

Emergency Lock-Down Procedures at Colleges & Universities

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The recent carnage at Virginia Tech emphasizes the fact that higher education campuses are vulnerable to acts of violence. This vulnerability is due in part to the general open environment desired by the institutions. Students, faculty, guests and passersby all have general campus access. Many campuses have evolved over time with security issues not being a prime planning factor. In particular, campuses located in cities and in other populated areas often have no clear boundaries, making perimeter control next to impossible.

Facility Evacuation and Emergency Lock-down Practices

Safety procedures at colleges and universities have historically focused on “facility evacuation” or “fire drill” exercises. These exercises are typically performed on a regular basis during the semester. Facility evacuation procedures are the appropriate response for fire emergencies and for certain other threats, such as bomb threats and internal hazardous releases.

Over the last few years, terrorist attacks, hostile intruders, violent students or employees, and other acts of violence have emerged as serious threats. These threats require “emergency lock-down” or “shelter-in-place” procedures to be executed – the exact opposite of a facility evacuation. These violent situations constitute life-threatening events. Conducting a facility evacuation or failing to respond properly or promptly could be a fatal mistake. Also note that, with some modification, emergency lock-down procedures are appropriate for other situations such as external hazardous releases, tornado and earthquake emergencies.

Emergency Lock-down Training and Exercise

Teachers and staff are frequently the initial responders to an emergency situation. Teachers in particular are viewed as role models and leaders by their students. In an emergency situation students will likely follow the advice of their teachers and other adults, yet very few of these initial responders have any formal training in emergency response.

All employees and students need to be provided with proper emergency response procedures. These instructions need to be written in a concise manner and must address all relevant situations. In addition, management needs to review these procedures with employees at meetings. Armed with this information, teachers will be in a position to discuss these procedures with their students.

Unfortunately, unlike facility evacuation procedures, my experience is that emergency lock-down procedures are not regularly exercised at many colleges and universities. Threats that trigger an emergency lock-down are likely life-threatening, and initially these exercises may cause some stress for all involved. However, it is critically important that everyone knows the proper action steps. In the longer term, these exercises will give everyone some level of empowerment in an actual emergency situation that might otherwise be overwhelming.

Communication Issues

The need to quickly communicate accurate emergency instructions at the commencement of a crisis situation is central to the effectiveness of executing the proper procedure. Communicating accurate, timely and sufficiently detailed information represents an important challenge. In order to distribute an accurate message, one first has to gather accurate facts. In the initial phases of an emergency, accurate facts are difficult to gather. Realistically, at the onset of an emergency, actions will generally be limited to either conducting a facility evacuation or conducting an emergency lock-down.

Alarms typically alert everyone to conduct a facility evacuation. Although detailed information (fire, bomb threat, etc.) cannot be communicated, the basic advice to evacuate the facility is disseminated.

In addition to building fire alarms, some type of siren or campus-wide public address system is needed to alert everyone that a dangerous situation exists and an emergency lock-down needs to be performed. Detailed emergency information regarding a hostile intruder, violent student or employee, hazardous release (accidental or intentional), etc. cannot be effectively communicated by a siren alone. It is also very important to utilize public address systems, blast telephone messages, send out e-mail messages, etc. Once a siren is sounded, everyone will know to conduct an emergency lock-down and to subsequently check e-mail, voice mail, etc. for additional information as it becomes available.

Depending on the specific threat, there are important differences in the exact emergency lock-down procedures to be executed. For example, if there is a hostile intruder threat, doors need to be locked and barricaded, windows and window treatments should be closed, everyone should get out of sight, etc. For a tornado threat with time permitting, you would probably want to relocate individuals in outside rooms to interior corridors but this procedure would not be performed during a hostile intruder situation.

In Summary

All colleges and universities need to develop safety procedures to respond to a hostile intruder, a terrorist attack and other life-threatening events that require the execution of an emergency lock-down. Communication systems need to be robust and redundant. Most importantly, all procedures need to be communicated to and practiced by everyone.

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Procedures – Hostile Intruder/Violent Student or Employee

- Everyone in hallways or open areas is to seek shelter in the nearest room.
- A silent evacuation should be considered if it can be conducted safely.
- Lock and barricade doors.
- Close windows and window treatments.
- Turn off lights.
- Everyone is to remain quiet (quietly contact 911) and not enter hallways or open areas.
- Crouch down in areas that are out of sight from doors and windows.
- Should the fire alarm sound, do not evacuate the building unless:
 - You have firsthand knowledge that there is a fire in the building, or
 - You have been advised by Police/Security to evacuate the building, or
 - There is imminent danger in the immediate area.

Procedures – Tornado

- At the onset of a tornado warning:
 - Everyone in outdoor areas is to seek shelter in secure buildings.
 - Trailers and temporary structures are to be evacuated.
- Faculty and staff are to go to interior areas/hallways or designated safe areas of the building.
- Close doors.
- If possible, take cover under a sturdy object.
- Cover your head, neck and face.
- Stay away from windows and objects that might fall.
- Do not seek cover in large open areas.
- Remain quiet.

Procedures – Earthquake

- If an earthquake strikes take cover immediately under a sturdy object.
 - Be prepared to move with the object and, if possible, grab the object.
 - Cover your head, neck and face to the fullest extent possible.
 - Stay away from, to the fullest extent possible, windows and items that might fall.
- Do not attempt an evacuation during the earthquake.
- Once the shaking stops; evacuate and remain prepared for aftershocks.
 - Do not move seriously injured individuals.
 - Provide search and rescue personnel with the last known location of any missing victim.
- Once outside seek open areas away from power lines, buildings and objects that might fall.

Procedures – Hazardous Release Outside

- Everyone in hallways or open areas is to seek shelter in the nearest room.
- Close windows and window treatments.
- Everyone is to remain quiet and not enter hallways or open areas.
- Crouch down in areas that are away from windows.
- Air ventilation systems will be shut down.
- A vertical evacuation may be considered.
- Should the fire alarm sound, do not evacuate the building unless:
 - You have firsthand knowledge that there is a fire in the building, or
 - You have been advised by Police/Security to evacuate the building, or
 - There is imminent danger in the immediate area.

Author's Note: Some organizations will have plastic and tape available to seal windows and doors. Most organizations will not go to these lengths and it should be noted that the individuals who deploy the materials may be exposed to some risk.