

LIBRARY ISSUES

BRIEFINGS FOR FACULTY AND ADMINISTRATORS

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Creating a More Secure Academic Library: Even the Heart of the Campus Needs Protection

by Steven Bell

Within the course of two days, several students had their laptop computers stolen while they worked in the campus library. Staff members could recall only isolated incidents of electronic device theft in the past at their academic library, located in a Mid-western college town. Theft of any type was rare, so a pattern of multiple thefts in a short period of time was cause for alarm.

The library director was in unknown territory. The open door policy allowed any member of the public to enter the building. With no security guard presence, the director now realized the vulnerability of the library to those with criminal intent. Working with staff, a decision was made to initially increase student awareness about theft prevention. Staff posted several signs around the library alerting students to watch their belongings.

The next week five more laptop computers were stolen. In each case the students said they stepped away from their study space for two minutes, and returned to find their laptops gone. Trying to make the students more thoughtful about security was clearly failing. No one was sure what step to take next.

Because of the large size of many academic library buildings, the late hours they are open, and the lack of staff or surveillance cameras to monitor so much space, there is always the possibility for crime, even incidents involving violence. For example, in February 2012 a female Boston University student was sexually molested while studying in the library by a male student who was a stranger. In March 2012 a male IUPUI student was attacked while in the library men's room by a stranger who choked him and threatened bodily harm if the student did not perform a sex act. Fortunately, in these cases the

students suffered no serious physical harm, but it's clear the potential was there. These events remind us that no matter how safe our academic libraries may seem, there is always the potential for those rare but more violent crimes.

Of all the issues academic librarians deal with in the course of their work, building security is among the most perplexing. When library professionals bemoan what they failed to learn in library school, dealing with crime or violence in the library building rarely comes up, but it's perhaps the one thing for which academic librarians may be truly ill prepared to confront. Library security problems are typically associated with public libraries because they are, of course, open to everyone.

Academic libraries, on the other hand, convey an image of being secure havens of peace for those dedicated to serious study. Surely no one imagines there are crimes of opportunity waiting to happen. This is the exact mentality that works to the advantage of criminals who exploit student naiveté and staff unpreparedness.

Preparation is Key

Creating a secure library facility can be a tremendous challenge, particularly for public institutions in large metropolitan regions. The security issues can range from everyday theft to violence to sexual harassment and assault or challenges presented by mentally disturbed individuals. Library workers are increasingly challenged to differentiate innocent remarks from creepy gestures or peculiar behavior from violent threat. Given the degree to which many academic libraries are open to the community, they are remarkably free of crime, but anything is possible. The key to a secure library is preparation. To be sure

there are academic libraries located on campuses in communities so small or rural that they may be virtually crime free, but an “it can’t happen here” mentality may serve the community poorly. Assuming the worst is possible, if not probable, is the starting point to being prepared for any eventuality.

Just as they create disaster plans that provide a course of action for any type of emergency that affects the collection or building, academic library staff should devise a set of policies and procedures that will help when crime does occur. The library dean and academic administration should work with staff and campus security to create a safe library where security is a high priority. This issue examines security matters for deans, provosts and staff to consider, and recommends strategies for creating a more secure library where the appropriate response to an act of crime is second nature rather than cause for confusion.

Start with the Staff

If securing the library was as easy as getting all students to conform to a set of theft-prevention rules, it would certainly eliminate the problems that occur when they neglect to safeguard their belongings. Unattended device theft accounts for the majority of crime in academic libraries, and efforts to engage students about security issues is a significant challenge for staff.

No matter how many signs are posted, no matter how many warnings are delivered, no matter how many “never leave laptops unattended” stickers you place on unattended laptops, this type of theft persists. Rather than exerting significant effort to educate students and heighten awareness, it may be more productive to focus energy on library workers. Start by creating more awareness among staff. Enable them with tools and techniques for participating in the effort to reduce theft. Proper preparation keeps security situations from progressing from minor problem to full-blown crisis.

A well-informed and well-prepared library staff may be the best method for creating a more secure academic library. There are several things library deans

and academic administrators can do to provide staff development in the area of security. Keeping staff informed about any crime that occurs in the library is the first step to promoting awareness that their library is a place where crime does occur. Colleges and universities are required by law to report all campus crimes to the community. A library administrator should regularly review the campus crime reports for library incidents. Library administrators should never assume they’ll be the first to hear about crime in the library. Students often report crime directly to the campus police, completely bypassing library staff, and campus security officers are unlikely to report incidents directly to library administrators.

Once a crime or security incident is identified, efforts should be made to obtain details. What was stolen? Who was hurt? Where in the library did it happen? What time did it happen? Are their suspects? Campus police may be limited in what details they can share from the incident report, but expect answers to these types of questions. The information obtained should be shared with staff. As the administrator with this responsibility at my academic library, I review the campus crime report weekly and share news of any incident with all library department heads, who in turn share this information with their staff members. Even if there are relatively few incidents of crime, even if these incidents are minor, it is valuable to establish a culture of crime awareness and reporting within the library.

