

Could UVa have done more to prevent the shooting?

A student at Virginia Tech was worrying students and professors. Facing possible mental health issues, the young man became disruptive, and those around him perceived his behavior as threatening. The situation escalated when authorities discovered he had access to weapons on campus.

Tech's threat assessment team convened and removed the student from campus. During a prolonged absence, he received medication and counseling.

His life improved, and he returned to Virginia Tech, where he became a "proactive, engaged and positive member of the community," said Gene Deisinger, the university's former director of [threat management](#).

When they function effectively, threat assessment teams at Virginia colleges intercept a person before he or she becomes dangerous and attempt to remedy the problem. Success stories, like the one at Virginia Tech, are common, experts said. But they are rarely shared with the public.

But stories like the one at the University of Virginia, where the suspect in the Nov. 13 on-campus shooting had landed on the radar of the school's threat assessment team two months earlier, raise questions as to whether the school did everything it could to intervene.

"It's every university's worst nightmare," said Jennifer Fraley, dean of students at Longwood University.

In September, UVa was told Christopher Darnell Jones Jr. [talked about having a gun](#). In the course of its investigation, the school learned he had been found guilty of illegally concealing a weapon, a fact he failed to report as rules require. Now Jones is charged with shooting and killing three members of the school's football team and wounding two others.

The complexity of threat assessment cases makes it difficult to assign blame without knowing all the details, experts said. Attorney General Jason Miyares will investigate UVa's handling of Jones' case, which the university requested.

It's more intricate, these experts said, than simply finding dangerous people and kicking them off campus.

Threat teams arose after Virginia Tech

Threat assessment teams came in the [wake of the 2007 massacre at Virginia Tech](#). The shooter, Seung-Hui Cho, had aroused suspicion from numerous faculty and staff. A clinical social worker thought Cho was mentally ill and had him temporarily detained. Police were told he was bothering female students, and professors thought his behavior

was strange — he rarely talked and his submitted works of fiction contained graphic violence.

But because staffers interpreted student privacy laws in an overly strict manner, no one shared their findings with one another, a government panel concluded.

"No one was able to bring the whole picture together and recognize the totality of the threat this person represented," said Tom Kapsidelis, a former Richmond Times-Dispatch editor and author of the book "After Virginia Tech: Guns, Safety, and Healing in the Era of Mass Shootings."

In 2008, Virginia legislators passed a law requiring public colleges and K-12 school districts to institute threat assessment teams designed to share information and prevent attacks. Virginia became the first state to mandate such teams on college campuses.

They are made up of a variety of campus departments, including police, student health, student affairs, communications and others.

Some universities are more quick to deploy their teams than others, Deisinger said. One school might investigate a person who has demonstrated troubling behavior but hasn't made a direct threat. Others only investigate specific threats. More proactive teams cost more money, and no one way is better than the other, Deisinger said.

Last year, Virginia Tech, which has about 37,000 students, reviewed nearly 500 cases, The Washington Post reported. On the contrary, Virginia Commonwealth University, which has roughly 28,000 students, examined 66 cases in the last school year, a spokesperson said. A representative for UVa declined to answer questions about the school's threat assessment team, citing the pending investigation.

Some schools also operate a team to deal with struggling students, sometimes called a care team. These teams are meant to help students who aren't showing up at class or who suddenly stumble academically. If these teams discover a threat, they can elevate the case to the threat assessment team.

Threat teams try to fix issue, not punish

Before a person lashes out violently, he or she typically broadcasts troubling behavior, said John Nicoletti, a psychologist who consulted on the Virginia Tech investigation. Social media posts are a common way to broadcast a threat. But failing to report a concealed weapon violation, as Jones did, could also represent a foreshadowing of future violence.

While reviewing a potential hazing incident, UVa learned from another student that Jones talked about owning a gun. In the course of its investigation in September and October, UVa discovered that [police in Chesterfield County had caught Jones](#) on Feb.

22, 2021, carrying a concealed 9mm semiautomatic pistol without a permit during a traffic stop.

Police discovered Jones was wanted in Petersburg for reckless driving and failing to stop for an accident in an incident that occurred Aug. 9, 2020. On June 10, 2021, he pleaded no contest to the misdemeanor charge of concealing a weapon without a permit and received a 12-month suspended jail sentence. The court ordered him to forfeit the pistol.

