

Guns on College Campuses

“Guns allowed in the classroom.” As university educators these are headlines that we never thought we would see. But this is indeed what is happening at campuses across the United States as lawmakers in four States (Texas, Colorado, Utah, and Idaho) now permit concealed weapons on campus and in four other States (Oregon, Kansas, Arkansas, Mississippi, and Wisconsin) concealed weapons are permitted by law but schools have limited where and who can carry them. About a dozen States prohibit guns on campus and, thankfully, Illinois is one them where carrying weapons is not allowed even by those who hold a concealed weapons permit.

In each case where guns on campus have been permitted, it has been met with resolute opposition by faculty and administrators that has included the resignation of Frederick Steiner, Dean of the School of Architecture at the University of Texas at Austin, who left because he could not enforce a rule that he did not believe in. Besides the obvious concerns about faculty, staff, and student safety, Gregory L. Fenves, the President of the University of Texas at Austin argues that the new campus gun laws will keep the university from attracting and retaining students and faculty.

Although there has been some prominent and tragic gun violence on campus in the past several years, according to the U.S. Department of Education our 4,000 plus campuses are among the safest places in the United States. The gun-related violence and homicide rate is well below the overall national average. But these isolated tragic events have given traction to the pro-gun lobby who have used fear to influence individual legislatures to pass laws that permit guns on camps.

We can certainly understand why there is such opposition to guns on campus by faculty and administrators. Our student body is representative of the general population, meaning it consists of people who are addicted to drugs, suffer from mild to severe emotional instabilities, not to mention a variety of coming-of-age issues with relationships, body image, and sexuality. Some of our classes have 300 students and just based on simply probability it will be composed of not only highly motivated, emotionally stable individuals but also a number who may be in crisis. Professional football stadiums and basketball arenas don't permit weapons of any kind because they too realize that in a large enough collection of people there will be some who are not fit to carry a firearm at any given moment even if they are legally permitted.

Sports venues also realize that such events bring about heightened states of emotion as our teams lose at the last second or are subject to a bad call. College classrooms can also be places where students can and should sense heightened emotion. A good educational experience should be provocative, make one ask questions about our world, and engage in vigorous debate. The presence of guns in this environment puts this type of important educational experience in jeopardy. This has already happened at the University of Houston, where the President of the Faculty Senate advised in a PowerPoint presentation that faculty “May want to: Be careful discussing sensitive topics; Drop certain topics from your curriculum; Not ‘go there’ if you sense anger; Limit student access off hours.” Such advice strikes us as having a chilling effect on the academic freedom of our faculty, and the engagement of faculty with our students. Our classroom should be safe zones for both students and instructors, not places where debate is

stifled for fear of violent and deadly reaction. How can a professor engage in, for example, a discussion of Middle East politics and religion, human evolution, social inequality, race relations, or issues of sexuality and gender when they may worry that someone may be carrying a concealed weapon and may be provoked to use it? The wild west of the 19th century, when guns were commonplace, even had the good sense that they should not be permitted in schools, churches, or taverns. We should have the same good sense as well.

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