Forty years ago, when I was an earnest young college student, I appreciated all the ways I was being treated like an adult; there were ashtrays in class rooms, and there were few restrictions on how I went about my day-to-day studies.

Issues involving sex, beer, and academics were a major focus of administrations; the enforcement of motor vehicle regulations, theft, and assaults received most of the attention of campus safety officers.

While the pressures of big-city crime and a more permissive drug culture increased year after year once I graduated in 1976, campus life was certainly regarded as largely protected and removed in many ways from what the rest of America was experiencing. This period of relative calm began to erode on campuses, like it did in the rest of America, as a result of-or simply about the same time as-the events of September 11.

In the 17 years since America welcomed in the year 2000, there have been dramatic changes in the level of security and safety concerns confronting law enforcement and the American public. In 2000 there were no TSA agents checking in passengers at airport terminals, and there was no Department of Homeland Security responding to terrorist threats. Both of those agencies were formed as part of the national response to the terrorist attacks of 2001. Ever since, security has been tightened at airports and government buildings, at corporate offices and public arenas. Few of us would have projected that the amount of resources would climb so high in such a short time.

Colleges and Universities have also seen the same push towards greater security measures on campus. Previously left off of lists of security-centric establishments, college and university campuses have actually suffered from hundreds of incidents of violence in these 17 years. Because of architectural preferences favoring open spaces, campuses do not lend themselves to simple security measures. Instead, campuses present many difficulties that any security plan must struggle to overcome.

Neither Rare Nor Unusual

Every college or university has had to “think about the unthinkable” as threats and risks have emerged and grown. Campus security personnel are forced to make plans for events that previously were considered as rare and unusual, and the learning curve for those responsible for safety and security at colleges and universities has been steep.

Let’s review two threats—one that has already gathered too many headlines after too many tragedies, and one that is an emerging risk that will further complicate matters in the years to come.

1) Campus Shootings

In 2016, the Citizens Crime Commission of New York City issued their report entitled “Aiming at Students: The College Gun Violence Epidemic.” This well-researched report listed incidents at colleges and universities from 2001 thru 2016. The statistics and observation read like an epitaph for the innocent and carefree college lifestyle of just a few decades ago: “To analyze shooting trends at
U.S. colleges, the Crime Commission reviewed 190 incidents at 142 colleges from the 2001-2002 school year through the 2015-2016 school year in which at least one person was intentionally shot (excluding the shooter) on the campus of a two- or four-year college, as well as incidents that occurred within two miles of a college campus, and at least one student was shot. In the 190 shooting incidents between the 2001-02 and 2015-16 school years, 437 people were shot, including 167 killed and 270 wounded. The victims included 290 students, 77 individuals not associated with the college, 40 employees, and five former students (we were unable to determine the relationship of 25 victims). An estimated 2.5 million students were enrolled at the 142 colleges where shootings occurred."

2) Terror by Truck

In July 2016, 86 people were killed and 434 were injured while celebrating Bastille Day watching fireworks in Nice, France, in a deliberate vehicle attack that has been determined to be an act of terrorism. In November 2016, one was killed and eleven injured in an ISIS-inspired attack on the campus of Ohio State University. One month later, twelve were killed and fifty-six injured in Berlin, Germany, in another truck attack at a Christmas Fair located in a city square. Clearly, the use of vehicles to deliberately inflict harm on the public is on the rise. It has come to America, and it is a threat that will have to be a factor in every campus security plan.

In November, the terrorist organization known as ISIS suggested to followers overseas that the use of vehicles to commit terror was both effective and easy to organize. The group suggested events like the Macy’s Thanksgiving Parade as being one of several particularly attractive targets. The Rose Parade, college football games, and all manner of events connected with colleges and universities were forced to increase safety and security to respond to these threats. Likewise, cities around the United States (as well as all NFL stadiums and all MLB parks) are in the process of beefing up protective barriers around certain sites and especially those where crowds gather in proximity to city streets.

Here To Stay

American universities and colleges are learning to cope with single shooter events; almost every campus has plans that include “shelter in place” and mass notification text messaging, along with regular drills and training for safety and law enforcement on how to speedily contain an armed threat. Hundreds of millions of dollars have been spent to improve response times, provide enhanced security doors and communications for classrooms, and to work toward profiling and monitoring potential threats among the student body.

Unfortunately, many campuses are not as far along in responding to this emerging threat of deliberate vehicle assaults. American campuses, with their easy vehicle access and crowded pedestrian areas, are extraordinarily vulnerable to this form of attack. Additionally, this method is an incredibly low-tech option for a terrorist or disturbed individual. The weapon is readily available, virtually unregulated, and lethal at high speeds.

Just as American colleges and universities are learning to cope with the difficulties and expense of reducing the risk of gun violence occurring on campus (after more than 190 incidents), so now safety and security officers on campuses will have to start planning for the prevention of these vehicular attacks. Budgets will be stretched, new products will have to be evaluated and installed, and a dozen stakeholders will have to come to grips with the need to take preventive measures around bike paths, pedestrian areas, and centers of campus life. Just like I cannot go back and be that young college student again, college campuses and those responsible for safety and security cannot wish their way back to 1999. Everyone is on notice that threats from shooters and threats from terrorists are not going away; indeed, they may become even more of a concern in the years to come.

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