

# Colleges better prepared a year after Va. Tech

By **HOWARD BUCK**  
*Columbian staff writer*

In their comfy student union lounge, few Clark College students could envision a deadly attack like the one that rocked the Virginia Tech campus a year ago today.

"If you don't think about it, obviously, you feel safe here," said Jessica Stevens, 20, a second-year student from Amboy. "I feel safe."

Not that it couldn't happen here: Students say they realize the potential exists.

But Clark and Washington State University Vancouver have taken several measures to ward off trouble. And Clark students have noticed.

There's a welcome presence of security guards, well into the night. More campus maps, signs and better lighting are evident. Several faculty and staff members are now trained in emergency response. Safety language now appears in each syllabus (class overview) prepared by instructors for all 12,500 students.

There's also been mental health outreach. Clark officials report student consultations with counselors have doubled from last year.

"I think Clark's been pretty

good about letting people know about security," said Michelle Ruhe, 17, a Running Start student. "There are security (phone) numbers posted everywhere."

On the more pastoral WSUV campus at Salmon Creek, it was hard to miss a recorded voice alert that blared in every major building, shortly after noon last Wednesday.

The WSUV retrofit cost \$75,000 and was made easier "because we've got a limited number of buildings and new hardware that allows this," said Lynn Valenter, vice chancellor of finance and operations.

The WSU systemwide drill sent text messages to more than 2,400 WSUV students, faculty and staff members who have registered for emergency updates online or by cell phone. Early reports show a 95 percent success rate, Valenter said.

"You don't need to reach every person. It will get around," she said. But, the more options, the better, she said.

"There is no silver bullet. We're looking at as many methods as possible," Val-

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enter said.

## Mental health watch

That includes greater effort to identify and help emotionally fragile individuals, like the Virginia student who killed 32 persons and himself last April.

With WSU money and student activities fees, WSUV added a student counselor last autumn, Valenter said.

Clark College has taken an aggressive stance. Instructors were trained to spot "red flags" in student behavior, and, where appropriate, direct that person to free mental counseling on campus. Tips can come from students, too. There's been a run on a "Helping Students in Distress" booklet.

Clark also launched weekly chats in the Penguin Union Building lounge. "Mental Health Mondays" provide an informal outlet to discuss common work, study and personal issues that can trigger depression or anger.

Students and officials have seen results.

"It's increased our workload," said Tim Cook, Clark counseling center coordinator. "Faculty will call us, or e-mail: 'Do you know anything about this student?' We follow it up," he said.

Heidi Hunter, news editor for Clark's student newspaper, The Independent, has seen instructors and classmates approach students who might need help.

"Professors have been discreet, very considerate and generous," Hunter said. "It's for the best. We have good mental health counselors."

## Other safety steps taken:

■ **Staff training.** Both schools have trained several faculty and staff members in

crisis response, in accordance with first responder procedures. More training will come.

■ **Physical changes.** WSUV has been quick to retrofit most classroom doors, with an internal thumb-lock deadbolt that can stop an intruder.

Clark will install new locks this summer, officials said. It also will improve outdoor lighting. New building and parking lot signage will help emergency crews and the public report and respond to trouble.

■ **Electronic notice.** Both schools have established new text and voice message links.

Clark College joined the FlashAlert system, a Vancouver-Portland system used by scores of metro agencies and the media. A drill last autumn, and winter weather notices, have reached many students.

Clark plans to revamp its Internet home page so it can post messages.

One glitch: WSUV has spotty cell phone reception on its hilly campus, Valenter said. The school has begun work to build a new cell tower, she said.

■ **Audible alarm.** WSUV will follow the lead of the Pullman main campus and should have sirens installed by next autumn, Valenter said.

But a generic siren call is no cure-all, she noted.

"The problem with a fire alarm is, everybody evacuates," she said. "That may not be what you want to happen."

Clark has not chosen to install sirens.

Both campuses still run more typical evacuation drills. Fire, earthquake and other dangers are chief concerns. There's more acceptance by students to participate because of campus incidents elsewhere, officials said.

"There is no single answer, because there is no single scenario," Valenter said.

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