Nicoletti recommends schools remove possibly threatening people from campus temporarily while the investigation is conducted.

"Otherwise, you have a liability issue," Nicoletti said.

But threat assessment teams aren't designed to be punitive, said Mark Follman, author of "Trigger Points: Inside the Mission to Stop Mass Shootings in America." They're not meant to identify bad people and lock up the prisoners.

"The core work is the opposite of that," Follman said. "It's intended to help people who need help."

Teams often try to communicate with the person they are investigating, often deploying a coach or professor who has a good relationship with the subject. The mission is to get the person off the pathway to violence.

Many students have guns, some have misdemeanor convictions, and the majority of them don't turn violent, Deisinger added. And a concealed weapon violation isn't necessarily enough to warrant removing a student from campus, Follman said, speaking generally.

UVa tried to communicate with Jones, but he refused to cooperate, said Coy, the school spokesperson. It's unclear what level of effort the university made.

There's another problem with removing dangerous people from campus – it doesn't eliminate the threat. Disgruntled employees have been known to return to their former place of work to enact violence.

"Kicking someone out of school, while that may be the appropriate response for a particular violation, that won't necessarily fix the problem or remove the danger," Follman said. "That's key to understanding how threat management works over a longer term."

Right to privacy in dorm rooms

After the UVa shooting, police obtained a search warrant and found a rifle, handgun and other firearm paraphernalia in his Bice Hall dormitory room. Could UVa have searched his room and prevented the shooting?

There are barriers to colleges inspecting dorm rooms without a search warrant. In 2017, a judge in the Texas Court of Criminal Appeals [ruled that dorm rooms are protected](#) by the Fourth Amendment, which prohibits illegal search and seizure. A resident adviser had inspected a student's room without permission, found drugs and called the police.

The judge ruled that while the school has the right to inspect dorms, police did not have the right to enter without a search warrant. It's unclear if there was enough evidence for UVa police to seek a search warrant.

A lapse occurred weeks before the shooting when the threat assessment team failed to refer Jones' case to the student-run judicial committee. It's unclear why the case wasn't referred. Coy said that even if the judiciary committee had received the case, due process takes weeks or months to play out.

Does the whole process need to move faster? Universities typically have interim measures to address emergencies, Deisinger said. They can remove students if there's an immediate concern – not a hypothetical one – and colleges have to apply the same standards to all students. How a college determines if troubling behavior represents a direct threat is a complex problem to solve.

In his five years leading Virginia Tech's threat management, Deisinger never removed a student before due process played out, even though his authority allowed it.

"Sometimes it does take time," Deisinger said.

Mental health concerns on college campuses are [rising](#). In the spring of 2021, three out of every four Virginia college students surveyed said they faced challenges to their mental health, such as loneliness, depression or anxiety.

At VCU, about 1 in 10 students seeks mental health care, a number that was rising before the pandemic, VCU's director of counseling said last year. Universities have responded by increasing their counseling capabilities. In January, Longwood contracted with a company called ProtoCall, in which students can use an app on their phone to speak to a counselor 24 hours a day.

It's possible the rise in mental health problems is leading to increased on-campus threats. Longwood hasn't seen an uptick, Fraley said. But at VCU, the number of threat cases is on pace to increase this year by almost 20%.

Alcohol violations plummet at VCU, where some students are switching to weed

The number of Virginia Commonwealth University students who were caught committing an alcohol violation has plummeted 93% in the past five years, according to the school's [annual crime report](#) released last month.

One possible reason: Some students switched from drinking alcohol to smoking cannabis, which last year [became legal for Virginia adults](#) 21 and over to possess in small amounts.

"Way more people smoke weed than drink," said Nikolett Kormos, a freshman studying physical therapy.

Jessica Vigil, a freshman English major, echoed those sentiments: "There's becoming more stoners."

Other factors may include an aversion to heavy drinking and less access to alcohol during the beginning of the pandemic.

Now that cannabis possession is legal for some, drug violations have cratered, too. And colleges are changing how they discipline students who illegally use alcohol or drugs, placing them on probation instead of arresting them.

In 2015, there were 621 liquor law violations on VCU's Monroe Park campus. These violations largely include underage possession and serving alcohol to a minor. Public drunkenness and driving under the influence are categorized separately. Students either can face criminal charges or be referred to university's disciplinary process.

