

Opening Statement of
Senator Susan M. Collins
Committee on Homeland Security
and Governmental Affairs Hearing

“Security on America’s College Campuses”

April 23, 2007

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Mr. Chairman, our hearts go out to all those who died or were wounded or who lost family members and friends in the terrible campus attacks of a week ago. Their pain reminds us that there are more than 4,100 colleges and universities in this country, with more than 16 million students. And, as Cornell University’s director of campus security has warned, “This type of thing could have happened anywhere.”

Unfortunately, history confirms that statement is true. Killers have targeted students of all ages, not

only in our country but in Great Britain, Israel, Russia, Afghanistan, and elsewhere. The murderers have ranged from disturbed individuals to terrorist squads, and their weapons have included guns, rocket grenades, and explosives.

Sadly, this threat is not new. Eighty years ago this May, a disgruntled school-board member in Michigan blew up the town's school, killing more than 40 people – mostly children.

As we will hear today, colleges and universities defy easy answers for law-enforcement officials and first responders. Typically, these institutions contain many buildings and hundreds of students, teachers, staff, and visitors who are moving about freely and who, at larger institutions, are likely strangers to one another. Campus-safety officers

confront the daunting challenge of defending campuses that are largely open to anyone who chooses to walk in, whether a troubled student with a gun or a terrorist with a suicide belt.

Our college campuses are in many ways attractive targets for those who intend to harm America. Besides educating our most precious resource – our sons and daughters – research universities can house atomic reactors, anthrax research facilities, and stocks of dangerous materials that could cause injury and death if seized by the wrong hands. Tens of thousands of people gather in stadiums to enjoy sporting events or concerts, creating additional targets.

Although campus security is primarily a state, local, and institutional responsibility, the federal

government plays a role in strengthening security through the Department of Homeland Security, the Department of Education, the FBI, the Secret Service, and other agencies. I hope that today's hearing will shed light on what the federal government can do to help bolster the security of the 4,100 colleges and universities across the nation.

We also should consider the issue of campus security in the broader context of homeland security. As potential targets for mass murderers, educational institutions have vulnerabilities similar to those of shopping malls, theaters, and transportation hubs – that is, large numbers of people and relatively open public access. Not even a police state could guarantee security at any one of them, let alone thousands of such sites.

But we can do more to identify best practices, to disseminate them, to help with their implementation, and to assess their effectiveness. As my good friend, University of Maine Public Safety Chief Noel March, points out, the International Association of Campus Law Enforcement Administrators is cooperating with the Department of Justice on developing a National Center for Campus Public Safety that would work toward these objectives.

We can work with our first responders to ensure effective responses to attacks. Campus communication systems can also be improved to allow more effective alerts and permit better coordination of responses.

Detecting and preventing threats to a campus community, while being duly mindful of personal

freedom and privacy issues, is at least as important as being ready to mount a rapid and effective response to an attack. We can promote better use of homeland-security and community-policing techniques to identify potential threats, as well as more mental-health counseling and intervention.

As a member of the Senate's bipartisan Mental Health Caucus, I am keenly aware of both the terrible ravages of serious mental illness and the increasingly effective means of treatment. We should examine the difficult question of whether or not laws and regulations needed to protect sensitive personal medical information make it too difficult to share vital information with campus law-enforcement officials about potentially lethal threats.

Perhaps our best service to our colleges and universities would be to make sure they are integrated into emergency preparedness and response planning for all hazards. If schools are prepared for natural disasters and terrorist attacks, then they will be better prepared to deal with the random and senseless acts of violence like the one that visited such awful sorrow on the families and friends of the Virginia Tech victims.

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