

UVa alerted students quickly to active shooter, a reversal from Virginia Tech massacre

The first message arrived on the screens of students' cellphones at 10:33 p.m. on Nov. 13 in all capital letters: "SHOTS FIRED REPORTED AT CULBRETH GARAGE."

A [shooting](#) had occurred on campus, taking the lives of [three students](#) and injuring two more. With the suspected gunman on the loose, authorities locked down campus for 12 hours.

During that time, UVa released a flurry of updates to cellphones, email accounts and social media. They informed the public of the suspect's description and continually asked students to shelter in place.

By the time the lockdown had ended, after police had arrested [Christopher Darnell Jones Jr.](#), UVa had sent 36 alerts, roughly one every 15 minutes.

It was a stark reversal from how [Virginia Tech had notified](#) students slowly in 2007 as a massacre was unfolding on campus. The lessons learned since then have caused universities to respond faster and provide more information.

They have more sophisticated technology and sometimes often overcommunicate instead of undercommunicate, erring on the side of caution. False alarms and raised anxiety are sometimes unintended consequences.

In the years since 2007, it's become clear that timely notifications are "critical to campus safety," said Tom Kapsidelis, a former Richmond Times-Dispatch editor and author of "After Virginia Tech: Guns, Safety, and Healing in the Era of Mass Shootings."

Other improvements have strived to increase safety on campus, experts said, including threat assessment teams designed to root out threats before they surface, better preparation for active shooter situations and a general approach of sharing suspicious behavior with authorities.

When 32 students and teachers were killed by an armed gunman at Virginia Tech in 2007, administrators waited two hours before notifying the community.

At 7:25 a.m., police responded to the West Ambler Johnston Hall dormitory, where two students had been shot and killed. Bloody footprints led toward the stairwell, indicating a shooter on the loose.

It wasn't until 9:26 that Virginia Tech issued an alert, mentioning a shooting "incident" and containing no information that the gunman had not been apprehended.

Administrators did not believe there was an ongoing threat to campus and that families should be notified first, Kapsidelis said. An emergency that contained a false alarm months earlier led school leaders to worry that a campuswide announcement would create unnecessary panic on campus.

Shortly after 9:30, the shooter entered Norris Hall, where he killed 25 students and five faculty members and wounded 17 others.

At 9:50, Virginia Tech issued a second email alert, informing students that a "gunman is loose on campus." A third alert, sent at 10:17, announced a lockdown.

In the years since Virginia Tech, colleges in Virginia have improved their response capabilities greatly. Virginia

legislators passed a law in 2008 requiring public colleges to immediately broadcast threats through texts, email and other lines of communication.

The Clery Act, signed into federal law in 1990, already required colleges to issue timely warnings to on-campus threats. The act was named for a Lehigh University freshman who was raped and murdered in her dorm room in 1986.

Now, UVa is capable of sending alerts via text, social media, LCD screens around campus, LED clocks in classrooms, outdoor sirens and public address systems in buildings. It contracts with a company called Rave Mobile Alerts, which is used by several colleges in the state.

Virginia Tech's president at the time, Charles Steger, defended the school's reaction in the years following. The school eventually paid a fine for violating the Clery Act.

When the shooting began the night of Nov. 13 on the northern end of UVa's campus, it took the university minutes to respond.

At 10:40 p.m., UVa instructed students and anyone nearby to shelter in place. At 10:43, it announced the report of an "ACTIVE ATTACKER FIREARM" in the Culbreth Road area. The message ended with the words "RUN HIDE FIGHT."

"Run, hide, fight" is a protocol developed by federal law enforcement agencies for how adults should respond to active shooters. Bystanders should run to a safe location.

If that's not possible, they should hide behind a locked and barricaded door. Only as a last resort should they fight the attacker.

UVa's alerts continued frequently into Monday morning, often stating the same information — the description of the suspect, the fact that police were searching campus and an instruction for students to stay put.

In the event of an ongoing threat, UVa's emergency response team sends an update every 15 minutes whether there's new information or not, said Bethanie Glover, a spokesperson for the university.

At 10:35 a.m., the school announced it was lifting the lockdown: "THE UVA SHELTER IN PLACE ORDER HAS BEEN LIFTED BASED UPON A THOROUGH SEARCH ON AND AROUND GROUNDS. A LARGE POLICE PRESENCE WILL REMAIN."

At 11:26, the final message was delivered: "UVA UPDATE: POLICE HAVE THE SUSPECT IN CUSTODY. THIS IS THE FINAL ALERT MESSAGE."

Em Gunter, 19 and a UVa sophomore, wishes the university had responded faster. There were at least 17 minutes between the moment she heard six gunshots from her dorm room and when the university issued its first alert, telling students to avoid the area where the shooting occurred.

She would have preferred the school err on the side of caution and set a lockdown immediately. Had the university realized there was no ongoing threat, it could have lifted the lockdown later.

"I'd rather go overboard than underboard," she said.

Gunter appreciated the fact that UVa sent text alerts every 15 minutes, reminding students the threat was ongoing.

But many UVA students don't receive text alerts, she said — students have to opt in — and few students check their email at 10:30 p.m. on Sundays. So many were unaware of the situation.

