

Drugs, Weapons, and Liquor: Considerations of Personal Safety and Security at a Southern Regional Institution of Higher Education

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Abstract

This study examines the personal safety and personal security situations of a higher education institution that sought to examine the relationship between criminality and enrollment. Using a Chi-Squared method, the outcomes showed no statistically significant relationship between criminality and enrollment existing at the host institution. Additional analyses examined facets of student opinions regarding personal safety and the safety of their belongings while enrolled at the higher education institution. Conclusions and recommendations for future research are offered herein. Higher education administrators may consider the discussions herein from the perspectives of enrollment, attrition, and retention.

Keywords: criminality, campus safety, campus security, enrollment, higher education, retention

1. Introduction

The host institution for this study was a regional teaching institution whose geographic location was located in the Black Belt region of the Southern United States (Sheffield, 2016a). The academic credentials and degrees offered by the host institution consisted of undergraduate and graduate programs. During the time of this study, the host institution exhibited an enrollment of approximately 3,989 students. This quantity of students represented both residential and online enrollees.

During the first decade of the twenty-first century, the host institution experienced several violations that necessitated arrests for liquor law, drug law, and weapons crimes. Declining student enrollments were observed near the end of the decade. Using a survey that queried student perceptions concerning campus quality of life, the host institution sought to examine whether such criminality impacted enrollment quantities.

Safety and security are primary topics for any university or college administration as well as parents and students because higher education settings are vulnerable to various types of criminality (Troxel & Doss, 2010). The Clery Act mandates that American higher education institutions report yearly the quantities of various crimes that were observed within the academic environment. Although campus data may be published and disseminated, the danger of criminality permeates higher education settings.

Crime may result in death that impacts the educational domain. For example, on January 20, 2010 a high school teacher, Starrick Morgan-Gray, was shot and killed by her husband near the end of her workday (*Demopolis Times*, 2010). The crime occurred at the boundary of a university campus which shared resources with the high school, and it affected both the city and campus communities (Doss, Troxel, Sumrall, Jones, & Fields, 2010). This act of moral turpitude demonstrates clearly that crime impacts the educational domain. Acts of crime often occur with speed, surprise, and violence. The murder quashed any notions of impenetrability within the educational setting. Instead, it caused greater attentiveness toward campus safety and security within the university community.

Other types of campus crimes may result in arrests. For instance, at Texas A&M University, four students were arrested for drug violations after a peer student overdosed from drugs (CBS News, 2016). At Curry College, a student was arrested for a weapons violation involving the possessing of a firearm on campus (WCVB News, 2015). Such types of arrests are not uncommon within general society. These incidents show their presence within the context of higher education. As its enrollment declined, the host institution experienced arrests within its campus for weapons, drugs, and liquor violations. Therefore, the host institution sought to better understand perceptions of its safety and security.

2. Literature

Among higher education institutions, police departments exist whereby societal order is maintained and criminality is deterred (McElreath, et al, 2013). The methods used to achieve these goals consist of compliance and enforcement (McElreath, et al., 2013). Although colleges and universities possess law enforcement capabilities, the respective law enforcement organizations are incapable of quashing all forms of crime. Typically, law enforcement entities exhibit publicly observable actions after incidents occur (i.e., after-the-fact entities) (Doss, 2011). Crime may originate at any time within the higher education environment. Administrators must be cognizant of the possible endangerments that have the potential of adversely affecting campuses, employees, and their residents.

Police departments often impact the institutional emergency management cycle (EMC) with respect to preparing for, mitigating the effects of, responding to, and recovering from various emergencies (McElreath, 2014a). When crafting, assessing, and adjusting strategy, administrators must identify and accommodate possible dangers (McElreath, 2014a). Among academic settings, any number of threats exist. Examples range from domestic violence and vandalism to theft and trespassing.

Personal security and safety attributes of higher education settings involve considerations of monetary cost. Value considerations are associated with all organizational functions and activities (Brigham & Ehrhardt, 2017). This notion is pertinent for higher education institutions because of the costs associated with providing safety and security. Examples include the wages of law enforcement personnel; costs of law enforcement training; costs of maintaining and operating law enforcement vehicles; cost of maintaining and operating campus police departments; and the financing of camera, audio, and video systems. Regardless of investments toward institutional safety and security, higher education settings are penetrable and susceptible to criminality.

