Campus Carry: Relieving Apprehension

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Ian Bogost, writing for *The Atlantic,* states“Deep and pervasive unease already pervades college campuses, and safety and speech worries are just instances of a more general and more universal anxiety” (2016). In his article, Bogost comments on the Campus Carry debate. While opposing sides of this debate often cite First Amendment rights to free speech or Second Amendment rights to own guns for self-defense (Bogost, 2016), Bogost pulls himself above the debate. He points to the issue of anxiety among college students as the bigger reason to keep guns off campus—students have enough to worry about, without having to wonder who might be concealing a gun (Bogost, 2016). Mr. Bogost is right that anxiety is a common problem among college students. Keeping guns off campus, however is not part of the solution. The concerns of students and faculty about Campus Carry must be addressed in order to persuade them of the safety provided by Campus Carry, and a state-wide effort is necessary to do this. This solution will be reached through three steps. The root causes of the unrest surrounding this issue will be examined, several examples of the unrest itself will be given, and finally, the solution will be discussed: persuasively raising awareness.

The immediate cause of the Campus Carry apprehension is the Campus Carry law itself. In May of 2015, the Texas legislature passed a bill effectively allowing holders of concealed handgun licenses to carry handguns on campuses of higher education. The bill does not strictly remove all prohibitions on concealed weapons on college campuses—it deals with concealed handguns only. Furthermore, private colleges and universities may still completely prohibit the concealed carrying of handguns by license holders on their campuses (University of Houston, 2008). Public higher education institutions may not wholly prohibit concealed handguns, but “shall establish reasonable rules” regarding the carrying of concealed weapons on their campus (University of Houston, 2008, page 2). Thus, each private institution has the freedom to decide whether or not it will allow concealed carry at all, and public institutions have the freedom to establish some rules regarding concealed carry, as long as they do not prohibit it altogether.

This bill, however, has sparked much debate, and apprehension about guns on campus is prevalent. Aside from the campus carry debate, when guns and schools appear in the news the stories are often tragic ones. In 2008, a former student of Northern Illinois University opened fire in a large classroom, hitting 21 individuals, and killing five of them (Sander, 2008). In 2007, a deranged student entered Virginia Tech and killed 32 people (*USA Today,* 2012, para. 4). 30 of the victims were shot in the space of eleven minutes, and approximately 17 additional people were wounded. (Arnold, 2015). And in 1966, an ex-marine student at the University of Texas at Austin mounted a 300 foot tower and began shooting at individuals in the surrounding area. In under two hours, the shooter took 15 lives, and wounded 31 more (Tofan, 2016). These tragedies rest vividly in the minds of Americans. And while the obvious goal of the new Campus Carry law is to increase safety at Texas colleges, the issue still does not lie at rest in the minds of many whom it will effect. They are at unease because they are not convinced that concealed handguns on campus is the safer option—they see guns as a big part of the problem.

There are several examples of this unrest. One area this is evident is that of professor resignation. Frederick Steiner, dean of architecture at University of Texas at Austin, is leaving the school for a position at University of Pennsylvania, due in part to the Campus Carry legislation (Stack, 2016). Daniel Hamermesh, professor of economics at UT Austin has publicly resigned due to the law as well (Mangan, 2015). University of Virginia professor Siva Vaidhyanathan withdrew from his spot as a finalist for dean at UT Austin’s Moody College of Communication—also due to concerns about the new legislation (Bogost, 2016). Bogost himself, a professor at Georgia Tech, expressed fear of his own students possessing guns in the classroom. These students had made comments among themselves about kidnapping Bogost’s kids after learning their grades. “They’re the kind of comments you wouldn’t think twice about—just typical college students communing over a tough professor,” Bogost writes, “Unless…you also knew that those students might be permitted to carry concealed firearms on campus” (Bogost, 2016). Furthermore, a survey conducted by Georgia Institute of Technology on its students shows that this unease is not just a reality for faculty members. When asked if they thought anyone with a concealed carry license should be allowed to carry on campus, 60.2% of respondents answered “no.” 58.6% of respondents said that they would feel “extremely less safe” if they knew anyone age 21 or older could legally carry a concealed handgun (Georgia Institute of Technology, 2016).

