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## The Star-Ledger

# A campus rampage and the response

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In the wake of the deadliest rampage in U.S. history at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University in Blacksburg, Va., Star-Ledger editorial writer Kathy Barrett Carter spoke with Lee Clarke, a professor of sociology at Rutgers University who is the author of "Worst Cases," a book about organizational failures during disasters. They talked by telephone about whether there are lessons to be learned from the tragic events that left at least 32 students dead.

Q. You've studied catastrophes and you say, contrary to Hollywood movies, that people don't usually panic. Given your research, what do you think it was like on the campus in Blacksburg yesterday?

A. I'd expect there to be many interviews in which people say there was panic and pandemonium. They'll say, "We were scared to death," but when you look closely, their actions will be quite sensible and rational. They will have felt panicky. That's what's going on in their emotions or feelings, but their behavior will be different, I predict. There will be stories of students and professors perhaps responding with heroism and great courage. To take nothing away from those actions, that is what is to be expected. That's what happens in every significant event.

Q. So why do people say there was panic?

A. Because they felt panicky. It's an off-standard situation. They look like they're panicked, but panic is irrational, nonsensical behavior that puts oneself and others in danger. We've already heard stories of people jumping out of the top-floor windows. I'd bet my mortgage that didn't happen. It doesn't mean the young person who said it was lying. Horror stories and rumors happen in all terrible situations. It happened in Katrina.

Q. Parents are probably feeling a great deal of fear. Is that appropriate?

A. We rightly think of our children as our future. Rightly or wrongly, we see them as less sul lied. So we feel an extra sense of loss when something happens to them. We look to communities, like the university, to protect them. Parents of these victims will wonder, "What could that university have done to make my child safer?"

Q. Is that a fair question?

A. It's an unavoidable question. And, if they waited two hours to do warnings, that will be a very fair question. From what we know now, it appears the gunman goes to the dorm and does damage and two hours later does even more damage. If that is true, that's an organizational failure. Somebody had to decide, "We don't want to panic people. We don't want to scare them unnecessarily."

Q. Is that one big problem in disasters?

A. Yes. They don't warn people appropriately. I wouldn't single out Virginia Tech. It's a problem among people in authority. They see it as a problem to be managed rather than see the students and faculty as potential partners. In most disasters, the people who save lives are just regular folks, people in the cubicle next to you. Regular people are the first responders. If they are trained, they can do things to save lives. That part isn't rocket science. It is possible to make a large organization move quickly if the task is seen as a central part of an organization's mission.

Q. How do you prepare for an event like this that is so rare and unexpected?

A. Here is a fundamental problem for most universities. Nobody looks out of place on a college campus unless they are toting a weapon. It is really a delicate problem. A lot of things will look obvious going back. But how do you prepare for a low-probability, high-consequence event? You can't prepare for everything. You can't protect against everything. You can involve students and professors more directly than you do for things like evacuation for example.

Q. There were stories that some students were using the Internet to communicate. Did that help?

A. Kids these days are connected. Institutional systems should be leveraged. People are sending e-mails and text messages. We could use that as a source of warning, a source of information. Professors and administrators worry students are using their cell phones to cheat. They can use them to warn each other.

Q. Are you saying there ought to have been a university-wide warning system?

A. A university is a structure where things happen in a regular way. Is there not

some way we could use those social patterns to help prepare people for a potential calamity? I don't know anyone who is doing that well. Perhaps I'm raising a standard that is impossible to meet. Rutgers has 30,000 undergraduates. They all get their classes. They all get billed.

Q. Is there any good to come from these shootings? Will this tragedy get universities thinking about these things?

A. There is a silver lining. There are always learning opportunities in a disaster.

Q. Back in August there was a manhunt on the Virginia Tech campus for an inmate, accused of murder, who escaped. Was that a missed opportunity? Was that the point where the university should have thought more about security?

A. Hindsight is always 20/20. We look back now at that event, but that event was different. We (colleges and universities) are terrific targets. Places of higher learning are wide open.

Q. Should an incident like this make everyone more fearful and heighten the sense of vulnerability?

A. There are some people who would argue there are so few people killed in this way that we should not overreact. Hundreds of people will die today in automobile accidents. What makes this different is we think of universities as safe places. And it's an important event because they are our children. Guns don't have a place on a university campus.

Q. Should colleges and universities put more emphasis on security?

A. Maybe we don't want to as a society, as a community. Resources are tight, and maybe universities decide they don't want to spend the intellectual capital or the money on this kind of thing -- preparing for calamities. That should be a choice, but there ought to be a dialogue.

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