State of Preparedness

Staff also needs to know how to respond to crime situations beyond device theft or other minor incidents. Even if these incidents are rare, proper preparation is important. Effective training allows library workers to think through how they would respond in any number of situations. Should they try to intervene? Should they immediately call campus police? When is an incident worth reporting?

These are the types of questions to address in staff training. Most colleges and universities have access to personnel who can supply the appropriate

training. Campus police can help staff understand how to handle different types of situations, from a fight between students to dealing with a mentally unstable individual. Even in situations where the clear cut action is to immediately call campus police, some library staff will be reluctant to do so because they are hesitant ‘to bother’ security. Training, practice and drills help overcome the resistance to involve campus security. In libraries that experience more frequent crime incidents or where the potential exists, administrators should consider installing panic buttons at service desks, which simplifies and encourages calls to security.

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Enable staff involvement by having a process that makes it easy for them to gather and report any crime activity. This helps promote a secure academic library. Administrators should introduce an incident report to boost the reporting of all crime and incidents in which a library’s code of conduct is violated. Make sure staff is familiar with it and know when to submit the report. From reports of theft to harassment, staff should provide as many details as possible, and submit it to the administrative office. Incident reports are most helpful for documenting patterns of unacceptable behavior.

For example, consider the patron who isn’t committing an obvious crime or some code of conduct violation, but he or she may be acting strange, saying creepy things to staff or making them feel uncomfortable with staring or odd statements. Taking action can be difficult in these situations because there’s nothing significant to report to the campus police. If the administration can make a case that establishes a pattern of abuse associated with a single

individual, however, that pattern may suffice for campus police to act.

In one such incident, after creating staff awareness, we were able to amass a half-dozen incident reports involving strange behavior from a single patron. This created enough evidence for the campus police to take this individual aside for a conversation about his behavior. This almost always encourages the individual to either stop the behavior or move on elsewhere. Without establishing a pattern of incidents, there's too little to go on and the problem can continue unabated.

Preparing staff to deal with truly violent crime is particularly challenging precisely because it is so rare in academic libraries, and far more unpredictable in nature. There may be little librarians can do to prevent violent crime, but with the right procedures in place and a well-prepared staff, it can make a difference in police response time, our interaction with the victims, and our ability to provide the police with details that can help them to catch the perpetrator. How we then share the information with our campus colleagues is important because it can focus campus attention on the issue of crime in the library.

Partners against Crime

One set of colleagues academic librarians often fail to engage with more closely is campus security. When crime becomes an issue, too often library workers flounder trying to determine a course of action. Instead they should work with campus police to strategize for crime prevention and library safety. If library administrators are doing their jobs properly, they will establish a relationship with campus police well in advance of a challenging crime situation.

If there is no strong working relationship with campus security, start soon to establish one. Start at the top. The library director should reach out to the administrator whose portfolio includes campus security. Engage in a conversation about the library and security concerns, even at those institutions where library crime is rare.

Designate one library staff member as the liaison to campus security. He or she should establish regular commu-

nication with a specific security officer who serves as the primary contact for all library security issues. Build the relationship so the officer becomes familiar with the library staff, knows the special needs of the library and can provide advice and training as needed.

Keep the Community Alert

There are genuine concerns that sharing reports of crimes committed in the library may have the unintended consequence of scaring away community members. While savvy students and faculty could certainly review the campus crime report themselves, few make the effort to do so.

Unless the administration decides to share information about library crime incidents, it's highly unlikely anyone using the library will know what crimes are committed there. If the incidents are minor or few and far between, there may be little value in sharing this with the campus. However, if there is a particular type of incident that becomes more common, the administration not only has a responsibility to create awareness, it may actually help to prevent additional crime.

A wave of computer thefts is a good example. If it becomes apparent that a solo criminal or professional theft ring is targeting unsuspecting students who carelessly leave their devices unattended, the administration needs to disseminate the information. A good response might be a message to the community or the posting of warning signs on the library doors. By alerting students and faculty of an uptick in crime, everyone can increase their attentiveness to security issues and take note of suspicious activity. If the administration and campus police suspect the library has become the victim of a team of opportunistic criminals, posting signs, handing out flyers, and asking staff to tell students about the problem can all contribute to encouraging thieves to move on to another library. At the least, maintaining silence may inappropriately prop up an inaccurate image of the library as a crime-free zone. At worst it may actually create the exact environment that allows a crime wave to continue unimpeded.