These are subtle indications of the apprehension, but not all are so mild. A professor at Kennesaw State University in Georgia tried to display a sign in opposition to Georgia’s campus carry bill at the state capitol, but was arrested by police (Torres & Davis, 2016). Torres & Davis also write that “dozens of students, professors and parents…testified against the bill” (2016). At University of Texas-Austin, over 600 faculty members signed a petition against concealed guns in their classrooms, and many joined on campus protests (Mangan, 2015).

The legislation allowing Campus Carry is a reality, and it is only a matter of time before it takes effect on college campuses in Texas. Yet there is still much apprehension concerning what safety levels at campuses will be after the law takes effect, as shown above. For some, such as Students for Gun-Free Schools (SGFS), the answer is to keep guns off campuses—which would require overturning the new law. SGFS brings up the following five points in opposition to Campus Cary:

1. Concealed handguns would detract from a healthy learning environment.

2. More guns on campus would create additional risk for students.

3. Shooters will not be deterred by concealed carry permit holders.

4. Concealed carry permit holders are not always “law-abiding” citizens.

5. Concealed carry permit holders are not required to have any law enforcement training (Students for Gun Free Schools, 2011, para. 12-16)

These concerns must be addressed in such a way that students and faculty on Texas college campuses are aware—persuaded—of the safety that concealed carry on campus will bring. An action plan for how this can be accomplished will be outlined below, but first the concerns themselves must be addressed.

SGFS argues that concealed weapons on campus would jeopardize a healthy learning environment at colleges. Buchholz describes schools of all kinds as “sacred,” “free,” and “safe” (2007, para. 16-17). And SGFS claims that introducing handguns into classroom environment where students and faculty “must be able to express themselves freely…would inhibit this dialogue by creating fear of possible retaliation” (2011, para. 18). But such fear would be irrational. Do students fear guns off campus, where concealed carry is allowed? Another organization, Students for Concealed Carry on Campus (SCCC), points out that about one-percent of the US population has a concealed handgun license. “Are students afraid to walk through crowded shopping malls knowing that one out of every hundred shoppers they pass is potentially carrying a legally concealed handgun?” asks SCCC (2011, para. 17). This is likely not the case. Furthermore, SCCC points out that students on campuses that do not allow concealed carry cannot know who, if anybody, is carrying a gun illegally (2011). Do students on those campuses walk around with fearing the potential *illegal* gun? As cited above, Bogost argues that the potential legally carried handgun would jeopardize academic free speech—but how can it do that any more than the potential *illegally* carried gun? It was such illegally carried guns that were used in the tragic shootings at Virginia Tech and UT Austin. In actuality, whether students fear potential legally concealed guns on campuses that allow concealed carry does not matter. Such fear is a problem and must be addressed, but the solution is not keeping all types of guns illegal on campus—the potential firearm is there either way.

SGFS also argues that allowing concealed weapons on campus would likely increase safety risks for students and faculty on that campus. Citing a report by another group, SGFS gives four possible causes of increased danger: “(1) the prevalence of drugs and alcohol; (2) the risk of suicide and mental health issues; (3) the likelihood of gun thefts, and; (4) an increased risk of accidental shootings” (Students for Gun Free Schools, 2011, para. 20). However, SCCC points out that for the twelve colleges that allow campus carry, out of “a combined total of one hundred semesters,” none of them “have seen a single resulting incident of a student under the influence of drugs or alcohol using or brandishing a weapon on campus, a single resulting suicide, a single resulting gun theft, or a single resulting gun accident” (2011, para. 18). Campus Carry has not increased violence at these schools. Tofan (2016) claims the research does not support this claim, citing a study by Stanford University that indicates a correlation between concealed carry and an “increase in violent crime” (para. 18). However, as pointed out by one source, the authors of the study only have a 10% confidence level of their outcome (that right-to-carry laws increase crime) for only about half of their sample size (Leghorn, 2014). This is just one study—and is shaky at best. The fact remains that concealed carry on campus has *not* resulted in higher violent crime rates. The risk of violence is not any greater on colleges that allow concealed carry.