An array of endangerments imperils higher education settings. For instance, regardless of geographic location, the possibility and hazard of terrorism must be acknowledged (Castagnera, 2009; McElreath, et al., 2014b; Wigginton, et al, 2015). Response processes and methods are essential when responding to various incidents (Doss, 2014). Strategic endeavors must acknowledge both controllable and uncontrollable risks (Doss, Guo, & Lee, 2012). Among higher education institutions, notions of risk also are applicable for both long-term and short-term planning activities.

Crime also occurs among virtual settings. The motivations for crime occurring in the physical world are often paralleled among virtual environments (Doss, Henley, & McElreath, 2013). In other words, physical crime often has some counterpart in the virtual domain. Examples include violence that is associated with instances of cyber-stalking, cyber-harassment, and cyber-bullying (Patton, et al., 2014). Disputes that happen among virtual settings may exacerbate, and seemingly private matters may speedily become common knowledge (Melander, 2010). In other words, events that transpire among virtual domains may eventually have repercussions in the physical world.

By their natures, university settings are open and available to students, employees, and the general public. Students, parents, administrators, and others visiting the campus environment expect to experience some amount of personal safety and security. However, Jenson (2007) indicates that violent incidents, especially shootings, among higher education settings have increased during the last few decades. Events of terrorism, such as the destruction of research laboratories by eco-terrorists, are also concerns of institutions of higher education (Doss, Jones, & Sumrall, 2010). Given such endangerments, methods to provide emergency communication systems to disseminate information among mass audiences are relevant considerations of emergency incidents (Doss, Glover, Goza, & Wigginton, 2015). Because university settings may contain thousands of residents, institutional police departments may find crowd control training to be beneficial. Such training is common among police entities (Jensen, et al., 2015).

Within the higher education setting, Maslow's hierarchical needs represents a basis for personal and faculty security both theoretically and conceptually. Fiore (2013) indicates that the progressive levels of Maslow's hierarchy of needs range from physiological (lowest) to self-actualization (highest). Within the educational domain, Maslow's hierarchy is a theoretical and conceptual foundation for campus safety activities and functions (Kretovics, 2011). Kretovics, (2011) indicates that efforts toward fulfilling desires and wants commences after needs are satisfied within the higher education setting,

Enrollment may be viewed from the perspectives of safety and security within the context of higher education. Maurelli (2015) showed that enrollments and crime rates exhibit positive relationships. Maurelli's (2015) study examined 200 higher education institutions with respect to instances of disciplinary measures and criminality. Enrollment decisions are influenced less by the crime statistics of higher education institutions (Carrico, 2016). Conversely, knowledge of criminality represented a greater likelihood to affect collegiate attendance decisions (Janosik & Gehring, 2003). The contrasting findings of Carrico (2016) and Janosik and Gehring (2003) show the reality that higher education institutions are unique. Each institution struggles with its own issues of criminality, and must craft strategies and plans accordingly to facilitate safety and security. Regardless, given the nexus among enrollment, campus safety and security, and criminality, this study examined the circumstances of a regional teaching university to investigate whether a relationship existed regarding criminality and enrollment.

3. Research Questions and Hypotheses

Inspiration for this research was derived from the writings of Sheffield (2016b) in which a campus safety and security survey was performed to examine perceptions of students at a regional teaching university. The primary research question was stated as follows: Are institutional safety and security policies deemed effective? Consideration of this primary question necessitated the crafting of various sub-questions. These sub-questions are stated as follows:

1. Residents feel safe at their personal residences.
2. Residents believe their belongings are safe when they leave their residences.
3. Is there a statistically significant relationship between campus enrollment and reported incidents of arrests for liquor law violation for the years 2001 through 2014?
4. Is there a statistically significant relationship between campus enrollment and reported incidents of arrests for weapons violations for the years 2001 through 2014?
5. Is there a statistically significant relationship between campus enrollment and reported incidents of arrests for drug violations for the years 2001 through 2014?