Establish the Security Plan

Few academic libraries would operate without collection plans or disaster plans, yet most of them think nothing of operating without a security plan. The first step to developing a more secure library is a well-thought out security plan. Here are some of the factors to consider in developing that plan:

Security Audit. Invite campus security officers or safety consultants to review the library's current state of security preparedness in order to eliminate potential problems, to assess the staff's level of awareness and training and to identify crime prevention strategies that can serve as the foundation of the plan. Identify the frequency with which audits will occur.

Staff Development. Identify the specifics about what type of staff training is needed and how often it is provided. Indicate which staff needs to develop skills in managing crime situations, and who will handle ongoing crime reporting and prevention. Identify resources for equipping staff with the skills they need.

Communication. Establish an internal process for gathering and sharing information about safety and security matters, anything from regular crime reporting to safety tips. Identify staff members who will be responsible for sharing this information with co-workers. This can include the establishment of communication channels with campus security and other administrative offices.

Reporting. Develop an instrument that staff members will use to gather all the important facts about a crime or security incident in the facility. Establish a procedure for completing the report and identify a staff member, usually in the administrative office, who will collect and store the reports.

Guard Procedures. In those libraries where there are assigned security guards, usually posted at entrances and exits, establish procedures for what the guards can and cannot do, and make sure staff are aware of the exact role of the door guards. For example, guards may have orders that prevent them from leaving their post.

Public Awareness. Establish steps for creating public safety awareness in the library. This most often relates to methods for sharing information about theft and the importance of guarding valuables or attending to property at all times. Posters, table tents, flyers, post-it notes with pre-printed safety messages are all possibilities. Identify the staff member responsible for creating and posting signs and messages for public safety. Keep in mind that too much signage creates “security fatigue” that promotes inattention to crime, so use signage sparingly and perhaps only for significant crime threats.

Build Community. Discover ideas and strategies for creating a more secure facility from other campus units or academic libraries. The library is only one among multiple facilities on campus with security issues (e.g., computer labs, recreation, cafeterias). Administrators should connect with others on campus with similar responsibilities in order to establish a dialogue about security for exchanging ideas and practices for more secure buildings.

The goal of creating a safety plan is never to unnecessarily scare or alarm staff members or to create an atmosphere of fear within the campus community. Rather it is about being prepared and secure in knowing the library staff is fully equipped to manage building safety, and confidently ready for whatever incident happens when it is least expected.

Three Ps: Preparation, Prevention, Protection

There are additional strategies that library leaders and academic administrators could employ in an effort to secure the library. Install

video surveillance cameras at strategic points throughout the building. Have private security guards and undercover officers conduct regular sweeps of the library. Put a security guard at every entrance and exit point. Require proper identification of all who enter, and scan the identification document of any outsider. Is it necessary? It depends on a variety of factors. Is the campus in a relatively secure locale or is there frequent neighborhood crime? Does the building’s design lend itself to crime opportunities? Do lax entrance policies and unsecured exits contribute to crime? Decisions based on these types of factors may mean a limited security presence or none at all for the remote, rural, or small town college library. An academic library situated in a high-crime area in a metropolitan region would need to take a totally different approach.

When crime happens in the library, we may tend to blame the students. We ask why they are so naïve as to leave an expensive laptop or iPhone just sitting on a desk as theft bait. We wonder why they thought it unimportant to mention a suspicious individual approaching students in the study rooms.

Students may be more aware of security issues than we think. A New York Times article titled “Staying Safe on Campus” (July 20, 2012) profiled multiple students concerned about maintaining a safe campus, and they demonstrated sophisticated thinking about keeping themselves safe. As one student said, “You have to realize that you’re on a big campus — so big that we have our own zip code — and the city is around it. Things can happen.” Our students get lectures about safety on a regular

basis. They even hear about it when they first visit as prospective students — and it’s something they regularly hear about from their parents. Is it possible the problem is not the student but the academic library?

The three Ps is a commonsense approach to a problem that can happen at any academic library. Even those thought to be immune to the problems routinely associated with those located in economically disadvantaged urban settings, can benefit from a well-thought out plan. Academic administrators, library staff and campus security personnel can strategize to reduce crime in the library by designing an environment informed by preparation, prevention and protection. When we do this well, the heart of the campus will beat strongly and securely for years to come. --bells@temple.edu

Resources

For those interested in creating an incident report and need an example, see:

<http://www.LibraryIssues.com/TULireport.pdf>

A link to the Temple University weekly crime report can be found at:

http://www.temple.edu/safety/reports/main_campus.asp

Having a Code of Conduct establishes a baseline of acceptable behaviors and practices, which if violated establishes clear justification for taking action to prevent or report a security issue. For an example, see:

http://library.temple.edu/sites/default/files/guidelines/codeofconduct_libraryusers.pdf

The Temple University libraries entrance policy is another sample for others who may wish to create one:

http://library.temple.edu/sites/default/files/guidelines/entrance_policy.pdf



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