Some nearby residents also said they did not know a shooting had occurred. The university encourages community members not connected to the school to receive text alerts, which can be done by texting "UVA" to 226787.

There's not much downside to overcommunicating, said John Nicoletti, a psychologist who consulted with the investigation of Virginia Tech's response in 2007. Because Jones, the suspect, is a UVA student, it's possible he received the same updates as everyone else and knew what police were looking for.

That's not necessarily a bad thing, Nicoletti said. Sometimes, shooters surrender when they see the alerts and realize what they're up against.

When two [Bridgewater College officers were shot](#) on campus in February, the school quickly locked down campus. A few hours after police apprehended the suspect, the school allowed students to move about on campus again.

Virginia Commonwealth University issues safety alerts regularly for inclement weather, robberies near campus or car wrecks on West Broad Street.

When two Richmond residents got into a fight earlier this year and one fired a gun, VCU asked nearby students not to leave their homes for a brief period of time. When it became clear there was no continuing threat, VCU gave the all-clear.

Sending out too many alerts can lead to a heightened sense of anxiety or students tuning them out. That's why Virginia

Tech limits its notifications to situations in which the school needs the community to take action, said Mark Owczarski, a spokesman for Tech. VCU's police chief declined to comment through a spokesperson.

Virginia Tech also contracts with Rave Mobile Alerts and uses text alerts mostly for weather, such as tornado warnings and snowstorms that close campus. When a shooting occurred at a hookah lounge in February, killing one person and injuring four others, the university issued text alerts telling students to secure their doors and stay in place.

Students obliged, Owczarski said. It was of great service to police not having students walking the streets at the time.

Virginia Tech first implemented its emergency alert system after the 2007 shooting. It was in development before the slayings occurred, but it had not gone live yet.

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Accused UVa shooter spoke of having gun 2 months ago, student told university

The University of Virginia's [threat assessment team](#) became aware of Christopher Darnell Jones Jr. in September when a third party reported Jones may have had a gun, UVa Police Chief Tim Longo said Monday.

Jones, 22 and a Richmond native, has been charged with three counts of second-degree murder and three counts of using a handgun in a felony. [Three UVa students were shot and killed on campus on Sunday, and two more were injured.](#)

[Police apprehended Jones late Monday morning in eastern Henrico County](#), about 12 hours after the manhunt began. They reported the clothing they believed he was wearing — a

burgundy jacket, blue jeans and red shoes — and the car he may have been driving, a black sport utility vehicle with Virginia plates TWX-3580. Authorities described him as armed and dangerous.

On Sept. 15, UVa student affairs learned from a student that Jones had talked about possessing a gun. The student never saw a gun, and no threat was made at the time. The student made the report as part of a hazing investigation, said Brian Coy, spokesperson for UVa.

UVa employees spoke with Jones' roommate, who had not seen a gun. As part of the investigation, UVa learned that Jones had been tried and convicted of a misdemeanor concealed weapons violation in 2021. He received a 12-month suspended sentence and a small fine, Coy said. It's unclear where the violation took place.

But Jones refused to cooperate with the university's investigation. UVa sought additional details about the claim that he had a firearm in his possession and that he had been convicted of a weapons violation.

On Oct. 27, UVa escalated the case for disciplinary action, Coy said.

Longo couldn't say how Jones fled the scene of the shootings, which occurred at the Culbreth Garage on the north end of campus, near the school's theater. And Longo didn't say how or where Jones was apprehended.

Jones was still a UVa student, but school President Jim Ryan said he believed Jones was no longer a member of the football team. No motive has been established, Ryan added.

Jones had also been on the threat assessment team's radar because of his involvement in a hazing investigation, Longo said.

"I don't know the facts and circumstances of that investigation," the chief added.

According to the UVa athletic department website, Jones played football for the university in 2018 but didn't appear in any games. He had been a member of teams at Varina High and Petersburg High, where he graduated in 2018.

He grew up in the Essex Village and Mosby Court public housing complexes in Richmond, where he lived with his parents and three siblings, according to a [2018 Richmond Times-Dispatch article](#).

His parents divorced when he was 5, and he didn't see his father again until Jones was a teenager. Jones called his father's departure "one of the most traumatic things that happened to me in my life."

After his father left, Jones got in fights in school, leading to suspensions. His mother worked the graveyard shift, and Jones would walk to a nearby grocery store to buy Ramen noodles or bologna. On special nights, he'd purchase a box of Church's Chicken.

He was smart and quiet, a relative said, and he became a successful high school student. At Petersburg, he was the football team's MVP, captain of the track team, a member of the National Honor Society, a member of student council and president of the Key Club, according to a scholarship nomination blurb.

Sometimes he got teased by other students for his academic prowess.

"I would get upset because my intelligence was being insulted," he said in 2018. "When I come into the classrooms, everything flowed."

He graduated with a 4.2 GPA, fifth in his class. Petersburg chose him as the top male student-athlete for an annual scholarship program run by Sports Backers and the Richmond Times-Dispatch, where he won a \$2,500 scholarship.

Upon graduation, he said he was interested in pursuing a degree in political science or business administration. Three school employees who knew him declined to comment Monday.

Gov. Glenn Youngkin on Monday evening issued an order that U.S. and state flags fly at half staff in honor of the victims.

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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%.