Exploring these questions necessitated crafting an array of corresponding null hypotheses. These null hypotheses are given as follows:

- $H_{0,1}$: No statistically significant difference exists between the perceptions of on-campus students versus the perceptions of off-campus students regarding the notion that "I feel safe where I live."
- $H_{0,2}$: No statistically significant difference exists between the perceptions of on-campus students versus the perceptions of off-campus students regarding the notion that "I feel that my belongings are secure when I leave."
- $H_{0,3}$: There exists no statistically significant relationship between campus enrollment and reported arrests for liquor violations for the years 2001 through 2014.
- $H_{0,4}$: There exists no statistically significant relationship between campus enrollment and reported arrests for weapons violations for the years 2001 through 2014.
- $H_{0,5}$: There exists no statistically significant relationship between campus enrollment and reported arrests for drug violations for the years 2001 through 2014.

4. Research Design and Methodology

The research design incorporates a quantitative methodology. Two perspectives of the problem domain are encapsulated within the design and methodology: 1) hypothesis testing of student perceptions and 2) hypothesis testing of accumulated crime data.

A Likert scale survey was disseminated to collect student feedback regarding their perceptions of safety and security. Within the survey, the value of 1 represented strong disagreement, the value of 3 represented neutrality, and the value of 5 represented strong agreement.

An analyses of means occurred to determine response directionality for each of the student enquiries. The constraints for the means analyses were as follows: 1) if mean < 2.5, then disagreement, 2) if 2.5 < mean < 3.5, then neutral, and 3) if mean > 3.5, then agreement.

The two-tailed, one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) method was used to explore student perceptions of campus safety and security. Stratification for the ANOVA investigation consisted of students who lived on-campus versus students who lived off-campus. The significance level for ANOVA hypothesis testing was 0.05. Determination of the effect size value was accomplished via the Omega-square method.

The Chi-square method was used to examine accumulated crime data for the years 2001 through 2014. The significance level for Chi-squared hypothesis testing was 0.05. Data sets used within the Chi-square analyses were obtained from the U.S. Department of Education Campus Safety and Security database. This study examined three subsets of criminality that were represented within the campus arrest data sets: drug violations, weapons violations, and liquor violations. Essentially, this study queried whether a statistically significant relationship existed between drug violation arrests and enrollment, weapons violation arrests and enrollment, and liquor violation arrests and enrollment.

5. Findings

During the period this study, a total of 1,678 individuals were polled during this research endeavor. A total of 520 usable responses were assessed during this study. Therefore, the quantity of usable responses represented approximately a 31% response rate. Given an overall institutional enrollment of 3,989, an error margin of 5%, and confidence level of 95%, the minimum sample size required for the sample to be representative of the population was 351. Because the amount of 520 usable responses exceeded the minimum sample size required for representativeness, it is assumed that the responses were reflective of the overall enrollment at the host institution.

Testing of the first hypothesis, representing perceptions of personal safety, showed that no statistical significance existed between the opinions of students regarding the notion that “I feel safe where I live.” Statistical values within the hypothesis test were determined to be $p = 0.0000$ and $w^2 = 0.1211$. Therefore, no statistical significance and little effect were exhibited via the hypothesis test. Analyzing the mean value for the question showed that $M = 4.22$ thereby indicating agreement with the posed notion.

Testing of the second hypothesis, representing perceptions of safety concerning personal belongings, showed that no statistical significance existed between the opinions of students regarding the notion that “I feel that my belongings are secure when I leave.” Statistical values within the hypothesis test were determined to be $p = 0.000$ and $w^2 = 0.1205$. Therefore, no statistical significance and little effect were exhibited via the hypothesis test. Analyzing the mean value for the question showed that $M = 3.96$ thereby indicating agreement with the posed notion.

Testing of the third hypothesis, representing enrollment and reported arrests for liquor violations, showed that no statistically significant relationship existed between enrollment and reported arrests for liquor violations. Statistical values of the hypothesis test were $p = 0.3738$ and $X^2 = 14.0$. Using a 0.05 level of significance and a p-value approach within the hypothesis test, this outcome was not deemed statistically significant.