By 2021, the number of liquor violations sank to 59.

The pandemic accounts for some of that drop — many students continued learning remotely in the spring of 2021, but by the fall, students were largely back on campus. Plus, the decline in alcohol violations began before the pandemic started.

Effect of legalization of marijuana unclear

In July 2021, Virginia legalized marijuana possession. Adults 21 years and older can possess 1 ounce or less. Selling it is illegal, and it can't be consumed in public. In the budget lawmakers passed this year, they added a misdemeanor criminal offense for possession of more than 4 ounces.

It's unclear what kind of ripple effect legalization will have on drug and alcohol consumption.

The National Survey on Drug Use and Health, which monitors the prevalence of cannabis use, has not reported new data since 2020. The Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System, in which the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention asks adolescents and teens about their alcohol and drug consumption, has not reported new figures since 2019.

At the McShin Foundation, a drug and alcohol rehabilitation center in Henrico County, it doesn't appear alcohol abuse has become less common since Virginia legalized marijuana. The number of people there seeking help for alcohol hasn't declined in the past year, said John Shinholser, the foundation's president. It may have gone up slightly.

Young adults and teenagers will try all sorts of substances, Shinholser said, especially whatever is most accessible.

Given that cannabis is legal, it's not surprising that drug violations at VCU are way down, too. The number of drug abuse offenses dropped 90% — from 433 in 2017 to 42 in 2021.

Even though some underage students are using cannabis, those students draw less attention to themselves than underage drinkers, Shinholser said. Cannabis users aren't likely to become violent or party loud enough to create a noise complaint.

Shinholser said he supports legalized consumption and sales of cannabis for adults. The vast majority of users do not abuse it or transition to harder drugs, he added.

Students less likely to face criminal charges

VCU students who do get in trouble for drugs and alcohol are now less likely to face arrest. In 2020, VCU changed how it responds to noise, drug and alcohol violations in its dormitories, said John Venuti, chief of VCU Police. Instead of dispatching police officers, housing staffers respond.

If a student is caught by housing staff, the student receives a disciplinary referral. Punishments can range from probation to being removed from university housing. If the housing staff needs assistance from police, and officers respond, anyone who breaks a law is arrested.

In the majority of cases in 2021, police were not called. For alcohol, there were 47 referrals and 12 arrests. For drug abuse, there were 36 referrals and six arrests.

Such leniency is effective, said Karen Belanger, VCU's director of student conduct and academic integrity. The rate of recidivism is low.

For now, cannabis is still prohibited at VCU. Because cannabis is illegal at the federal level and, because VCU receives federal funding, it and other colleges still keep cannabis on their lists of banned substances.

That may change soon. On Thursday, President Joe Biden issued pardons for people convicted of federal crimes for simple possession of marijuana, and he directed his administration to expedite a review of whether marijuana should continue to be listed as a Schedule I substance, a classification that includes heroin and LSD.

VCU Police don't seek out cannabis violations or search people when officers smell it, assistant chief Nicole Dailey said last year. But if an officer discovers a cannabis violation during an unrelated encounter, the officer will respond.

A person who violates cannabis laws can receive a \$25 civil fine.

Other colleges

At the University of Richmond, liquor law violations declined but not as drastically as at VCU. Alcohol disciplinary referrals dropped from 112 before the pandemic in 2019 to 86 in 2021.

Drug violations at UR have nearly disappeared, dropping from 66 in 2019 to three in 2021. UR also operated at limited capacity in spring 2021, contributing to some of the decrease.

UR has not made a drug or alcohol arrest in the past two years — every case was handled by the university instead of a court. UR deploys education and counseling for substance abuse issues, a university spokesperson said.

At Virginia State University, there were no drug abuse arrests in 2021, but there were 48 drug abuse disciplinary referrals — almost equal to the 2019 figure. Alcohol violations dropped slightly.

A spokesperson for Virginia Union University did not provide the university's annual crime report. Under the Clery Act, the federal government requires colleges to publish annual security and fire safety reports each fall.

Not all universities have experienced drops in liquor law violations. At the University of Virginia, alcohol referrals in 2021 were essentially flat compared to 2019, and drug abuse referrals nearly doubled from 13 to 25. At Virginia Tech, alcohol referrals increased in 2021, but there were no drug abuse referrals.

