Metro State Receives High Marks for Safety

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In a recent survey by backgroundchecks.org (released about a month ago), Metro State was ranked #6 for safety among 200 colleges and universities in Minnesota.

That admirably high ranking is a result of the active role played by everyone at Metro State, from safety officers and staff to faculty and students. “The team effort has been successful on campus, with everyone pulling in the same direction,” says Thomas Maida, director of public safety at Metro State since 1998. (Interestingly, Maida was born at St. John’s Hospital, which is the present location of Metro State’s Dayton’s Bluff campus.)

Metro State contracts their safety officers from American Security Inc., with Maida overseeing all aspects of their duties, including hiring and training. “We are looking for individuals who recognize our university mission and are able to respond to the needs of our students and employees,” he said.

One of the challenges at the Dayton’s Bluff campus is that, due to the inclusion of a public library, all library floors are considered public—as is the first floor of the new Student Center. As a result, there are 4-5 safety officers on duty at all times. There are about 15 full-time safety officers (and numerous part-time), with extensive cross-training to cover various duties. Overall, there are about 500 hours served per week covering three shifts, from 6:30 a.m. to 11:30 p.m.

Additionally, there are 40-50 campus security authorities (CSAs) at Metro State. These are regular employees, including the president, vice president, deans and department heads. According to Maida, “With some training, these individuals are responsible to report any crimes that occur on campus.” The CSAs are trained to inform a safety officer or Maida himself. “It’s a much broader filter that picks up a lot of additional things on campus,” he says.

This extra watchfulness, enhanced by multiple cameras throughout the campus, contributes to “rings of safety,” as Maida calls it. “Safety officers can follow foot traffic off campus, on campus, those walking through the tunnels; so the camera system is a real support tool that officers can monitor at their desks, and on their phones,” he adds.

Safety officers are also available as escorts to accompany Metro State students and employees to their vehicles. One thing Maida has noticed is a dramatic reduction in the number of escorts needed since the opening of the parking ramp last fall, and he encourages people to use it. There are cameras, as well as “code blue” emergency phones, on each level. (Actually, these phones are available at all campus parking areas.)

Safety officers also do “tours” of the ramp, gliding around in that nifty, little white truck. “The truck is electric, so it’s quiet, in stealth mode,” says Maida. “It’s called a ‘gem car,’ but those who use it call it ‘the egg,’” he adds with a smile. The truck is plugged in overnight using one of the ramp’s charging stations.

Another facet of safety Maida wanted people to be aware of is the “R U Ready?” page on Metro State’s website. (The quickest way to access it is to scroll down to the very bottom of the homepage and click on the link.) The page contains valuable information (some in pdf form) on plans and procedures for various emergency situations, such as a fire, a tornado warning, a medical emergency, and the like. The “R U Ready?” page also provides access and instructions for “Star Alert,” Metro State’s emergency mass notification system.

As we move toward that time of year, this system is a great resource for such things as class cancellations due to snowstorms, as well as other incidents. Star Alert sends messages to students, staff and faculty through phone, text or email; personal cell or work numbers or emails can be added or changed as needed. That is also why Maida encourages everyone to check their Metro email regularly, because that is often where these alerts and other notifications are sent.

“R U Ready?” falls under the website’s “Safety and Security” tab, which offers other valuable data, such as evacuation procedures, steps taken in the event of a pandemic, and preventive steps to take to help reduce the spread of the flu. Also available is what is called a “Campus Security Report,” which Maida’s department produces annually.

This report—part of the Clery Act, enacted in the 1970s and a mandate for all institutions receiving federal aid—provides information for a number of safety related issues. It also contains charts which graph all crimes and incidents at all Metro State campuses within a given year. The report recently added a section pertaining to the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA), where it outlines procedures, offers educational resources, provides what steps to take if one is a victim of a sexual assault, as well as disciplinary actions for sex offenses.

These measures all add up to a safe academic space conducive to learning. In fact, along with being #6 in the state, Metro State was ranked #16 in the nation for safety amongst some 5000 higher learning institutions. Maida thinks the credit for this achievement belongs to everyone, including safety officers, staff, faculty and students. “It really starts from our leadership on down,” says Maida. “Our presidents and vice presidents have always valued a safe institution. They’ve always been there for me over the years, giving me the funding I needed. Without that, we wouldn’t have been #6.”

Maida also wanted to remind people to be informed and prepared, and to always take their valuables with them, even if they are leaving their workspace for only a minute. And regarding any suspicious activity, “If you see something, say something,” Maida states. “The very nature of a shared responsibility helps our community.”