Testing of the fourth hypothesis, representing enrollment and reported arrests for weapons violations, showed that that no statistically significant relationship existed between enrollment and reported arrests for weapons violations. Statistical values of the hypothesis test were $p = 0.3730$ and $X^2 = 14.0$. Using a 0.05 level of significance and a p-value approach within the hypothesis test, this outcome was not deemed statistically significant.

Testing of the fifth hypothesis, representing enrollment and reported arrests for drug violations, showed that that no statistically significant relationship existed between enrollment and reported arrests for drug violations. Statistical values of the hypothesis test were be $p = 0.3272$ and $X^2 = 56.0$. Using a 0.05 level of significance and a p-value approach within the hypothesis test, this outcome was not deemed statistically significant.

6. Conclusions and Recommendations

The outcomes of this study showed that no statistically significant differences existed regarding the notions of personal safety and safety for personal belongings. Essentially, the outcomes of the study suggest that students have some feelings of safety for both themselves and their belongings while residing at the campus. Despite this favorable impression of campus safety and security, campus hazards persist realistically.

Reviewing the outcomes of this study shows that instances of arrests for weapons violations, drug violations, and liquor violations are unrelated to enrollment at the host institution. Therefore, students are not deterred from attending the institution because of the examined instances of criminality. Although the testing of hypotheses revealed no statistically significant findings, what is not shown may be just as notable as what is shown via quantitative assessment. In this case, no statistically significant relationship was exhibited between enrollment and criminality. Therefore, reduced enrollment may occur for a variety of reasons that are unrelated to criminality, ranging from reputed institutional competitiveness and academic programs to economic and financial attributes involving the costs of education (Doss, et al., 2015).

The primary research inquiry queried whether institutional campus safety and security endeavors were effective. Although the host environment expects to eliminate or minimize criminality, no guarantees exist that it will or will not occur. Perceptions and expectations of effectiveness may vary individually. Regardless, given the outcomes of the study, the student respondents indicated some amounts of favorable safety perceptions (both personally and for their belongings). Therefore, from this view, some measure of effectiveness may be assumed.

The academic setting is comprised of a variety of individuals, the bulk of whom are either students or employees. Therefore, this study's findings may be considered from the perspectives of student and faculty safety and security. Higher education administrators are responsible for their respective amounts of safety and security among campuses. Essentially, not only are safety and security expected for students, but also for others who may venture into the academic setting. Examples include faculty, administrators, visitors, and so forth. Some knowledge of whether one feels safe or has some confidence in the safety of personal belongings contributes toward a better understanding of personal safety and security among college campuses.

The findings of this study have implications for institutional administrators when crafting organizational strategic plans. Understanding whether a relationship exists between enrollment and crime provides a foundation for institutional resource allocation (e.g., law enforcement, residence hall administrators, etc.) toward diminishing the fears of potential enrollees that may undertake studies within the academic setting. Regardless, administrators must maintain a continuous vigilance toward ensuring that campus safety and security are well-maintained continuously.

Future studies may also consider different perspectives of campus safety and security. Examples of additional criminality are diverse, and range from sexual offenses to crimes in the virtual world. Future studies may examine whether any relationship exists between these crimes and enrollment. Other considerations for future studies may examine campus safety and security from personnel perspectives. Although much effort is generated toward ensuring that students experience a safe environment that is conducive toward academic success, they are not the only individuals who partake of the academic setting. Faculty, administrators, and support personnel also have a vested interest in campus safety and security. Future studies may address institutional safety and security from such perspectives.

Academic institutions may often interact with their localities. For instance, among urban areas, higher education settings may be surrounded by cities wherein criminality exists. Given this notion, future studies may examine whether the criminality of the corresponding locality impacts campus safety and security. Certainly, a converse enquiry could investigate whether campus crime transcends the campus boundary to impact the corresponding locality.

In any case, many people have a vested interest in the safety and security of higher education settings – students, employees, parents, and others. Crime occurs at both urban and rural institutions of higher education; no campus is insusceptible to crime. Dangers persist despite any favorable impressions of personal safety. Given the dangers that may affect higher education settings, administrators must unceasingly acknowledge threats that impact their respective campuses, and plan accordingly to enhance safety and security.

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