Another reason VCU students might be consuming less alcohol is a fear of alcohol poisoning. In 2021, VCU freshman Adam Oakes died in a hazing incident at a Delta Chi fraternity initiation party. Mateo Melchor, a VCU freshman majoring in international

studies, said he thinks VCU students are less likely to drink in excess since Oakes' death.

Kormos, the freshman studying physical therapy, said some students are scared to consume mixed drinks at parties, because they don't know what substances have been poured into the large Gatorade buckets in which beverages are served.

The pandemic also had an effect on college students' relationship with alcohol, said Chuck Klink, vice president of student affairs at VCU. College students nationwide seemed to consume less alcohol, drink heavily less often and become less intoxicated, Klink said. There were fewer parties during the onset of the pandemic, and many students spent more time with their families.

If college students drank less, adults did not. According to a [study by Johns Hopkins University](#), adults over the age of 21 drank greater amounts of alcohol and consumed it more frequently during the pandemic.

Some college degrees in Virginia never pay off. Others provide an immediate return.

Students majoring in philosophy at Virginia Commonwealth University pay nearly \$15,000 annually in tuition bills. But according to a recent analysis, the average graduate still earned minimum wage five years after graduation.

[The analysis](#), which estimated the earnings for 750 school-specific majors in Virginia, found that VCU philosophy majors earned the least in the state. Other programs at the bottom include Regent University's drama department and Mary Baldwin's arts program.

Meanwhile, graduates of the University of Virginia's computer science program made \$110,000 annually five years after graduation, the most in the state. They were closely followed by Washington and Lee University's computer science grads and UVA's computer engineering alumni.

Together, the data indicate that whether college provides a positive financial return on investment depends mostly on the field of study and somewhat on the college the student attended.

Colleges in Virginia have long debated how to weigh the intrinsic value of certain majors versus their pecuniary value. At a time when tuition costs are rising, student debt remains high and jobs are unfilled, many students in the state are choosing majors that are more likely to provide a good paycheck.

Peter Blake, the head of the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia, said colleges have a responsibility to make sure programs are aligned to meet employment demands as closely as possible, especially now.

A program's return on investment, he said, is "particularly important."

The study, which estimates earnings for bachelor's degree programs nationwide, was published last fall by the Foundation for Research on Equal Opportunity, a think tank described as right-of-center.

Researchers used 2017 and 2018 earnings reported to the College Scorecard, a government database that compiles wage values shortly after graduation, and Census Bureau data to project future income. The study does not address students with graduate and professional degrees.

Some majors never provide a financial return on investment. Those students would have earned more money across their lifetimes had they saved the \$100,000 or so in tuition costs, started earning a paycheck four years earlier and begun climbing the wage ladder sooner.

Nearly one in four college majors in Virginia fails to provide a lifetime return on investment, according to the study. The majors least likely to provide a financial windfall are psychology, biology, fine arts, drama, English and social work. The schools that house the highest number of negative-ROI majors are Liberty University, VCU, University of Mary Washington and Radford University.

The majors that provide the highest ROI tend to focus on science, technology, engineering, math and business. Several nursing programs are near the top of the list, too.

You don't have to go to a prestigious school or an expensive school to get a good-paying job. High-earning majors are found at VCU, Old Dominion University and for-profit schools such as ECPI University.

Some perhaps unexpected majors landed in top 100: romance languages at Washington and Lee, politics at UVA and interdisciplinary studies at UVA, indicating that graduates of the most prestigious schools are more likely to earn high-paying jobs even if they are not enrolled in a high-value major.

'A civilized world' needs philosophy

Though they aren't rich, philosophy grads earned a wide range of estimated salaries five years after graduation, from \$44,000 at the College of William & Mary to \$17,000 at VCU.

VCU's figure, which comes from 2017 and 2018 data, is close to minimum wage at the time.

Donald Smith, department chair for VCU philosophy, said the results do not fit with his analysis of the jobs VCU philosophy graduates earn.

"I was in disbelief," he said.

In recent years, VCU philosophy grads have become a research analyst at OrthoVirginia, a researcher at the Economic Policy Institute and a senior analyst at Lumber Liquidators. About half of the graduates go to law school or some other postgraduate degree, he estimated.

