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Student Perceptions of Campus Safety and Security

Capstone MAPC 700

**Introduction**

When it comes to living on, or even being part of, a college campus, campus security is a vital aspect of the campus. However, in some cases campus security is not utilized in the ways that it should be, and students may not see them as the people who are there to keep them safe and their campus secure. Colleges and universities throughout the nation spend endless amounts on the appearance and aesthetic of that college campus. One thing that has become increasingly more prevalent is that this funding that the aesthetic gets appears to be far more than the funding for campus safety and security projects. Keeping students safe should be a top priority for these campuses, so why do students feel that it is not? The purpose of this capstone is to uncover the perceptions and opinions that students have of the safety and security of their college campus in order the shed light on what should really be the focus of these colleges. A possible outcome or implication of this capstone would be that it serves as a basis of more detailed and inquisitive research and studies that will in turn lead to a change in the campus life in order to allow students to feel safer and more secure during their on campus years. In this study, I have conducted a survey of 57 students in the Tampa Bay Area to help gauge their perceptions of campus safety around them and in effect on their campus. In the literature that I have reviewed, I am able to hypothesize that my study will find that students' perceptions of their campus security is not that of a police-like safety force protecting them, but rather they are perceived as power-hungry, less sociable parts of the campus with a negative connotation attached to their name. The questions that I am looking to answer in this project are: How do students perceive campus security at their college or university? What role do officers play in the eyes of these students when it comes to their safety and security?

**Literature Review**

While the intention of having campus police is to provide security and ensure the safety of students, that it not necessarily how it comes across to the students that make up the campus population. The student perspective is what holds the most value when it comes to observing and analyzing campus security and safety, because they are the consumer. They are the ones directly experiencing the safety procedures and communicating with these officers. Schafer, Lee, Burruss, and Gilbin worded it perfectly to support this by stating "it should be recognized that an institution's student body is the largest group of constituents campus safety measures are intended to protect, and their views and desires cannot be discounted." To provide some insight and support into this capstone project, several articles will be discussed in this literature review. The literature chosen will focus on the legitimacy that campus police hold with the students, as well as how students interpret their role on campus.

Students tend to not take campus security officers seriously, especially when all they see is the menial tasks that these officers complete while they are watching. Jacobsen's *Policing the Ivory Tower: Students' Perceptions of the Legitimacy of Campus Police Officers* substantiates this with "citizens' perceptions of the legitimacy of the police develop based on the ways in which officers exercise their authority and whether or not that exercise of authority is perceived as being fair and just" which can translate directly onto perceptions of campus police. If these officers are seen only completing work that seems almost administrative rather than protective, the student perspective would be skewed. Another study discussed in *The Continued Marginalization of Campus Police* found after analyzing their data that, while these officers do attend and graduate from an academy and are professionals in the law enforcement field, "they never achieve their final social standing as 'real' police officers." Because of this viewpoint, their study also revealed that this is why some of the respondents are hesitant for the campus

officers to be armed. When the student body is questioning whether or not these professionals are "real" officers, their legitimacy is decreased within the population that they have been assigned to protect, hence skewing student perceptions toward campus security as a whole.

The roles that these officers hold on campus are often misinterpreted by students, mostly due to communication flaws and lack of understanding by both parties. Oftentimes the students can misconstrue an officers attempt at policing the community as the officer being power hungry, or trying to stop them from enjoying college. However, the power these officers hold can be handled improperly, and "abuses of power and damage to officers' legitimacy can occur when officers are unable to reorient themselves and their jobs to the current setting in which they serve" (Jacobsen 2014). In Jacobsen's audio interviews, the participants describe this as an "us versus them mentality" and the lack of trust that students feel toward campus police because they feel that the officers which was "often triggered by individuals' perceptions that officers reacted disproportionately to incidents on campus" and that officers react this way because they "are just trying to get you in trouble [and] seem to make the situation worse." This is a common theme found in the minimal studies done on campus police, however the location of the university can play a role in the student perspective of campus security. Schafer et. al. found that students from one location felt less safe in their environment than those of the other location, which could indicate that they see campus police as having a much bigger role than the students who were less concerned about their environment. They noted that "campuses located near communities characterized by higher crime rates may experience spill-over effects, leading to increased fear of crime and decreased perceptions of safety." This factor alone can skew student perceptions, because if they do not experience crime in or around their campus, they very well may not know what the importance of campus police is.

