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COMMENTS CONCERNING ARMING CAMPUS POLICE OFFICERS May 23, 2013

The ACLU of Rhode Island has for many years been concerned about the over-policing of Rhode Island's schools, including post-secondary institutions. The recent false report of a gunman at the University of Rhode Island has sparked conversation surrounding the arming of campus police, but we believe it is important that any reaction to this incident take into full account the realities of campus life and of introducing armed police officers to a college campus.

Contrary to media reporting, violence on college campuses remains rare. Introducing armed campus police officers will not alter those statistics; armed officers could, however, increase the risk of harm to Rhode Island's college students and alter in subtly negative ways the college campus experience. There are also legitimate concerns about how arming campus police can change the atmosphere in the academic setting, which is why many professors oppose this practice.

While it may often seem that college campuses are declining into dens of violence, the reality is much different. The University of Virginia Youth Violence project reports that, examining all murders on college campuses between 1997 and 2009, "the average college can expect to experience a murder on campus about once every 166 years."¹ According to the U.S. Department of Education, crime on college campuses has been on the decline in the past few years, with reports of all campus crimes declining between 2007 and 2009. The crimes that do take place on campus remain relatively consistent and unlikely to place non-armed campus police officers at risk; sex offenses and burglary are the crimes most often reported at Rhode Island's public colleges. Both of these crimes are likely to be reported after the fact, when response by an armed campus police officer is unnecessary. As such, it is unlikely that a campus police officer will ever encounter a situation where immediate discharge of their weapon is necessary. Instead, Rhode Island's campus police officers are most likely to conduct on-campus arrests for drug abuse or liquor law violations.

Much of the discussion regarding arming of campus police officers has revolved around the few minutes required for armed local police to arrive at the URI campus and the hypothetical risk that could have befallen officers or students during this past month's false alert. By the same token, those five minutes – wherein no shooter was present on campus – could have protected students from an unfortunate accident occurring during a chaotic situation.

The campuses of Virginia Tech, MIT, UC Berkley, and myriad others are armed, and yet the presence of these weapons on campus has not been enough to avoid the tragic situations that

¹ <http://curry.virginia.edu/research/projects/violence-in-schools/college-campus-violence>

took place within the last two years. At both Virginia Tech and MIT, weapons provided no protection for the campus police officers who lost their lives, and at UC Berkeley armed campus police shot and killed a student in what was later determined to be “suicide by cop.”

At the same time, the safety of students and campus police officers nationwide has occasionally been threatened in the past year by the very weapons meant to protect them. In January, a campus security officer was fired when his weapon accidentally discharged on campus. A UC Berkeley campus police officer was shot in the leg when his weapon discharged in October, and a University of Florida student was injured while sleeping last July when a campus police officer’s weapon discharged and shot him through a wall. Just Monday, a campus police officer shot and killed a 64-year-old man on the University of Akron campus five times when he mistook the man’s BB gun for a .45-caliber handgun.

We recognize that campus police are trained officers who served their communities as armed police officers long before continuing their service as campus police, and their dedication to the protection of students is laudable. At the same time, it must be acknowledged that an officer who regularly draws their weapon makes very serious mistakes; a Rand study noted that a New York City police officer involved in a gunfight misses their target 82% of the time.² For an armed campus police officer that draws their gun in one or two heightened situations over a career, their training may easily be eclipsed by the simple lack of day-to-day experience with violent situations where they believe their own safety is at risk.

The safety of students remains of paramount importance, and the decision to balance safety against security is never an easy one. Arming campus police officers is a drastic response to a hypothetical, but unlikely, scenario that could place students at risk while providing little increase in protection to students or campus officers. The ACLU of Rhode Island respectfully encourages the Board of Education not to require the arming of campus police officers on Rhode Island’s campuses. Thank you for your time and attention to these concerns.

² <http://swampland.time.com/2013/01/16/your-brain-in-a-shootout-guns-fear-and-flawed-instincts/>