The median estimated wage for philosophy grads nationwide is \$37,000 in this study, which is a lower figure than some other studies cite. For instance, a 2021 [New York Fed study](#) on the labor market for recent college graduates found that philosophy graduates have a median wage of \$39,000 early in their careers, but that it rises to a mid-career median wage of \$62,000.

Because of the specificity of the Foundation for Research on Equal Opportunity report, its sample sizes are small.

"I have no reason for thinking that VCU philosophy majors fare significantly worse with respect to ROI than what these other studies indicate," Smith said.

Just because a major doesn't pay well doesn't mean it has no value, said Blake, head of the State Council of Higher Education. Return on investment is an important measure of a program's success — average debt for a Virginia college graduate is \$30,000. But it's not the only measure.

"A civilized world needs people who are trained and educated in English, history, social work, early childhood education, art, anthropology, et cetera," he added.

Philosophy improves reasoning skills, the ability to be open to criticism and the ability to disagree in a rational manner, Smith added. All of those skills are relevant to any career a student might pursue.

Josh Hartt, 21, graduated from VCU last month after double majoring in political science and philosophy. Philosophy hasn't helped his job search much, but if he could do college over again, he wouldn't change a thing.

“It taught me to think in a way most people don’t, and that was worth every single penny,” Hartt said.

Hartt doesn’t have a job yet, but he has enough money saved up to get an apartment in Richmond while he applies. He plans to apply to law school next year.

What’s helped him the most with his career are the job prospects working on political campaigns. He says the teachers and students he met in philosophy classes were some of the best at VCU.

“If you’re interested in philosophy, don’t let job prospects deter you from it,” he added.

Hartt’s sentiments match those of most students, who are largely happy with their decision to attend college. In a poll of 15,000 Virginia college graduates from the past 15 years, 88% reported feeling satisfied or very satisfied with their undergraduate experience.

A majority, 70%, say their time in college prepared them for the workplace. But only 56% said their education was worth the cost.

Ethan Hamilton broke the mold. Days after he graduated from VCU philosophy last year, he got a job offer as an ontology analyst for a consulting firm in Arlington County, building data models for computers and earning about \$70,000, far more than the national average.

His employer was interested in applicants who understand logic and rules — exactly what he had learned in philosophy.

“For this field, it’s a perfect fit,” he said.

A \$2 million ROI

Students in the top-paying majors typically earn six-figure salaries by age 27. Of the 25 best-paying degree programs, 17 are engineering or computer science.

Joshua Sahaya Arul, 21, took computer science as a high school class at Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology in Alexandria and got hooked. At UVA, he chose it as his major primarily because he enjoyed the subject.

A summer internship at Capital One turned into a job offer months before he graduated from UVA. By age 21 — he finished college in three years — he was earning close to \$110,000, the estimated salary for his major for graduates five to seven years older than he. He recently accepted a job at Google.

According to the study, he and other UVA computer science grads will receive a return on their college education of more than \$2 million.

The State Council of Higher Education does not shut down programs that fail to deliver good jobs. Instead, it pays attention to a program's popularity. If students stop enrolling, the program can get shut down. In essence, the state council lets the market decide.

If majors have high demand, "there must be some value students see in them," Blake said.

For years, students have chosen majors that do not guarantee a big paycheck. Psychology is the state's most popular major, with 5% of students enrolled, and it's been among the most popular majors for at least 30 years.

The highest-paying psychology program is at Virginia Military Institute, where graduates earn an estimated \$47,000 five years after graduation.

"Everyone has their own price point when it comes to return on investment," Blake said.

In the survey of college graduates from the past 15 years, about one in three graduates said they went to college for reasons other than preparing for a specific job — either because they felt they were expected to, they wanted a well-rounded education, or they were trying to figure out what they wanted to do.

But not all majors have sustained the popularity of psychology. In 2010, there were 1,500 college students in Virginia studying English. By 2020, that number had cratered by 40%.

VCU has seen that trend with its new students. In the past four years, fewer incoming freshmen have chosen the College of Humanities and Sciences, which is home to such departments as biology, English and philosophy.

What's growing are engineering, business, education and health — programs with clear job destinations, said Tomikia LeGrande, VCU's vice president for enrollment.

The university's goal, she said, is to make sure students can envision a career — no matter what major they choose.