

Wisconsin campuses don't need more guns



People gather at the entrance of Umpqua Community College in Roseburg, Ore., on Oct. 12 to support the students and faculty upon their return to classes for the first time since the Oct. 1 shooting on campus.

Commentary by Michael H. Carriere, Ph.D., associate professor, Milwaukee School of Engineering; Nicolas Lampert, Peck School of the Arts, Department of Art and Design, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee; Leah Flack, Ph.D., assistant professor, Marquette University; Aims McGuinness, Ph.D., associate professor, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

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We, the undersigned collection of instructors from colleges and universities in the city of Milwaukee, feel compelled to speak out against the bill recently proposed by Rep. Jesse Kremer (R-Kewaskum) and Sen. Devin LeMahieu (R-Oostburg).

This bill, which would effectively allow students and faculty to carry concealed weapons inside public university and college buildings, illustrates the anti-democratic tendencies of our current elected officials. This proposed legislation does nothing to enhance public safety; it is little more than an exercise in crass political posturing.

There is little doubt that gun violence on college campuses is a real issue that needs to be addressed. Yet studies conducted by the Department of Education and the Department of Justice have shown that college and university campuses are some of the safest public spaces in the United States. The campus homicide rate across the nation is about 1 death per 1 million people; this figure jumps to 57 deaths per million in the general population.

At the same time, a report issued by the Department of Justice in January 2015 found that about two-thirds of public and private campuses employed armed officers. Officers at public universities, such as those within the University of Wisconsin System, were more than twice as likely as their counterparts at private schools to carry firearms. Despite the press given to tragic school shootings, the fact remains that our nation's campuses remain safe places.

So what would bringing more guns onto campuses in Wisconsin ultimately produce? In the aftermath of the 2012 Newtown school shooting, Time magazine reported that New York City police officers — trained professionals — hit their target only 18% of the time during gunfights. What might that percentage be for a scared instructor or an untrained undergraduate student?

More important, the presence of armed individuals, who probably look very similar to any sort of active campus shooter, will only add to, rather than resolve, the chaos associated with such a scenario. As Regina G. Lawson, chief of police at Wake Forest University, argued against concealed carry legislation in North Carolina in 2008: "When you're responding to a situation like that, and someone's in plain clothes with a gun, who's the bad guy? Who are you going to take out to save the lives of the 10,000 other students you're trying to protect?"

Such a comment strikes at the heart of perhaps the most onerous aspect of Wisconsin's proposed legislation: It is vehemently opposed by both those who would have to live with its repercussions and those it purports to protect. Scores of Wisconsin system student groups, university professors and staff members have already voiced their displeasure with the Republican-led endeavor to allow guns on their campuses.

The University of Wisconsin-Madison Police Department has condemned the bill. As reported by the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, the department, in a statement issued Oct. 13, argued that "Allowing concealed weapons inside a building like Camp Randall Stadium, filled with 80,000 people, creates a major security issue...[The evidence] does not support the idea that our campus would be safer if concealed firearms are allowed in our buildings." This bill, in other words, was drafted without any conversation with the constituents it was meant to address.

As educators, we strive to create safe and inclusive learning environments. The addition of more guns to such spaces — and the uncertainty that these weapons ultimately bring — will severely undermine this process.

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