Overall, the literature selected has a heavy focus on how students perceive the legitimacy of the campus police located at their university. The lack of respect that students have toward these officers stems from the lack of knowledge of what the importance of the officers on the campus are, and their role in keeping the community safe and secure from any threats. These perceptions from the students vary, and a key factor into how they look at their campus security is the environment around them. Less crime in these areas means less that the students see officers interacting in a volatile or serious situation, and more that the officers help with neutral and nonviolent or nonthreatening tasks.

**Research Methods**

In order to obtain the data needed for this research, I created a survey. This survey included both qualitative and quantitative questions, so that I could accurately scale the responses while also giving the students an opportunity to share their experiences and observations without being limited to a few choices. The questions in the survey began with basic demographic questions, such as age and gender. The rest of the questions in the survey are as follows:

- Did or do you attend college in the Tampa Bay area? If so, which school?

- Did you ever live on campus?

- How present did you feel campus safety/security was?

- Would you say campus security had more of a positive or negative presence?

- Have you ever experienced any bias with campus security?

- If you have felt bias, how?

- Share a memory of campus safety/security's presence around you.

- If yes, why did you call them?

- Have you ever called campus safety before?

- On a scale of 1-10, how would you rate: your overall experience with campus safety? Campus safety/security overall?

This survey was distributed to students on campus at The University of Tampa, as well as through Facebook pages that have members from all colleges and universities in the Tampa Bay Area. The target audience is students, of any gender, between the ages of 18-24 that attended or currently attend a college or university in this geographic area. Based on the responses from the 57 participants, they were coded based on the qualitative responses into specific themes that were recurring in the data. Those themes are: legitimacy, power, interpersonal, and neutral.

**Findings**

Based on the literature selected to review for this capstone, the themes that were found in based on the responses to the question "If you did feel bias, how?' The first theme that was found was that of legitimacy. There were four responses from the qualitative section that found students questioning the legitimacy of the officers, simply by the tasks that they have seen the officers perform. The main thought behind the responses was the room searches. One respondent stated that their "room had previously gotten in trouble so they continued to target them if there was an issue on the floor." These room searches are conducted based off of noise, or smells in the building or hallway, and several students noted this in their responses. These officers are not seen as "real" officers, as supported by Jacobsen and Patten et. al., because the only threats that the students have seen them encounter based on these respondents are rooms being searched due

to disruptiveness by the students living there. When the response from the officers is not deemed as "fair or just" per Jacobsen, then their legitimacy is called into question, and students begin to lose their trust and, in the case of this study with students in the Tampa Bay Area, feel bias being presented against them. The response that stood our the most, however, was that the officers "care less about safety – only care about policing students". This directly calls out the officers on their role in the safety of campus and if it is, in fact, "legitimate", or if it just an abuse of power, which is the next theme that will be explored.

Power was the second most common theme found throughout the responses to this survey. While one respondent directly stated this theme with "very rude and abuse of power" as their response to if they have ever felt bias, others shared more specific examples to support this argument. One example in particular that showed a specific instance that a student experience the abuse of power of a campus officer in their role was when the respondent was cited for being "disrespectful". Their response stated: "I received a citation for "respect of persons' for being disrespectful to a campus safety officer. I tried arguing the citation but it's their word against yours." Students that were interviewed in the literature that was reviewed discussed how they felt that officers escalate situations or "make things worse" and in this instance the respondent was on the receiving end of this type of situation. To be cited for a crime that does not actively exist on a campus and have the citation stand even after an appeal shows direct abuse of power from a university officer toward a student. In addition to this response, another shared how "[officers] tend to group people together and give them all a strike even if some people weren't actually doing anything bad." For an officer to group together and penalize every student in an area, this further fuels the "us versus them mentality" that was previously discussed in the literature review. The students are punished for simply being guilty of being in the wrong place at the

wrong time, which will continue to increase the divide between the students and campus officers, and the students will note their abuse of power in any situation.

The third theme being looked at based on the responses is interpersonal communication. This theme is apparent based on the majority of the replies, but one stood out the most and summed up the basis of most responses: "they are not understanding at all." College students are in very formidable years, and are bound to make mistakes during their college career. When the respondents note that they attempted to talk to the officers or even let them know that they are not the ones that are being disruptive or the culprit behind any suspicious activity, it seems that the officers cited them regardless of their involvement. This, again, is where the "us versus them mentality" comes back into play. Communication between authority and the community is key to a successful and safe college campus lifestyle, and when students specifically state that the officers are not understanding at all, it shows those interpersonal flaws in this system. It also is an example of how the officers are unable to orient themselves within the campus community lifestyle.

