United States history — Americans reflected on the causes of the massacre as well as on possible preventative measures. The student shooter had a history of psychological and behavioral problems. He had been declared a danger to himself by a Virginia court in 2005; his professors had reported strange behavior, and the university had previously investigated him for stalking female students. Still, he had been able to purchase weapons because of a gap in the federal and state laws that forbid individuals legally declared mentally unsound from buying guns. The Virginia Tech shooting led to the first federal gun legislation in thirteen years: the new law strengthened procedures for identifying and tracking mentally ill people and stopping them from buying guns. However, some — for example, Students for Concealed Carry, an organization that advocates for those who wish to carry legally concealed weapons on campuses — disagree with this emphasis on restricting firearms, especially on campuses. (Some colleges do allow concealed weapons on their campuses.)

Given a sense of urgency by the murders at Sandy Hook Elementary School, the gun control debate rages on across the nation. Less well known is that this year many state legislatures will consider whether to require public colleges and universities to allow guns on campus. We oppose legislation that will prevent colleges from setting their own gun policies — and will make students, staff, and faculty less safe.

Today the vast majority of U.S. colleges and universities, public and private, prohibit guns. Federal law is silent on the issue, and the states are somewhat divided. Five states — Colorado, Mississippi, Oregon, Utah, and Wisconsin — have laws allowing “concealed carry” at public colleges and universities.

Details of the laws vary. In Wisconsin administrators can prohibit weapons from campus facilities if they post no-weapons signs on each
building. Mississippi allows concealed carry on campus only for those who complete a firearm safety course. Utah is the only state that specifically forbids public colleges and universities from banning the carrying of concealed weapons.

The rest of the states divide into those that do not allow concealed weapons on campuses (twenty-one) and those that permit colleges to set their own gun policies (twenty-four).

After the shootings at Virginia Tech in 2007, in which thirty-three people died, and at Northern Illinois University, where six were killed in 2008, debates on campus gun policies in state legislatures soared. Two years ago only one state permitted concealed carry at public institutions, compared with five today. In 2011 and 2012 state legislators introduced at least thirty-four bills to allow concealed firearms on campuses. Although most of those measures failed to pass, many of them are back on the docket this year.

Proponents of concealed carry laws usually argue that the constitutional right to bear arms should apply everywhere, on campuses as well as off; that people are safer when they have guns to protect themselves; and that an armed bystander could put a stop to a mass shooting in progress. "The current rules guarantee criminals a free shot," says David Burnett of Students for Concealed Carry, which the Wall Street Journal calls a "major force" for guns on campus. "Allowing licensed concealed carry would give potential attackers pause and ultimately give innocent victims a fighting chance."

With that view in mind, let’s look at what actually happens on college campuses.

Colleges and universities are far safer than most public spaces in the United States. The campus homicide rate is about one death per one million people, compared to fifty-seven deaths per million in the general population. In the college-age population in general, moreover, homicide is the second leading cause of death, while on college campuses it remains a rare event.

Still, no campus is crime-free. Would more guns on campus prevent crimes?

In the Chronicle of Higher Education last June, Gary Olson, former provost of Idaho State University, stated categorically that "there is no recorded incident in which a victim — or spectator — of a violent crime on a campus has prevented that crime by brandishing a weapon." As for the extremely rare case of an active shooter, we shudder at the prospect of campus police, who often do bear arms, rushing into a scene where more than one person is firing a gun. As Regina G. Lawson, chief of police at Wake Forest University, said at a 2008 conference on higher-education law, "When you’re responding to a situation like that, and someone’s in plain clothes with a gun, who’s the bad guy? Who are you going to take out to save the lives of the ten thousand other students you’re trying to protect?"
Like all police officers, campus police would likely have a low rate of accuracy in such chaotic situations, given the likelihood that the officer is moving, the target is moving, and victims are fleeing in every direction. (Time magazine reported in January that New York City police in gunfights hit their target 18 percent of the time.) The average student, professor, or staff member carrying a weapon is likely to be far less accurate, substantially raising the odds of more innocent victims.

Campuses are a risky environment for guns in other ways as well. We don’t need to put more firearms in the hands of college students, a cohort that includes emotionally volatile young men and women and abusers of alcohol and drugs. How many accidental shootings will happen under the influence? How many disputes will turn deadly if a gun is nearby?

Consider also an even more compelling fact: suicide is the second leading cause of death for college students (after accidents). According to the Harvard Injury Control Research Center, 85 percent of attempted suicides using guns are fatal, compared to only 2 percent of attempts by a far more common method, drug overdose. If guns are more readily available, many more suicide attempts will likely succeed.

By all means, let’s get on with the national and state-level debate about how best to balance second-amendment rights with public safety. We applaud President Obama’s directive to scale up federally funded research on gun violence — research that for decades has been squelched by the political muscle of gun rights advocates. More research means better-informed choices.

But meanwhile, let our colleges and universities set their own policies. We believe that the great majority will continue to prohibit guns, and our campus communities will be all the safer.

Comprehension

1. According to the writers, what is the firearms policy of a “vast majority” (2) of American colleges and universities? Why is it important for the writers to point out the prevalence of this policy?

2. What has caused an increase in debates about gun policies in state legislatures over the last several years?

3. According to the writers, how would armed students cause problems for campus police?

4. Why are campuses “a risky environment for guns” (12)? How do the writers characterize college students? Do you think this characterization is accurate?

Purpose and Audience

1. What is the writers’ purpose? Are they writing to change their readers’ minds? Propose a course of action? Attract national attention or support for a cause? Inform or entertain?