

# How to handle threats to a campus



BY **ELLIE ASHFORD** APRIL 20, 2018

Community colleges should have a crisis management team in place and strong partnerships with law enforcement in order to be ready to respond to any threats of violence as well as to reassure the community after the fact.

That's the subject of an April 30 session at next week's **American Association of Community Colleges' annual convention** in Dallas.

Presenter Jane Karas, president of **Flathead Valley Community College** in Montana, and FVCC campus resource officer Cory Clarke will talk about how FVCC responded to a cyber threat last fall, and Mary Spilde, president emeritus of **Lane**

**Community College** in Oregon, will talk about how her college helped **Umpqua Community College** recover after a mass shooting in 2015. Karas and Spilde are both former AACC board chairs.

## Cyber threats

FVCC was on high alert last fall after a K-12 school district in the community was contacted by a hacker group that said they had personal contact information and threatened shootings. Karas learned about the threat at midnight and spent hours on the phone that night with local law enforcement officials and the college's crisis management team. She made the decision to close the college the next day and the following day.

While the threat was directed against one school district, the attackers made it sound like all schools in the region would be targeted, and it wasn't clear whether that included the community college.

“The worst part of the threat was the vagueness of it,” Clarke said. “The attackers warned that any student anywhere in the community could be a target. They didn't specifically mention FVCC but did target other schools by name, sending them the message: ‘How would you like to lose some students?’ They threatened calamity, death and destruction.”

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That set off alarm bells at FVCC, as the college has an early childhood center, high school students taking classes on campus and student residents. Unlike a high school that is contained in one building, a college campus is spread out, making a lock down more difficult.

## War room

College leaders took part in a “war room” with K-12 superintendents and law enforcement – the FBI, NSA and the highway patrol, as well as local police

departments – where it was determined there was no credible threat to the college.

During the incident, Karas used an alert system, email and social media to keep students and employees informed. The day FVCC reopened, she held an open campus meeting to assure people it was safe to be at the college.

The threats eventually morphed from physical violence to demands for ransom money. Investigators learned the threats were from a well-organized cyber-criminal group based in the United Kingdom, which had earlier extorted \$50,000 from a TV studio in 2016 by threatening to leak episodes from a Netflix show.

Having a crisis management team in place with training by FEMA, was reassuring to college officials. FVCC does regular security checks and is prepared to deal with any emergency, such as a tornado or active shooter, as well as a cyber attack.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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