

False Alarms

Attention-seeking students fabricate crimes to generate the media and community response that real campus tragedies command.

BY MARLON A. WALKER

When University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill student body president Eve Carson was found shot to death, e-mails sent out by campus officials immediately alerted the university community to the violent act. Local news media also swarmed the campus, providing coverage to vigils and memorial services.

Three weeks later, an e-mail sent out to the university community again alerted them to a threat on campus. A student told campus police how a Black man attempted to rob him in the early morning hours. When being interviewed by a local television station, he showed off stitches in his head, and even recalled the similarity of his situation to that of the slain student body president.

The student, Brian Sharpe, later recanted his story. Experts suggest Sharpe and others like him who report false crimes are driven by the attention given to a real crimes.

"It's a copycat behavior where somebody has the idea put into his mind by reading current events and gets carried away with the grand importance of it all," says Dr. Daniel B. Kennedy, a professor in the Criminal Justice Department at the University of Detroit Mercy.

In April 2007, Seung-Hui Cho, a student at Virginia Polytechnic State University in Blacksburg, Va., launched a rampage on the school's campus. When it was over, 32 people — including Cho — were dead, and 25 more were injured. Immediately, campuses across the country reacted to the tragedy, beefing up security procedures and rethinking how they would react to something similar.

It was around the same time that false reports also saw an increase. Kennedy says that the impulse to report false crimes may be triggered by actual crimes, and fueled by the power the person reporting hopes

to wield.

"For anybody with a need to demonstrate a sense of power or reassure himself that he is powerful or significant ... by doing this, he can attach himself to the importance of the story by making himself part of the story," he says. "It's duping delight — something you find with a lot of sociopaths and criminals — which is the sheer joy of manipulating people."

Most people who make the false allegations have ended up being charged with filing a false police report. For campuses, authorities say the only real cost associated with false police reports is the possibility that officials will notify the university community, which will then be made to correct the original message. If over saturated, people won't take these alerts seriously.

Capt. Jon Barnwell of the North Carolina State University Police Department in Raleigh, N.C., says parameters set up for the campus alert system help to avoid situations where information will eventually be proven false. Barnwell says information usually isn't released before officials conduct a short investigation. Several administrators are also involved in the process to decide whether information deserves to be sent out to staff and students.

While they cannot totally prevent a false report from happening, Barnwell says he hopes their criteria to determine an emergency leaves little room for error. When the time comes to put out an alert, he says, recipients need to be able to quickly identify it as urgent information.

Some schools haven't been so lucky.

On Oct. 18, a man reported a shooting at The College of New Jersey's campus in Newark, prompting phone and e-mail messages to be sent to the campus community. The call was later declared a hoax.

Officials at Florida A&M University went on alert after a back-up quarterback for

