

# Joseph I. Castro: What if your school campus becomes a target?

By Joseph I.  
Castro

In my first two years of service as Fresno State president, I have been asked on several occasions what keeps me up at night.

While I thankfully sleep well (almost) every night, I am most concerned about the dramatic increase in random violence occurring on university campuses throughout the nation and the possibility that it could happen at any time on our campus.

The possible became all too real Nov. 2, when one of our 24,000 students used a social media site to threaten violence with an automatic weapon. The student quickly deleted the post because he said it was a joke. But in the brief period it was on the website, another student took a screen shot and shared the post.

Within a few minutes, the threat and screenshot went viral.

Thankfully, our campus police officers moved rapidly to identify and arrest the suspect – with valuable assistance from the social media site – within two hours and before any threat was carried out. But for our students (and their families), faculty and staff, the two-hour period felt like an eternity, causing fear and panic.

Just two days after the threat at Fresno State, the stabbing of four people and death of the assailant at the University of California, Merced, was a second reminder of the reality of campus danger that we live with.

The threat of violence at Fresno State served as a learning opportunity for me and our senior leadership. Other college and university presidents as well as K-12 leaders, would benefit from reconsidering some of their long-held assumptions about crisis response and communication.

Our response must be different today because of changes in the way campus and community members receive messages and their expectations for rapid notice during emergencies. While each incident of random violence is unique, the lessons we learned from our experience at Fresno State may be instructive to educational leaders across the Valley and beyond.

- Communicate clearly, immediately, and often. Because of the uncertainty and stress surrounding the early stages of a serious threat, there will be a temptation to get your first communication “just right” and to take more time to complete it.

Meanwhile, every minute that goes by without clear information exponentially increases stress for students, faculty and staff – and it leaves a vacuum for others to fill with rumors or incomplete information.

Start with a simple message as soon as possible explaining what you know, what you are doing about it, and what you want your community to do (e.g., stay where they are and lock their doors or leave immediately).

- Emergency alert systems are essential. Our Bulldog Alert text message system worked well and we learned we need to get more of the campus community to sign up. Social media sites like Twitter, Instagram and Facebook are staples in sharing information quickly. E-mail messages are a third important mode of communication.
- Symbolism matters. The threat to Fresno State included a picture of our library. This resulted in significant distress among students and staff studying and working there.

While we had concluded – based on good information early in the investigation – that the library was likely not a

unique target, a police presence at the building would have dramatically lowered the stress level of those inside.

I also suggest a larger than usual physical presence of police officers and vehicles around campus immediately after such incidents to help to lower stress levels among those who remain on campus.

- Learn from the experience. Research indicates that many universities and colleges do not effectively debrief from a crisis and therefore they minimize learning opportunities. I recommend a comprehensive debrief with the campus leadership team and an open campus forum.

You will undoubtedly receive some critical feedback, but your institution will emerge much stronger.

- Safety and security are everyone's responsibility. We have a well-trained police department. However, the path to a stronger and more secure campus resides in the immense power of our 26,000 plus students, faculty and staff who observe and report any strange behaviors.

It was through this power of caring and supporting each other at Fresno State that we identified and arrested the subject in our recent incident.

No university president or K-12 leader should believe he or she is immune to a serious threat. The research demonstrating a rapid increase in random violence on university campuses is clear on this question. Our approach would emphasize that all educational leaders would do well to embrace change, hope and pray for the best, and prepare with colleagues for the worst.

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