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EMERGENCY PROCEDURES

State universities amp up security

Drills, warnings aim to ensure safety

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Students flocking back to Michigan colleges this weekend will find out about warning systems, safety seminars and other new services schools are offering in the name of keeping them informed and safe.

The new approaches to safety were drawn up months before a report released Thursday criticized Virginia Tech officials' response to the April rampage of a gunman on campus.

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But they were designed with that event in mind.

Wayne State University, for example, purchased assault rifles and body armor. Last week it conducted an intense training exercise with Detroit police to practice responding to a situation involving shooters in a building.

At Michigan State University, a new emergency text message notification system was announced this week. It is designed to alert students, faculty, staff and parents to crises.

Oakland University added a similar response system. Officers there have been training throughout the summer on crisis response, and the school's emergency response plan has been updated significantly.

At Eastern Michigan University, a number of steps are being taken to address security concerns -- many related to the December rape and killing of student Laura Dickinson and the university's failure to report it as a homicide for weeks.

"You hate to see tragedies, but at the same time there are always lessons to be learned," said Michael Boulus, executive director of the Presidents Council, State Universities of Michigan. "I think we've all looked deep into our hearts and souls and policies to figure out how best to keep our campuses as safe as they can be."

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Every university in Michigan is tackling those issues, Boulus said.

"One of the biggest things for us is making sure our students are safe and our campus is safe and the

staff is safe as well," said Bob Heighes, interim director of public safety on the EMU campus in Ypsilanti.

There, the university is implementing 16 strategies it came up with for improving safety and security in the wake of the Dickinson case.

Among the steps: sending out biweekly reports on campus crime to students, faculty and staff; a review of the emergency response plan, and a security audit of the campus.

Greg Jones, a senior from Allen Park and EMU's student body president, said he's encouraged by the efforts to improve security on campus.

"There's always more that needs to be done," Jones said. "We can never say we're safe enough."

The Virginia Tech shootings -- which left 33 dead, including the gunman -- raised questions about whether colleges are capable of responding effectively to such incidents.

The report from the panel appointed by Virginia Gov. Tim Kaine criticized the university for waiting too long to warn faculty and students.

At Wayne State, they set out to answer those questions immediately after the shootings. Officers were trained in emergency response and new equipment was purchased.

The drill last Friday gave officers a chance to test their training in rapid deployment.

The scenario involved two gunmen who were shooting inside a campus building, injuring some students, killing others. It tested the ability of officers to respond, and the university's ability to send out text messages warning of the incident.

"The training ... has to be ongoing," Wayne State Public Safety Director Tony Holt said.

At MSU, the text message system was in the works well before the April shootings, but after Virginia Tech "more emphasis was placed on it," said MSU Police Sgt. Florene McGlothian-Taylor.

Oakland University has a new crisis notification system that includes e-mails and telephone calls. They're also looking at text messaging, said OU Police Chief Samuel Lucido.

Earlier this week, top administrators on OU's campus gathered for their annual briefing on security issues. While there, they simulated a crisis to get key people on the same page on how to respond, Lucido said.

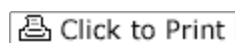
But Lucido and others say that while preparation is key, everyone on campus has a role in ensuring safety.

Heighes said, "A university can have all the technology and training. But it takes people, too. They have to be aware of what's going on around them."

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