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Regional colleges step up efforts to ensure campus security

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For three days this summer, law enforcement officers moved, with plastic guns drawn, through the halls of a building on the University of Central Missouri campus.

The 45 officers were involved in the first series of training sessions there to prepare campus police, Warrensburg police, and Johnson County Sheriff's deputies for "an active shooter situation."

Across the country, campus security has been in the spotlight since April, when a mentally disturbed Virginia Tech student shot and killed 32 people and wounded 25 others before committing suicide. It was the deadliest campus shooting in U.S. history.

Now, as universities and colleges in Missouri and Kansas prepare to receive students for the fall semester, they are reviewing and upgrading campus security measures and launching emergency messaging systems and campus alarms. Campus police officers also have been undergoing more emergency-response training.

Also, student-life offices and campus public-safety departments said they were fielding a lot more inquiries from parents and students about campus safety.

A major part of freshman-orientation sessions in the spring and summer focused on campus safety, emergency-response times and monitoring student behavior.

"That was new for us," said Mel Tyler, vice provost for student affairs at the University of Missouri-Kansas City. "Usually most of the questions are about parking and other things."

UMKC this year will focus its freshman welcome program on campus safety, counseling resources and where to report incidents. During orientation this summer, the chief of campus police talked to parents about emergency plans.

In June, UMKC police teamed up with the Kansas City police tactical unit and practiced room searches and how to approach a classroom where a gunman might be holding hostages. More UMKC officers this fall will go to tactical training sessions and response training.

"It's like risk management," said UMKC Police Chief Scott Shelton. "We need to train the hardest for the incidents that rarely ever happen."

Many campus police departments are getting such training. Strategos International, a Lee's Summit law enforcement and military-training company, has been bombarded with training requests from campus police around the country. This fall the company will train officers in St. Louis and at the University of Missouri-Columbia, said Vaughn Baker, company president.

At the University of Kansas this week, officials said they tested an emergency mass-notification system, the installation of which began 12 years ago. The voice-message fire alarm system also can broadcast inclement weather alerts and is linked with the Douglas County Emergency Management Department. It can

be used from a central location to warn people on campus or to broadcast instructions in case of an emergency.

The system is now in 40 buildings, and the university expects to test it in an additional 16 buildings by the end of August. That system will couple with a new text-messaging alert system — free to students and faculty — that has been in place since June.

Several area campuses, including Park University in Parkville, Johnson County Community College and Kansas State University, will for the first time this fall begin operating software with cell-phone emergency-messaging capabilities.

University governing boards and state officials also have gotten involved.

The Kansas Board of Regents at its September meeting expects a report from each of its colleges and universities on campus security systems and safety procedures. Regents in May called for the reports.

In Missouri, a task force created by Gov. Matt Blunt after the Virginia Tech shootings is expected to report to the governor on campus safety and security by Wednesday.

While the task force did not evaluate security on each of the state's campuses, Missouri Commissioner of Higher Education Robert Stein said the report would make some recommendations for improving security and safety measures, and "emphasize an all-hazards emergency plan that includes responses for everything from natural disasters to active shooter ..."

Stein, who served on the task force, said that based on information it collected about campus security systems, "Missouri campuses are relatively safe places, but still there is a need for us to be diligent."

On the federal level, legislation that would create a National Center for Campus Public Safety and a federal grant program for campus security last week passed the Senate Judiciary Committee. The School Safety and Law Enforcement Improvement Act of 2007 would make \$50 million in grants available for emergency communication systems, training and other improvements.

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