The final theme that was noted is the neutral theme. Many of the respondents listed answers such as "n/a, none, no" when asked if they have experienced bias, which is to be expected. The ration of campus officers to students is large, so it is reasonable to find that some students have never had a run-in with them. Responses also included "friends have had both good and bad experiences with them" which goes to show that each student experiences college differently, and some may find themselves in conflict with campus officers, while others may find the officers to be helpful and feel safer in the presence of these officers. In *The Continued Marginalization of Campus Police*, their studies showed that some felt safer with campus authorities than others, but most importantly that the majority "of the same respondents were

unsure or do not know the variety of tasks or the training of campus police officers." The students that do not understand as much when it comes to the roles of these officers were less opinionated when it came to discussing bias and their perception of campus safety, because they do not know what has gone into that position. The most unique response to this question however, was from a student that previously worked for campus safety. This role led to them having "a different relationship" with campus safety officers. Working for the campus authorities is what would put this respondent in the 25% category of Patten et. al's study, because they understand the behind the scenes, and what really goes into being a campus officer besides unlocking doors and searching rooms.

**Discussion**

The purpose of this capstone is to determine the perceptions that students have on their campus authorities. Based on the findings, it can clearly be seen that students who participated in this study felt strongly about their experiences with campus safety, and the themes were easily identifiable. These themes are able to be directly supported by the literature that was reviewed for this study as well. Based on my experience as a college student in this geographic region and the incidents that I have heard over the years, I was able to generate my hypothesis on what would be found in this study fairly easily. After analyzing the data from this capstone survey and the responses given, the hypothesis was, in fact, able to be supported. The interest in this topic stems from years of witnessing unfair campus safety and security treatment of students, as well as the bias that these students are stuck with throughout their college careers. Many of these students feel that they do not have a voice and that their opinions of campus security are not heard, and this study allowed them to be open about what they would like to be said.

These findings, while they may not be exponential, can help the field move forward because it can serve as the basis for a much more in depth study of student perceptions of campus safety. It can be the talking point for more detailed and specific analyses of this department on university and college campuses, and reform or possibly restructuring of the department could come of it. It is the hope that this study can be further built off of by those that are capable of educating both students and officers of these perceptions, to allow more open lines of communication between the two parties so that these themes can be replaced by those of a more positive connotation.

Key takeaways of this study are the tasks that students most commonly identify as campus security issues. These included unlocking doors, rides on the golf cart, room searches, and many other menial tasks that do not directly show how these officers keep the students on campus safe. Seeing that this was the majority of the responses for the question that asked respondents to share a memory or experience, it shows the lack of interpersonal communication between the two groups immensely. The power struggle between students and officers is one of the most prevalent themes as well, and if there were more transparency or communication between the two parties then there could be a change in these findings.

Some of the limitations of this study are the distribution of the survey. There were 57 participants in this survey, however there are thousands of students in this age range and geographic profile that could have participated. This survey was heavily responded to by students of the University of Tampa, so surrounding universities were not represented as well as they could have been. There also is bias on the respondents' side of the survey. Many of the students that chose to participate in the survey only did so due to the fact that they had a prior incident with campus security that they did not feel was just, and they had a negative perspective

of these officers. One of the students that was distributing the survey to his peers stated that the students that were most interested in participating in the study were those that did not like campus safety. This leads to biased data, and the participant pool should have more equal representation for this area. Another limitation was that in the demographic questions, the race or ethnicity of students was not an included question. By having this additional data, it would have allowed the study to also explore the racial bias that students feel they may face on campus.

The future research that I hope comes from this study is that of racial and gender roles that the students play when it comes to bias from campus authorities. Students feel that they are targeted because of their race or gender, however this section of research is not commonly studied, so there is a lack of supporting literature. This study is a general basis that students can build off of to explore these other areas of bias, as well as allow officers to build off of it to determine how they can better themselves in their role while taking into account the student responses of their perspective on this role.

**Conclusion**

The purpose of this capstone was to explore the perceptions that students have of their campus security and authorities. Based on previous knowledge of the subject and literature reviewed, it was hypothesized that the students participating in the study would perceive campus security and safety as power hungry and seen from a negative perspective. The analysis of the data and encoding of it revealed that this hypothesis was proven, as students most commonly noted the questioning of the legitimacy of the officers on their campus, as well as the abuse of power and lack of interpersonal skills and communication. All of this together leads to the negative overall perceptions of campus safety. This capstone project was able to successfully explore the opinions and perceptions of students in the Tampa Bay Area, as well as leave the

door open for future studies to focus on more specific aspects. Students in the Tampa Bay Area do see campus security as having a negative presence around them based on past experiences, but a hope is that this study can serve to promote a healthier relationship between these two parties.

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