SGFS’s third point, that potential shooters would not be deterred by their knowledge of laws allowing concealed carry, rests on the fact that shooters are “frequently suicidal” (Students for Gun Free Schools, 2011, para. 26). The inference here is that because suicidal shooters are planning on dying anyway, they would not be afraid of victims potentially shooting back. This may be true in some cases. But as Louisiana State Representative Ernest D. Wooton put it, “If we don’t try [Campus Carry], are we going to know?” (as cited in Students for Concealed Carry on Campus, 2011). Furthermore, whether the shooter fears victims shooting back or not does not matter that much. If Campus Carry deters potential shooters, great. But even if it does not, it still empowers license-holding victims to defend themselves and neutralize the threat (Students for Concealed Carry on Campus, 2011). SCCC further points out that this issue is about enabling licensed students to defend themselves, not only from shooting sprees, but from all types of crime—assault, robbery, rape, just to name a few (Students for Concealed Carry on Campus, 2011). While the deterrence effect is nice, it is not the sole benefit of Campus Carry. The ability to defend oneself from any crime is just as central in the new law.

SGFS also points out that not all concealed carry license holders are “law-abiding citizens” (Students for Gun Free Schools, 2011, para. 31). They cite a study by the Florida *Sun-Sentinel* saying that in Florida, in 2007, 1400 individuals who had obtained a concealed carry license had pled guilty or no-contest to felony charges, 128 had active domestic violence restraining orders, and 6 were registered sex offenders (Students for Gun Free Schools, 2011, para. 37). It is true, and as SCCC puts it, “every segment of society has its bad apples, but… concealed carry has fewer than most” (Students for Concealed Carry on Campus, 2011, para. 26). While 1400 individuals seems like a large number, it pales in comparison to the total number of active concealed carry licenses in Florida in 2007: 438,864 (Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, 2016). To put it simply, only about 0.3% of total license holders in Florida in 2007 were not “law-abiding” citizens. The majority of license holders are, and giving them the freedom to carry their handguns on campus will increase their ability to defend themselves and possibly others from crime, and thus make campuses safer.

Finally, SGFS argues that, in order for a person to obtain a concealed carry license, no “formal law enforcement training” is required, typically only a one-day class is required, and “Many shall-issue states do not even require the applicant to fire his/her handgun at a range” (Students for Gun-Free Schools, 2011, para. 39). SGFS then compares this to the “intensive training” that police officers receive (2011, para. 40). However, the average citizen does not need full law enforcement officer training to be able to defend themselves with a handgun (Students for Concealed Carry on Campus, 2011). According to SCCC, the necessary training for self-defense can be accomplished in one day (2011). Thus, the lack of law-enforcement caliber training for license holders is a moot point

Thus, SGFS’s 5 main concerns about Campus Carry, while understandable, are not viable when compared to the facts. This is exactly what students and faculty all over Texas need to hear. How can this be accomplished? As the administration of each school works to establish guidelines for Campus Carry under the “reasonable rules” clause mentioned at the beginning of this paper, it must also institute an informational campaign. The purpose of this campaign would be two-fold: 1) to acknowledge the common concerns about Campus Carry mentioned in this paper that students or faculty might hold, and 2) to address these concerns in an effort to show students and faculty why Campus Carry actually makes Texas colleges safer. Lone Star Community College already frequently sends email blasts to its students—the author has received several emails per semester with tips for cyber-security. The same is needed to address the common apprehensions about Campus Carry.

The new Campus Carry law, along with the vivid memories of past campus shootings, has caused much unrest regarding concealed weapons on Texas college campuses. Faculty have left their positions as a result, and students have expressed their apprehension as well. Thus, informational campaigns at each school are needed to persuade students and faculty of the truth: In spite of common concerns, Campus Carry will make Texas schools safer environments for students and faculty.

You, the reader, can play a part in easing this apprehension as well. Take the information presented in this paper, and share it with any students and faculty that you know. Ultimately, the choice is up to them whether they accept the arguments presented here or not. But are not likely to be persuaded if they are not made aware of the facts. By sharing with those in your realm of influence, you can play a part in fighting the “deep and pervasive unease” mentioned by Bogost at the beginning of this paper.

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