

February 14, 2008

## Vandal Parents Newsletter

A few days ago, I concluded a newsletter to you with a comment about campus safety. I ended by saying that campus safety is fragile and yet critical to the basic health of the community and learning environment. I must revisit this issue with you.

A few hours ago, another tragic shooting took place on a university campus. The campus community at Northern Illinois University was ravaged by a shooting incident where 6 people were killed and many others wounded. The scope and details of the tragedy are still being investigated but the horror and loss is overwhelming. I am deeply saddened and my heart goes out to members of this extended community of students, faculty staff and their families. The shootings at Virginia Tech demonstrated how challenging it is to make university campuses safe and the tragedy at Northern Illinois will increase those concerns.

The news of this tragedy will touch students and faculty on our campus in the next few hours. Many will pay little notice and focus on the adventures planned for the three-day weekend while others will pause to consider their own safety. I suspect that most students will give only passing attention to the news. In fact, you probably have more concern about their safety than they do.

It is easier to write about student successes, services and upcoming events but I must share more information about what we are doing to prevent and prepare for tragedies. Here are some of those details.

In the wake of Virginia Tech, we have done much to make this campus safer. Some of those actions included:

- Faculty workshops to identify and help students who are in distress and to address classroom safety.
- Students who display symptoms of crisis or distress are receiving more attention from faculty and Student Affairs staff and more frequent referral for counseling or other appropriate staff.
- Training for faculty and staff to prepare for “shooter incidents”.
- Weekly safety meetings of Student Affairs staff with law enforcement personnel to monitor campus safety issues.
- More systematic assessment of situations that seem to pose risks and sharing information among appropriate staff about students who seem to be in crisis or distress.
- Last month, we hosted a presentation with student leaders to consider their role in reducing risk in living groups and social settings. We also hosted another program to reduce “bystander behavior”. We were challenging student leaders to act to help other students who may be in crisis. Our presenter was a leading reviewer of the Virginia Tech tragedy.
- Warning systems are being improved.

- In the weeks after Virginia Tech, we also learned that we were very prepared to evacuate buildings but less prepared to lock down facilities. We are working on this issue.

This week, the issue of guns on Idaho university campuses has been debated throughout the state and on our campus. A bill was introduced in the Idaho Legislature that would allow persons who hold concealed weapons permit to carry guns on university campuses. The bill was opposed by Governor Otter and leaders of all Idaho universities. The bill was quickly withdrawn but caused great concern among many students, faculty and staff.....and many parents.

Certainly, there are voices in favor allowing concealed weapons on campus as a strategy to make a campus safer but such practice is prohibited on all campuses in Idaho. The University of Idaho strongly opposes any proposal to allow concealed weapons to be brought on campus by policy.

This letter may generate some strong responses from those who have deeply held views about safety, personal responsibility and the role of guns on college campuses. I hope that we at least share common ground of creating a safe community even if we may differ on how that goal is achieved.

I want to assure you that we work tirelessly and persistently to make our campus as safe a possible. We can not guarantee absolute safety but we must devote ourselves to the highest levels of safety that can be provided with the resources that are available. This is a safe campus but we must work hard to keep it that way

Thank you for your support of the University of Idaho.

Give your Vandal a call..... and tell them that you love them.

Bruce M. Pitman  
Vice Provost for Student Affairs